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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: A PERIOD EMOJI FAIL

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The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

Language promotes inclusion. The adoption, use, and repetition of words serve to establish societal norms. The same is true of emojis.

Plan International, an international non-governmental organization advancing equality for girls, recognized the power that emoji representation holds for normalizing matters society deems taboo. In 2017, Plan UK, the United Kingdom subsidiary of Plan International, launched a campaign encouraging the Unicode Consortium to include a period emoji in the global emoji keyboard. Unicode is the international technology consortium responsible for choosing emojis for inclusion in software platforms. Those interested in seeing an emoji adopted can petition the Consortium for approval. Plan UK's Unicode emoji campaign arose from its desire to destigmatize menstruation. A period emoji, it believed, would help women talk about menstruation.

Before petitioning the Unicode Consortium, Plan UK conducted an Internet-based poll on the ideal period emoji. Voters could choose between five designs: a sanitary pad, a uterus, a period calendar, a pair of period pants, and three blood droplets. Over 54,600 people cast votes, and the period pants emoji emerged as the clear winner. Plan International submitted the period pants emoji, a picture of white underpants with a period stain, for consideration.

Despite the overwhelming response favoring the period pants, Unicode rejected the popular depiction. Unicode failed to explain its choice; some argued a period pants emoji lacked broad usability, others speculated the period pants emoji was just too uncomfortable to approve. Plan UK then teamed with NHS Blood and Transplant and submitted a new design: a single blood drop. In 2019, Unicode adopted the single drop of blood as one of 230 new emojis. According to Emojipedia, the leading interpreter of emojis, the single drop of blood emoji "may be used to signify a blood donation, bleeding, injury or menstruation."

The broad references to a blood drop emoji dilute its ability to destigmatize menstruation. The blood drop emoji is not a clear, identifiable representation of menstruation. Emojis best normalize when they prompt those using and receiving the symbol to think of the idea associated with it in more standard terms. Disability advocates have hailed Unicodes' adaptation of wheelchairs, seeing-eye dogs, and prosthetic limb emojis for redressing underrepresentation of disabled people. A period, or menstruation, does not necessarily come to mind (or perhaps is just one of many things that come to mind) when someone sees a blood droplet on their phone.

Unicode's decision to reject the period pants emoji makes clear that it is not a thought leader but a consensus follower. Plan UK sought approval of the period pants emoji to make the idea of menstruation less taboo. Unicode's rejection of an emoji that is exclusive to periods reflects a current reality; people do not necessarily feel comfortable using words and ideas that relate clearly to menstruation.

Unicode, sadly, is correct in its conclusion that society is not ready to discard silly euphemisms referring to menstruation. And that is precisely the tide against which Plan UK is fighting in looking to Unicode for normalization. If the standard of adoption is the popularity of an expressed idea, then Unicode can't possibly normalize taboos.

The same year it rejected the period pants emoji, Unicode selected the seeing-eye dog and wheelchair user emojis, and a same-gender, hand-holding couple emoji. Individuals and groups, including Apple and Google, lauded it for celebrating diversity. Unicode's praise is not wholly deserved. By rejecting Plan UK's original proposal in favor of an emoji with multitude meanings, Unicode chose to perpetuate shame rather than promote empowerment.

And, by the way, that year Unicode also selected an emoji representing men's underwear briefs. It has yet to select a bra.

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