The Heartside: the visual communication design of engaging with young women to address menstrual taboos

Meilin Wang

● **Abstract**

Creating a positive narrative around menstruation has been the focus of my research. I have investigated how electronic stickers (e-stickers) can be used to create visual narratives that enable young women to communicate their menstrual experiences via chat on social media. Social, historical and cultural pressures impact the taboos that surround interpersonal communication related to menstruation; however, social media opens new avenues for young women to talk about having their period. During my research, I considered the ways that young women use visual and symbolic communication to convey personal and emotional information, particularly through using e-stickers, emojis and emoticons on their favourite social networking service (SNS) platforms. My research highlighted a lack of, and an opportunity to create, positive symbolic representation associated with menstruation for social media users. Employing an illustrative methodology, I have created a female character and prototyped a set of e-stickers that show her physical experiences and mood during the different phases of her menstrual cycle.

● Table of Contents

3

● List of figures

● List of Table

● Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Meilin Wang

● Acknowledgements

● 1. Introduction

'Leave me alone; I've got my period.'

Menstruation is a uniquely female phenomenon. As a woman and a communication designer, I have researched how hand-drawn illustrations can be used as symbolic language to promote affirmative action. To address a perceived shortage in this area, I decided to develop a positive narrative around menstruation that is suitable for use on social networking sites (SNS). To achieve this, I have developed a female character that embodies a range of emotional and physical experiences shared by women during their menstrual cycles. Using personal knowledge, I have rendered a set of images that depict familiar events associated with menstruation, while simultaneously addressing the taboos that surround this natural bodily function. Consequently, I have designed of a pack of electronic stickers (e-stickers) suitable for use on social media platforms.

In this report, I will outline my investigation, highlighting my research into user preferences through secondary data analysis, and consider the role and function of e-stickers compared to those of emojis. My practice-based explorations of this topic have culminated in the creation of a single character as a prototype for a set of e-stickers. Using hand-drawn illustrations, I have created a symbolic form of visual communication that is capable of conveying personal and emotional information to my perceived audience: young women who regularly use social media. I chose to design an outcome for this group because they are frequent users of this form of visual content (i.e., emojis, e-stickers and emoticons) in their online peer-to-peer conversations. Through my chosen research methods, I have explored the potential of visual narratives to create e-stickers that fit the subject matter. During my research, I discovered that there is a lack of specifically designed symbolic representations associated with menstruation that are available for use on social media. Designing and prototyping the character for my e-stickers prompted me

to consider the importance of generating recognisable symbols and visual patterns. Balancing strong character design against 'cuteness', I have considered how anthropomorphism (animals given human traits) and its reverse, zoomorphism (humans represented with animal traits) might enhance the appeal of my character. Making menstruation 'cute' is one way to create a transitional state for my character. This makes her engage enough to entice young women to use the stickers in online conversations, while also addressing the need for more open communication about menstruation.

● 2. Contextual Review

As a communication designer, I was interested in exploring the power of visual language by creating simplified, emblematic imagery representative of women's menstrual experiences. I also aimed to address taboos associated with open conversations about menstruation in daily life. Focusing on the propensity of young women to use pictographic, anthropomorphic elements for online communication, I considered how I might influence the behaviours of this target group by providing them with affirmative narratives that are sharable on social media.

To understand the narrative potential of e-stickers, I considered 'Fearless and Fabulous', an e-sticker pack created for Facebook by Ann Shen.[1] These stickers were commissioned to encourage affirmative action among women and to empower them to feel good about themselves. Recognising the importance of social media as a key platform for communication among young women, I wanted to create an outcome that would help normalise discussion of menstruation. To do this, I designed a female character experiencing a range of easily recognisable emotional and physical states associated with menstruation. In evaluating Whisper's sanitary pad advertising campaign entitled 'Touch the Pickle', I considered the power of concentrated marketing to address taboo subjects.[2] Though my research has mainly focused on the design of expressive graphics suited to social media, I am aware of the influence of contemporary feminist artworks, which publicly question the unmentionable aspects of daily life. I have referenced artwork by Barbara Kruger, a feminist artist who "specialises in pithy, raucous and ironic expression".[3] A key context for this design project has been recognising the widespread attraction of females to anthropomorphic characterisation. Evaluating the black and white line-drawn series of digital images of the famous rabbit character Tuzki[4] highlighted the need for me to consider the design of form and narrative in relation to movement, pattern and cuteness.

1 Ann Shen, 'Fearless and Fabulous,' Facebook Stickers, March 9, 2017, accessed October 16, 2017, https://facebookstickers.info/fearless-and-fabulous/.
2 Duncan Macleod, 'Whisper Touch the Pickle', June 25, 2015, accessed May 15, 2017 http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2015/whisper-touch-the-pickle/.
3 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your body is a Battleground)* poster, 1982, accessed October 16, 2017, https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger/untitled-your-body-battleground.
4 Momo Wang, 'Tuzki,' accessed May 24, 2009, https://facebookstickers.info/tuzki/.

● 2.1 Social media, illustration and target audience

When considering the most appropriate format for the presentation of this project, the popularity and broadcast range of social media seemed ideal. Professors Cookingham and Ryan stated that late-adolescent females frequently use and are influenced by SNS.[5] Additionally, these sites offer public spaces suited to fostering discussions about diverse social experiences. According to Professors Lu, Hao and Jing, SNS offer accessible and frequent interpersonal engagement with other young females, which supports their need for peer communication and self-expression.[6] Telecommunications professor Ya-Ching Lee researched the influence of pictorial representation used on social media platforms and highlighted the fact that young women prefer personally orientated content (such as photographs, stickers and emojis) because they want to engage in intimate communication, self-expression and socialisation.[7] As texting is not face-to-face communication, visual languages express their emotions, reactions, facial expressions and body movements better than verbal language or written words. Lee's research was important because it reinforced my belief that young women respond to hand-drawn illustrations.

Ann Shen's 'Fearless and Fabulous' series of e-stickers on Facebook[8] uses highly illustrative images and positive reinforcement. While the pack illustrates a broad range of emotional expressions (such as happiness, astonishment, depression and irritation) in great detail, it is difficult to interpret on the small screen of a mobile phone. Consequently, I rarely found the opportunity to use these stickers. Even though Shen has created a set of affirmative female archetypes, I immediately noted that there were no images representing Asiatic women, even though Shen is of Asian descent herself. Fearless and Fabulous demonstrated that the use of multiple personas in a pack does not necessarily guarantee that to

5 Lisa M. Cookingham and Ginny L. Ryan, 'Mini-Review: The Impact of Social Media on the Sexual and Social Well-ness of Adolescents,' *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology* 28 (February 1, 2015): 2–5.

6 Jingyan Lu, Qiang Hao and Mengguo Jing, 'Consuming, Sharing, and Creating Content: How Young Students Use New Social Media in and Outside School', *Computers in Human Behavior* 64 (2016).

7 Ya-Ching Lee, 'Effects of branded e-stickers on purchase intentions: The perspective of social capital theory', *Telematics and Informatics* 34 (February 1, 2017): 397–411.

8 Shen, 'Fearless and Fabulous'.

the SNS user will identify with the characters. Arguably, it makes it harder as the user seeks someone they can identify with among the assorted personae. My design of a series of symbolic images aims to communicate with young women and be used interactively in visual conversations. Realising that designing a broad range of characters would not directly correlate with users' likelihood of identifying with the experiences portrayed, I decided to focus on designing one character capable of expressing a range of emotions. The issue became one of how to use a single compelling character to portray a strong enough narrative that resonates with a wide range of young women instead of producing a range of separate characters with distinct narratives.

Understanding that girls still face double standards in gender morality, I decided that my character needed to be resolute and unashamed. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir encourages women to question society's expectations of their social roles, self-orientation and self-identity.[9] Simone de Beauvoir addresses menstruation directly, discussing how 'being female' is shrouded in myth, not in reality. The presentation of feminism in China is more of a personal endorsement than an organised collective action.[10] The younger generation participates in the feminist movement and contends with issues related to personal identity in online spaces because of political obstacles that limit the opportunity for organised activities. Thus, SNS provide important environments for discussion.

In 2017, Astrup reported that young women are not provided with information or the space to talk about their experiences of menstruation.[11] According to the Oxford Dictionary, a taboo is a social custom prohibiting a practice or discussion of a certain subject.[12] It is evident that in traditional advertisements, menstruation is portrayed as embarrassing and degrading— and individuals usually avoid discussing taboo subjects in public spaces. In Red Moon: Menstruation, Culture & the Politics of Gender, Fabiánová stated that the humiliation of menstruation can

9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. HM Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

10 Jiaran Zheng, *New Feminism in China: Young Middle-Class Chinese Women in Shanghai*, (New York: Springer, 2016).

11 Juliette Astrup, "Period Poverty Tackling the Taboo," *Community Practitioner* 90, no. 12 (2017).

12 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "taboo," accessed May 15, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/taboo.

negatively affect women, especially young women.[13] I believe that presenting conversations around taboo topics in public spaces could reduce this negative stigma. SNS are appropriate fora because they are now regarded as public spaces in that they provide instant, interpersonal interactions.

In my initial investigation of the types of content available to address menstrual taboos, I examined advertising campaigns for sanitary pads, focusing on Touch the Pickle, which was launched in 2014 in India by the Always brand of feminine hygiene products.[14] Touch the Pickle broke menstrual stigmas by challenging the traditional Indian belief that women will be jinxed if they touch a pickle jar during menstruation. The campaign inspired many conversations about the empowerment of women and breaking down menstrual taboos—and counteracted the taboo of menstruation by directly referring to it. This approach boldly and affirmatively introduced a dialogue about menstruation to the public media. Discussions about taboo subjects are often limited by age, culture and geography; however, by establishing a widespread, easily accessible visual campaign on SNS, it may be possible to begin to break down barriers, particularly among younger women.

The success of the Pickle campaign supported my hypothesis that by designing emojis or e-stickers, a widespread online debate could be developed to empower women to fight gender stereotypes and reduce menstrual taboos. In The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation, Delaney, Lupton and Toth claimed that 'menstrual taboos are among the most inviolate in many societies'.[15] Menstruation is often associated with concepts of uncleanliness, ceremony and secrecy. In First Blood: A Cultural Study of Menarche, Dammery argues that menstruation is traditionally considered to bode ill, because it is associated with bleeding.[16] She also counters that some cultures celebrate this private experience publicly.[17] I wondered whether promoting a positive conception of menstruation required repositioning of the symbols that represent it. Can society's

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13 Diana Fabiánová, *Red Moon: Menstruation, Culture and the Politics of Gender* (Northampton Media Education Foundation, 2010).
14 Macleod, 'Whisper Touch the Pickle'.
15 Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (University of Illinois Press, 1988).
16 Sally Dammery, *First Blood: A Cultural Study of Menarche* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017).
17 Ibid.

perceptions be changed by creating images that celebrate menstruation, for example, by depicting menstrual blood in an iridescent colour to beautify menstrual flow?

To gain a deeper understanding of symbolic language in relation to menstruation and women's self-experiences, I evaluated works by feminist artist, Barbara Kruger.[18] The development of western feminism is reflected in the arts, while feminism in China lacks a visual presence. Kruger's artworks generally combine an implied and ironic context. This is evident in her use of the potency associated with the colour red, which is often superimposed on a black and white photograph with confrontational slogans that highlight social, political and gender discrimination issues. While Kruger's work is stark, it is nevertheless bold and led me to consider how visual nuance, explored through colour, makes a strong impression on an audience. Blood is a key aspect of menstruation, making red important to my narrative. Like Kruger, I decided to limit my colour palette and minimise the use of colour to create a striking contrast to my character, who is black and white.

The surrealist Meret Oppenheim suggested that the problem of women is not their gender but their position.[19] Her art piece 'Object' features a cup, a spoon and a saucer wrapped evocatively in gazelle fur[20] and critically explores female sexuality, identity and exploitation by fusing metaphor, humour and eroticism. Oppenheim utilised a more veiled approach than Kruger. This less confrontational image is open to interpretation, yet raises important issues. This suggested that an oblique approach to my design of the narrative elements might be suitable. Nevertheless, I decided that, in this instance, it might be to more effective for me to be obvious rather than to hint at the topics I address: menstrual taboo, gender discrimination and self-experience.

18 Kruger, "Your Body is a Battleground."
19 Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Gloria Gwen Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991).
20 Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936, sculpture, Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, accessed January 2, 2018,
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_meret-oppenheim-object-paris-1936.

● 2.2 Online communication: emoticons, emojis and e-stickers

Since verbal tone and body language are difficult to represent in text messages, individuals developed visual patterns to convey nuanced meaning in their online communication.[21] Xuan Lu and colleagues outlined the difference between emoticons, emojis and e-stickers. Emoticons use punctuation, numbers and letters to create pictorial icons that illustrate an emotion or sentiment, while emojis are pictures that replace type and include facial expressions, gestures, objects and animals.[22] E-stickers are defined as 'illustrations or animations of characters sometimes attached with witty words and phrases that express emotions'.[23] Emoticons are difficult to collect and analyse statistically because they are often typed with letters imitating facial expressions.[24] Lu et al. claimed that "around 10% of emojis are more frequently used while the majority of emojis are not".[25] Given that so many existing emojis are unused, it seemed pointless to create more.

Marcus et al. claimed that "the depiction of facial and bodily expressions in stickers is more elaborative, expressive, and comprehensive than the traditional typographic symbols".[26] It seemed to me that e-stickers provide a more nuanced means to convey emotions and sentiment and also provide the opportunity to extend the narrative space through animation. During a survey of e-stickers, I found a distinct lack of stickers relating to menstrual experiences. There are images that could be used to represent having a period but they require the user to decipher the message as they are not specifically designed to address menstruation.

21 Cydney Grannan, "What's the Difference between Emoji and Emoticons?," Demystified (blog), accessed February 17, 2018. https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-emoji-and-emoticons.

22 Xuan Lu et al., 'Learning from the Ubiquitous Language: An Empirical Analysis of Emoji Usage of Smartphone Users,' in *proceedings of the 2016 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing*, Heidelberg, September 12–16, 2016. (New York: ACM, 2016)

23 Aaron Marcus, et al., 'Chapter 3: Cuteness in China', In *Cuteness Engineering* (New York: Springer, 2017), 63–91.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Aaron Marcus, et al., 'Chapter 3: Cuteness in China', In *Cuteness Engineering* (New York: Springer, 2017), 63–91.

While examining existing online stickers, I discovered the widespread attachment of users to a simple black and white anthropomorphic character known as 'Tuzki'. This genderless rabbit is an e-famous character created in 2006 by Momo Wang[27] and perfectly suits social media because of the strangeness evoked by its animated body movements. Tuzki's face has eyes that are shut (two transverse lines) and rarely features a mouth—simplicity that belies vivid expressions of emotions, reactions and sentiments. Wang uses movement as the main means of increasing the playful depiction of emotion and each sticker is a vignette. Compared to Fearless and Fabulous, the aesthetic expression of Tuzki is alluring in its simplicity and visual refinement. Anthropomorphic qualities, exemplified in Tuzki, could be used to avoid the self-identity issues previously outlined. However, the gender of anthropomorphic characters could be an issue; Tuzki appears sometimes female and sometimes male. It was important for my design to be resolutely female if it was going to describe menstrual experiences. The difference between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism is the different features that can be expressed. Thus, I resolved to use zoomorphism of a female to create an explicitly gendered character.

Empowering young women to express their emotions and talk openly about menstruation required a decision on whether emojis, emoticons or e-stickers offered the best format for my designs. The works analysed showed me that creating one compelling character with strong, simple graphic forms can resonate with a wider range of young women than an array of different characters can. Considering the work of Barbara Kruger has enabled me to see how the striking use of the colour red, contrasted with black and white, provides a visual counterpoint that reinforces the message: it is acceptable to tell people that you have your period and how you feel on social media. This research project seeks new ways to use illustration as a tool for challenging taboos that uphold the notion that menstruation is private and secret rather than a natural part of life to be celebrated and openly discussed.

27 Wang, 'Tuzki'.

● 3. Methodology

Research question:

As a communication designer, how can I use illustration to create a pack of e-stickers that address the taboos associated with menstruation?

● 3.1 Methodological statement

This project aims to develop a series of visually symbolic e-stickers that can be combined to build narratives that demystify menstruation and illustrate key points in the menstrual cycle. To achieve this, I employed a mixed methods approach that merged Design Thinking methodology and illustrative methodology.

Unlike the conventional Design Thinking methodology, which starts with the definition of a problem, I started with an observation of how young women use visual symbols to share their common experiences. To further investigate this, I considered how women, especially young females of a similar age to myself, talk about menstruation and its taboos. I have researched the social, historical and cultural contexts surrounding these taboos with a specific focus on how young women communicate on social media platforms. In conjunction, I also considered how young women use visual and symbolic communication to convey personal and emotional information, particularly through the use of e-stickers, emojis and emoticons on SNS platforms. I found that they use visually symbolic language to address personal issues. However, there are no e-stickers that specifically address the taboos associated with menstruation, or indeed, provide positive affirmation of it.

As a communication designer, I identified the requirement for a positive affirmation of menstruation. This need could be met through the use of an illustrative methodology that employed design principles to establish criteria for the project. An iterative development method was employed within both Design Thinking methodology and illustrative methodology to address menstrual taboos. I investigated menstrual elements in women's daily lives though personal experience and informal conversations with young women. I connected these menstrual narratives—their emotions, expressions and scenes—and combined them with the function, requirement and application pattern of online visual languages. I considered that emotions from, manifestations of and reactions to menstruation can also be conveyed in online conversations in the form of visual emotional expressions, illustrations of menstrual events or expressions of women's thoughts on different menstrual cycle phases. These can not only express menstrual experiences such as menstrual pain and other physical changes but can also be applied to present general emotions and actions such as agreement (or disagreement), happiness, depression and irritability as in other e-stickers. This method assisted this project to address menstrual taboos by generalising menstruation on SNS.

In the final phase, I employed an illustrative methodology to build prototypes from my sketches. This involved an iterative process of line drawing, colour application, digital refinement and narrative movement to design a pack of e-stickers in a gif format. These present a menstruating female character, which could be used to address menstrual taboos in online visual conversations. I refined these e-stickers by setting them into online chat content.

Overall, I applied secondary data collection analysis, visual mapping, iterative visual processes, analogue making, line drawing, applying colour, digital refinement and prototyping as methods to create and evaluate affirmative symbolic e-stickers to address taboos associated with menstruation.

Design Thinking Process

Discover

I have a hunch.

Background research.

How do I approach it?

Observations & Investigations

Definition

Define

Specify requirement.

How can I address it?

Ideate

Prototype & Refinement

Development

Illustrative methodology.

Iterative process.

What should I create?

Deliver

Illustrative methodology.

How do I build and shape

my character?
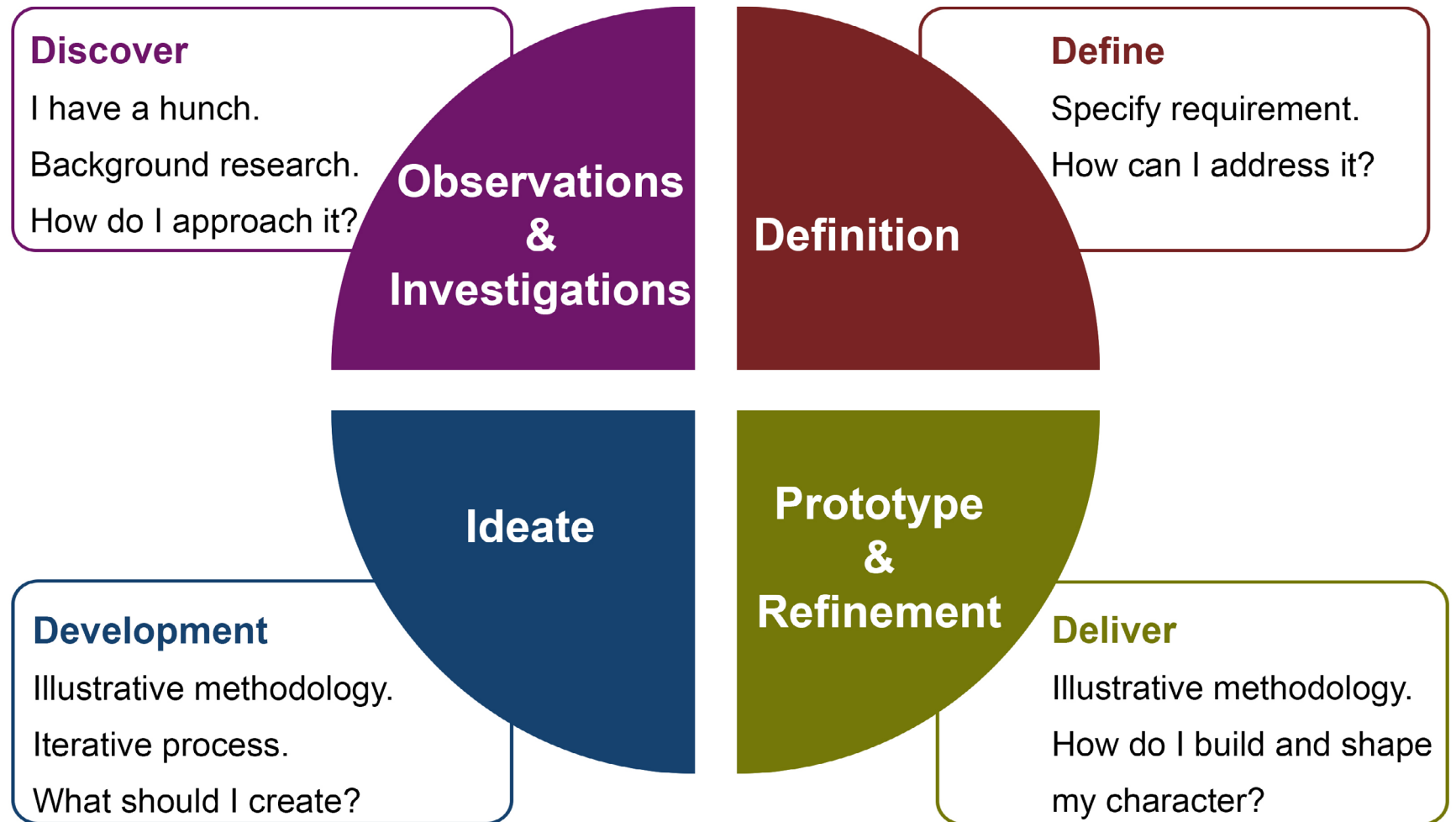
Fighure 1
Meilin Wang,
My Design Thinking processes , January 2018

● 4. Concept Development, Results and Discussion

● 4.1 Concept one: using illustration to engage users on SNS

According to Anne Allison, 'Young women in their teens and twenties consume cuteness in everything'.[28] Marcus and Ma illustrated that cuteness is a complex and nuanced concept with a diverse manifestation pattern.[29] General cuteness is associated with objects and characters that look adorable, chubby, vulnerable, innocent, playful and harmless. The usage of cute illustrations is evident in young females' online communications. Thus, at the beginning of my design journey, I attempted to use cuteness as a tool to engage with young women. Drawing is an important component and form of expression within this project. The process of drawing can intuitively examine different manifestation patterns and explore the way different characters might interact to form a visually narrative dialogue. Conversations between young women involve a distinct pattern of visual communication for self-expression. This phenomenon is derived from the identification of their peer group as a 'special community'. Therefore, my target audience has a preference for e-stickers that have attributes of 'cuteness' and I investigated how to engage with this audience by using cute elements to communicate menstrual issues and address the associated taboos. However, after this investigation of cuteness, I concluded that it may not appropriately present the idea of addressing menstrual taboos.

28 Anne Allison, 'Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product,' in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Toblin (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), 34–49.
29 Aaron Marcus and Xiaojuan Ma, "Cuteness Design in the UX: An Initial Analysis," in *International Conference of Design, User Experience, and Usability, Toronto, Canada, 2016* (New York: Springer, 2016), 46-56.

I explored which illustrative forms my target audience uses on SNS. I drew cute animal characters based on self-experience and the observation of popular anthropomorphic characters on SNS, including e-stickers, caricatures and illustrations that are shared, used and frequently discussed by young females. I drew these menstruating characters with the innocent facial expressions, harmless body language and chubby, puffy forms that represent cuteness and attempted to present menstruating as a relaxed phase (see Figure 2). Personally, I believed that these cute anthropomorphic characters could generate delight in the audience. I considered that young females could build a conversation on menstruation using these e-stickers in their online communications. I also postulated that these characters could avoid censorship and the embarrassment caused by menstrual taboos because they are not human.
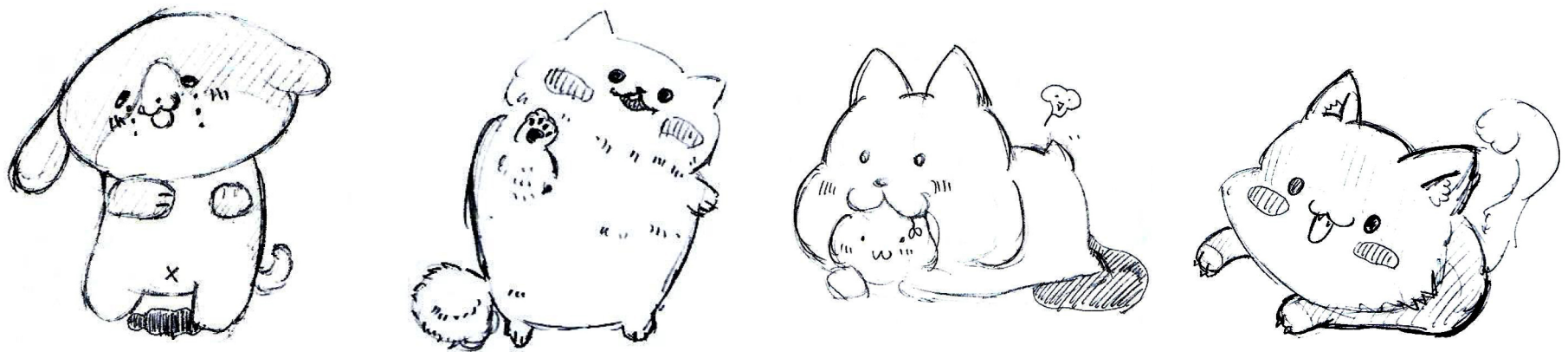
Fighure 2
Meilin Wang,
A sketch of cute puppies , August 2017

My sketches also extended to daily necessities such as underwear and sanitary products (see Figure 3). In reviewing them, I found that while these characters are closely associated with menstruation, their general impression is more commercial and less conducive to intimate communication; it would be difficult to use them in daily online conversations. After this experience, I realised that engagement with the audience requires characters rather than objects associated with women's preferences.
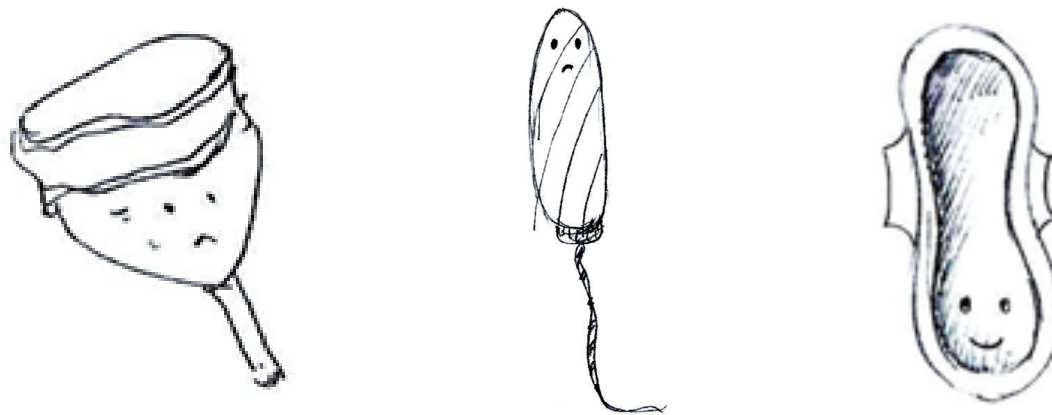
Fighure 3
Meilin Wang,
Sketches of a menstrual products,
September 2017

After further review of my sketches, I discovered that cuteness as an illustrative style cannot express the concept of my project even though it is extensively used by young women on SNS. While the characters are cute, cuteness alone cannot normalise menstruation, address associated taboos or empower women. Particularly, in terms of menstruation, I believe that women do not attempt to be seen as puppies or any other animals. Thus, I decided that my design required womanly characters to represent menstrual experiences and address taboos. Additionally, Hjorth noted that cuteness is stereotyped as a young woman's preoccupation and as a 'feminine' and 'childish' concept.[30] I concluded that cuteness may accelerate the negative influence of stereotypes by unilaterally representing women and their preferences.

As this was a preliminary exploration, all initial sketches were without detail, colour and digital refinement. An iterative visual method, as a refinement process, is an important step in my project design process, especially given that the resulting drawing could contrast with the visual mapping, thereby constituting a refinement to my design. The use of colour was not a priority at this stage because I aimed to find an appropriate visually illustrative presentation to communicate with my audience. Visual refinement will be discussed at a later stage.

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30 Larissa Hjorth, 'Digital Art in the Age of Social Media: A Case Study of the Politics of Personalization Via Cute Culture,' in *Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, Brunel University, London, 2009 (Finland: DiGRA 2009).

● 4.2 Trials, decisions and design refinement

I reflected on the importance of visual communication in partially replacing verbal communication on SNS because non-face-to-face communication requires more subtle expressions. However, not just any visual communication can replace verbal conversations. Fearless and Fabulous used hand-drawn illustrations to present female characters from diverse backgrounds. However, there is a problematic phenomenon that when pictures of diverse characters are supplied, individuals cannot identify with multiple characters and use them to express themselves due self-identity problems. A single character can only represent a fraction of the female population due to racial, ethnic, age and even class differences. People rarely use e-stickers featuring characters of other racial origins to express themselves because they cannot identify with them. Consequently, I concluded that designing a series of characters to represent young females across races would not necessarily engage with my audience. There is a requirement for building a connection between e-stickers, audience and menstruation and therefore, I decided to design a single female character to present her menstrual experiences.

Prototyping this character is a crucial design aspect of this project given that it aims to engage with young women on the matters of their self-presentation and peer communication. I sketched a range of different young women and their daily experiences to expand the diversity of the character to engage with a wider audience. I attempted to elucidate their emotional states and aspects of their lives previously hidden or suppressed by mainstream values. For instance, I sketched women in different body shapes, women in messy rooms and a woman with body hair. I did not focus on the expression of menstrual experiences because, in this stage of prototyping, I investigated what kind of female character could best establish engagement with my audience.

I sketched young women who appear to be 'chubby' (see Figure 4) because my personal experiences and observations led me to believe that many women think that they should lose weight. I also sketched skinny women to present the other extreme (see Figure 5) and attempted to illustrate appreciation of diverse body shapes. By reviewing those sketches, I found that the description of body shapes is not an appropriate pattern to engage the audience because users identify themselves in the character used to communicate on SNS and there is no body shape that represents all women. Additionally, I considered that the expression of body shapes can distract the audience from the emphasis of this project. Thus, I focused on describing more daily experiences and emotional expression in relation to character.

Fighure 4
Meilin Wang,
Sketch of a female 01,
October 2017

Fighure 5
Meilin Wang,
Sketch of a female 02,
October 2017

In sketching scenes of women's daily lives and emotions, I realised that menstruation may happen in any moment of a woman's life. For instance, in Figure 6, the female in her messy room may also be menstruating. Incorporating self-experiences, my design attempted to reverse the misunderstandings and stigma of menstruation by presenting an interesting, affirmative and anthropomorphic menstruating woman. However, I found that it is difficult to generalise and capture all young women in a single female character because one cannot generally represent all, so some users may not identify with the character. In addition, some individuals may feel embarrassed to use a menstrual character due to the stigmas of menstruation.


Fighure 6
Meilin Wang,
Sketch of a female 03,
October 2017

I compared my design with anthropomorphic character e-stickers on SNS—Tuzki, the rabbit character, and 'Gudetam' an egg yolk-shaped character—and found that anthropomorphism can address self-expression issues because these characters are not human. Therefore, I decided to explore the potential of anthropomorphic characters to be used frequently on young women's SNS conversations.

The difference between anthropomorphism and cuteness is that anthropomorphism is a pattern to physically present my character, which can be expressed in diverse visual styles, while cuteness is a style of visual expression itself. I considered that certain elements of cuteness can still relate to anthropomorphism as an expression style to engage with my audience; some cuteness traits can still be considered in prototyping my characters. Though I decided to create an anthropomorphic character, I considered that the larger scale of human characteristics can present menstruating women better that the abundant elements of anthropomorphism. It is important that the gender identity of the character is female to represent young women in relation their online communications. Additionally, I considered that the character's form should be more human than animal-shaped to avoid the situation encountered in my earlier cuteness sketches, where it was hard to demonstrate menstrual experiences and address the associated taboos. Therefore, I investigated how to balance the character's humanness, anthropomorphism and gender expression.

I collected e-stickers on SNS and analysed them with a visual mapping method, sorting them by the extent to which they were animal- or human-shaped, with anthropomorphism set in the middle (see Figure 7). Through this mapping, I decided to set my character in the position of anthropomorphism close to human expression, which is the white area in the visual map. With this degree of anthropomorphic expression, the character could have more human features and a clear and appropriate gender to build a self-expression connection with young women. Additionally, the character could also present a stronger comprehensive range of body language. The anthropomorphic usage in Tuzki also informed my design. Though the ears and tail describe Tuzki as a rabbit, this character is more human-featured than animals because structurally, it has more abundant, flexible and vivid body language than animals generally feature.

Animalism   Anthropomorphic   Human
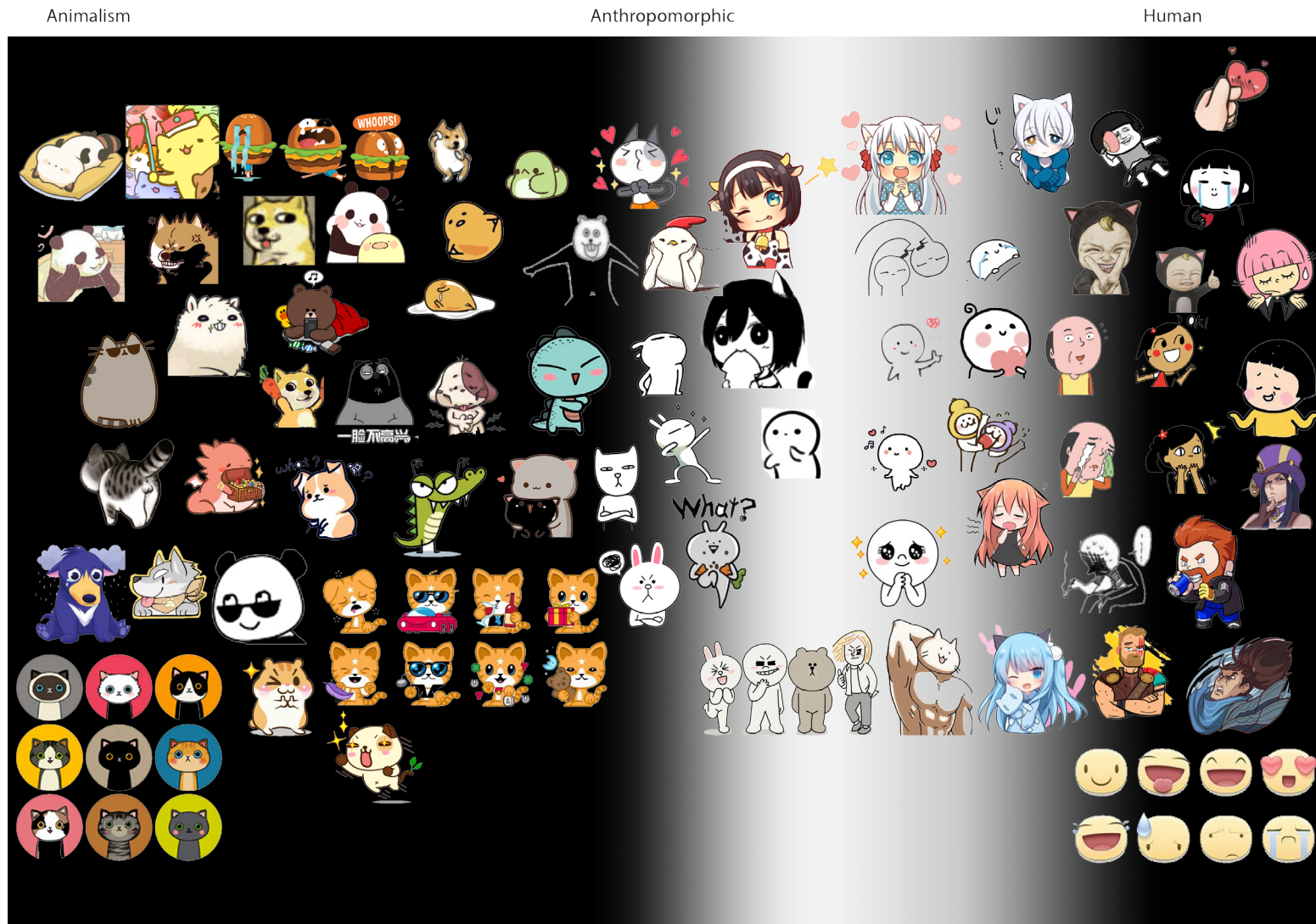
Fighure 7
Meilin Wang,
A visual mapping of anthropomorphic
and zoomorphic e-stickers
January 2018

I noted that the gender presentation in anthropomorphic characters is based on facial expressions and body movements. Through the gender mapping of e-sticker characters, I decided to locate my character in the highlighted area (see Figure 8). I recognised the requirement that the character be easily identified as female to connect with young women (and represent their menstrual experiences), but I attempted to express this without making my character too feminine to avoid gender stereotype problems and weaken the subject matter. Therefore, I avoided creating a character with big eyes, a blushing face or other elements associated with cuteness, innocence, vulnerability and adorableness.

Male

Female

Fighure 8
Meilin Wang,
A visual mapping of e-sticker charac-
ter's gender
January 2018

31

● 4.3 Visual expression and narrative content

For the aesthetic presentation of my design, I have concentrated on line quality, colour, texture, pattern, quantity and movement expressions in prototyping the character. I have also refined the narrative content of this series of e-stickers in relation to emotional expression, menstrual experiences, feminist perspectives and censorship issues.

Detailed visual presentation may not be required in e-stickers because nuanced imagery cannot be easily interpreted in conversations read on mobile phones. I selected my design from sketches because the process of iterative drawing helped me to refine my character. I decided to start with a woman showing how painful her period was (see Figure 9) because I thought that this is probably the most common shared experience. I simplified the line drawing, especially in my character's features (see Figure 10).

Fighure 9
Meilin Wang,
A sketch of a crying woman,
November 2017

Fighure 10
Meilin Wang,
A sketch of a woman in her menstrual pain 01,
December 2017

It is generally recognised that designers should use a limited colour palette to optimise the size of e-stickers.[31] Thus, after refining her body shape, I considered using watercolour to represent menstrual blood (see Figure 11). I performed a number of colour trials; however, I decided that washed colour reduced the narrative impact because it did not look like menstrual blood. Instead, I chose to create a strong visual contrast to my character with maroon menstrual blood (see Figure 12). This direct presentation of menstrual blood is an affirmative act, designed to de-stigmatise casual references to having one's period and challenge both the silence that accompanies menstruation and the taboos associated with it.

Fighure 11
Meilin Wang,
A woman in her menstrual pain 02,
December 2017

Fighure 12
Meilin Wang,
A woman in her menstrual pain 03,
January 2018

31 "What You Need to Know About Selling Sticker in Line Creator Market," Petshopbox Studio, last modified 2018, accessed December 24 2017, http://petshopboxstudio.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-selling-sticker-in-line-creator-market/.

Balancing human features and animalism for the zoomorphic attributes of my character, I appended a tail and animal ears to enhance the animalism (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). I wanted to test if a movable tail and ears would intensify body language and emotional expression but, on further reflection, decided to remove the tail as it distracted from the main movement of each e-sticker and created associations with cats that did not enhance the message. I was then left with only cute cat-like ears (which also appeared slightly devilish and playful). I believed that in the digital refinement, the creation of her cat ears enhances emotional expression but was concerned that my character would read as 'too cute'.
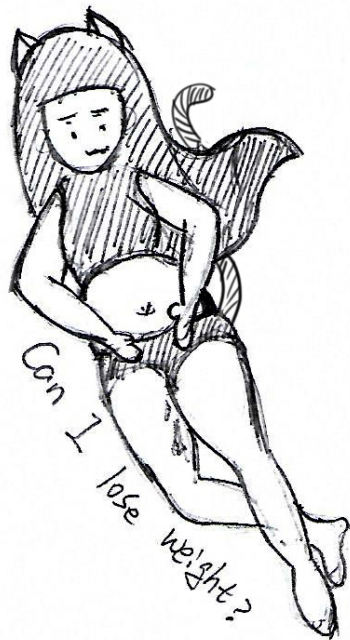

Fighure 13
Meilin Wang,
A sketch of a menstrualing woman 02,
January 2018

Fighure 14
Meilin Wang,
A sketch of a woman in her menstrualtion,
February 2018

I simultaneously tested various zoomorphic traits, replacing the facial expression (see Figure 15) with something more cat-like; the face was recognisably human but morphed somewhat, which allowed her (my character) to retain the ability to accurately present recognisable human facial expressions. I liked the way this modification to her face increased playfulness and peculiarity but was unsure whether it was really necessary and supported my feminist aims for the stickers.
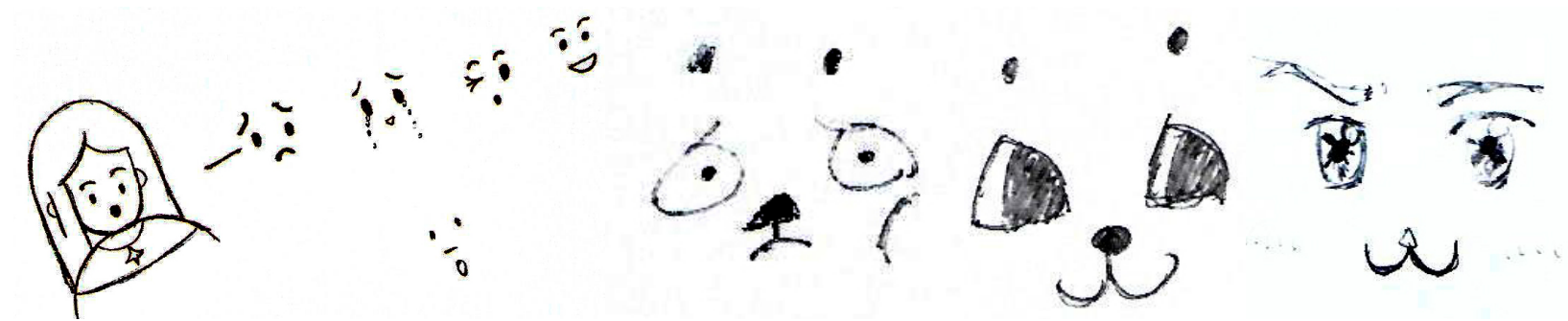
Fighure 15
Meilin Wang,
A emotional expression tests and refinements,
February 2018

I believe that through personal interactions on SNS, my e-stickers can be used by young women to directly oppose menstrual taboos. During informal conversations, I found that my peers would like to have stickers such as mine to send to their teachers if they are feeling unwell and unable to attend class when they have their period, as they are too shy to actually write that in text. Though my character design is not overtly feminist, I believe the concept of creating and placing her into daily conversations is.

Design requirements for e-stickers for social media are slightly different to those for emojis. The platforms set requirements that enable fluent online conversations to occur on any screen size. To ensure e-stickers are legible, the standards define the file size, pixel size, quantity and format. On Facebook and WeChat, the minimum number in a pack of e-stickers is 16. I feel that 16 e-stickers, while insufficient to cover all emotions and expressions, presents enough opportunity for me to design stickers for the most typical menstrual experiences. Especially when considering that users tend to select a small range of images which they reuse (favourites), rather than using every sticker in the pack.

Another feature of e-stickers is that they are large enough to be gifs (extremely short animated sequences). Making the stickers mobile is hugely advantageous, especially for my design because it reinforces the temporal nature of the menstrual cycle. Animating the stickers has enabled vivid, playful, dramatic and unexpected expressions to occur. Each SNS platform has a different set of standards for stickers. For example, on WeChat (China's sanctioned social media platform), e-stickers are dynamic because gif is the only format. However, on Facebook, most e-stickers are static jpeg images. Consequently, I have designed both forms of sticker: animated and static.

A secondary data collection and analysis of emojis and e-stickers generated an understanding of which emotional expressions are frequently used on SNS. Table 1 shows a mapping of the emotions conveyed in e-stickers and demonstrated that expressions such as delight, grief, stress, irritation, amicability and ambivalence (see Figure 16) would be required for my design. Therefore, I decided to sketch these emotions, identified in the secondary data collection and e-sticker mapping, and to create a pack of e-stickers that show a female character's many experiences during menstruation. While e-stickers can be used to demonstrate common emotional expressions in daily online communication, I believed that audience can be expanded through the extensive usage and sharing of my e-stickers.

Table 1. Emoji usage in text messages

|	% emoji-msg	Top emoji
US	9.2	😂 😘 😍 😊 ❤️ 😭 😉 ☺️ 😁 💯
Brazil	5.1	😂 😍 ❤️ 👏 😘 👌 😏 😌 😉 💕
Mexico	7.9	😂 ❤️ 😍 👌 😘 ☺️ 🙈 😭 🙊 😁
France	**19.8**	❤️ 😂 💘 💖 😘 😍 💕 💞 💜 💗
Spain	3.4	😂 😍 😘 ❤️ 💕 😍 👌 🙈 😉 💞
Turkey	5.8	😂 😁 😊 😘 ☺️ 😃 😁 😍 ❤️ 😀
Argentina	3.1	😍 ❤️ 😂 😘 👌 😊 💕 😭 😏 ☺️
Indonesia	3.2	😂 😘 😁 😊 😍 😊 😅 😄 😭 ❤️
Russia	10.9	😂 😊 ❤️ 😘 😊 😍 😌 😃 💋 😏
Colombia	3.7	😍 😂 ❤️ 😘 🙈 👌 😌 😊 😔 😏

Table 1
Emoji usage in text messages
Lu, Xuan et al., *Learning from the Ubiquitous Language: An Empirical Analysis of Emoji Usage of Smartphone Users.* 2016, P.770

Amicability

Say hi

Delight

Ambivalence

Interesting

Grief

What?

Stress

Irritation

Good night

Eating
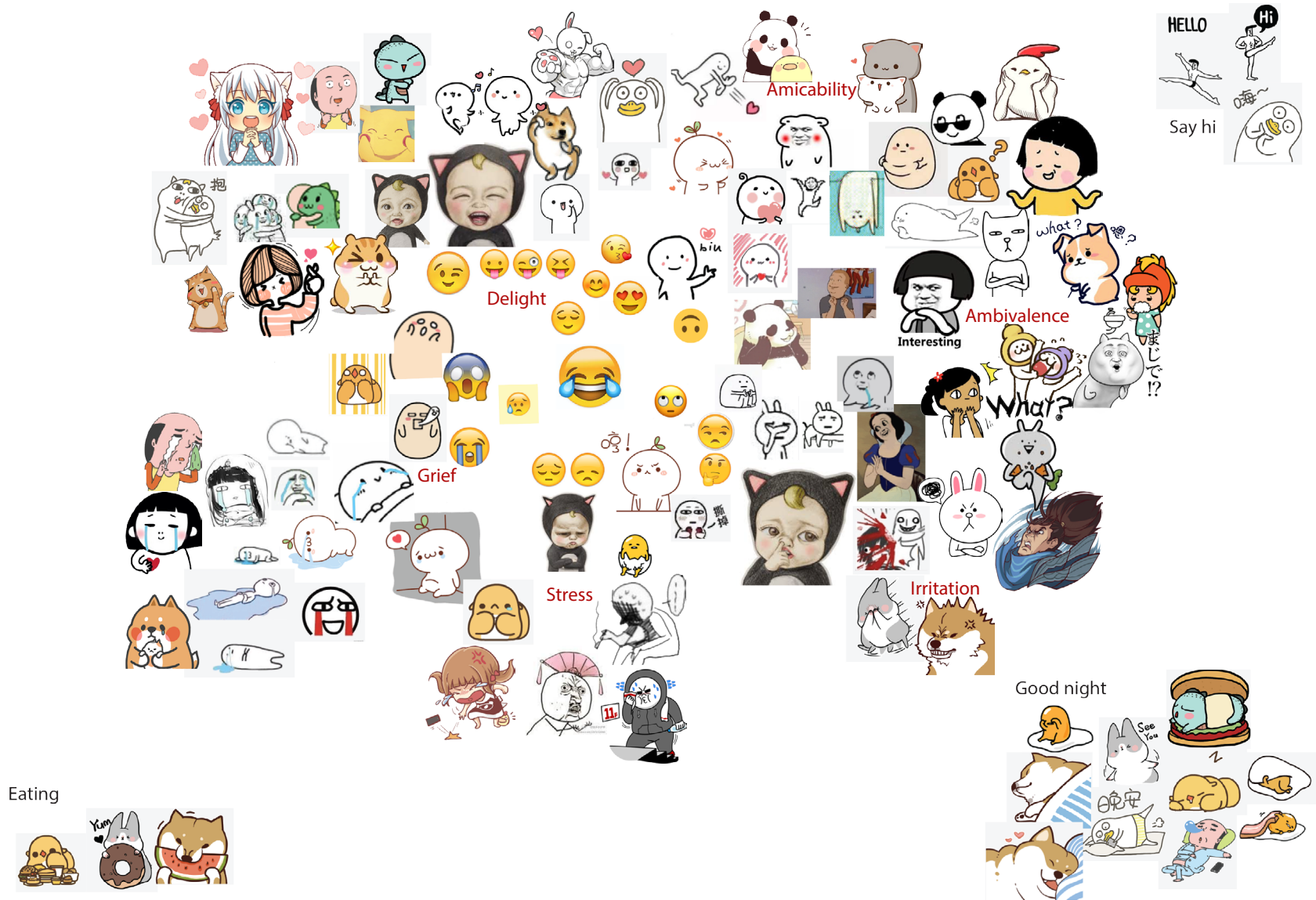
Fighure 16
Meilin Wang,
A visual mapping of e-sticker's emotional expression,
January 2018

There are social media websites created for women who have concerns around pregnancy. Users of these sites track their menstrual cycles and celebrate the beginning of their menstruation with their intimate friends or strangers who share their concerns. My design could be used in these communications to convey the rhythm of menstruation and the different stages of the monthly cycle. Reflecting on the whole monthly cycle, I sketched a scene where my character got pimples (a sign of hormonal fluctuations; Figure 17). I found that drawing the full figure reduced the focus of this e-sticker and realised that if I was going to highlight key events (see Figure 18), I would need to design some images that were close-up (like looking in the mirror).

Fighure 17
Meilin Wang,
A pimpled woman 01,
February 2018
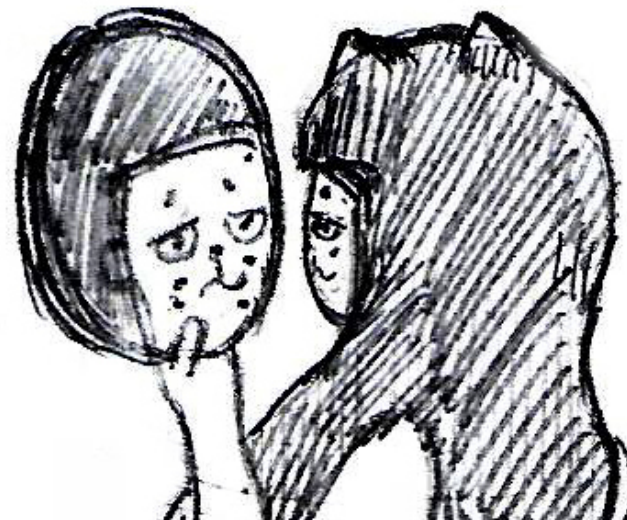
Fighure 18
Meilin Wang,
A pimpled woman 02,
March 2018

Verbal text may require some e-stickers to enhance the expression of menstrual experiences or emotional states. For instance, the e-sticker presenting menstrual pain with 'leave me alone' text can convey the pain or be used to simply express the emotion of 'leave me alone' (see Figure 19). Text is not required for those e-stickers with obvious emotional expressions, such as Figure 20.

Fighure 19
Meilin Wang,
A menstruating woman 04,
February 2018

Fighure 20
Meilin Wang,
A happy menstruating woman 04,
February 2018

For some platforms, censorship may regard the presentation of explicit menstrual blood as a discomfort factor due to the taboos and stigmatisation of menstruation. Therefore, it is possible to create another version of each e-sticker that uses the hint of one red dot or red cycle on the character's rear to express menstruation for certain platforms. This obscured reference can avoid censorship issues while maintaining engagement with the audience, who have an understanding of menstruation and the associated experiences.

● 5. Conclusion

This research investigated how to positively influence women, especially young women, by normalising menstruation and empowering females on social media through the visual language of e-stickers featuring an anthropomorphic character. I found that the employment of SNS to distribute visually orientated content can positively connect with young females and then considered how engagement with affirmative concepts (such as the normalisation of menstruation) can address menstrual taboos and empower women.

I considered Fearless and Fabulous as an example that encouraged women using illustration to construct narratives and also examined a commercial campaign, Touch the Pickle, that targets the normalisation of menstruation. I investigated the feminist artworks created by Barbara Kruger in relation to women's perspectives. These incorporate cultural structures of stereotype, identity and sexuality to explore the narrative visual language in a straightforward presentation. I found that e-stickers could be an appropriate form of communication to engage with the target audience. By investigating the aesthetic presentation of Tuzki, I gained a deeper understanding of what is required to create an anthropomorphic character for satirical and implied manifestation.

From a female communication designer's perspective, I attempted to employ visually cute illustrations to engage with my audience but found that cuteness cannot empower women. I prototyped a diverse selection of female characters in relation to their daily lives and collected and analysed data for user behaviour, emojis, emoticons and e-stickers. I combined self-experience and research in relation to menstruation and prototyped and digitalised a menstruating female character to break menstrual taboos by directly illustrating the menstrual experience. I also considered how to translate female character attributes into an anthropomorphic character and how to balance her animalism and anthropomorphism.

I believe that there is an opportunity to develop my theory about visually addressing menstrual taboos on platforms that record women's monthly cycles. These apps can employ my designs to chart different stages of the menstrual cycle, although I have not necessarily mapped all the emotional and physical stages in a month yet. These designs will be completed in future work on this project. Finally, I have investigated fertility and symbols thereof in women's monthly cycles to create another pack of e-stickers. This will describe the fertility narrative including both positive and negative expression.

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