

Cultural Differences in Past Experiences and Attitudes Toward Menstruation Among Japanese and Thai Female University Students

Rumi Matsushima, Kyoto Notre Dame University, Japan
Adisorn Juntrasook, Thammasat University, Thailand

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Abstract

This study examined cultural differences in past experiences and attitudes toward menstruation among Japanese and Thai female university students. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 2024 at Thammasat University in Thailand and in 2025 through an online survey in Japan (Japan: $n = 166$; Thailand: $n = 106$). The survey measured attitudes toward menstruation, educational experiences, satisfaction with menstrual education, awareness of coping strategies, menstrual-related difficulties, and personal feelings about menstruation. The results showed several cross-national differences. Japanese students reported greater hesitation in discussing menstruation and lower confidence in their knowledge. In contrast, Thai students demonstrated higher motivation and confidence regarding menstrual knowledge and more open communication about menstruation. However, Thai students also reported greater practical difficulties, particularly financial barriers to menstrual products and challenges related to school activities. These findings suggest that menstrual education policies should be adapted to social contexts, promoting open discussion and knowledge confidence in Japan while addressing structural barriers such as access to menstrual products in Thailand.

Keywords: menstruation, menstrual education, cultural differences

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Introduction

In recent years, menstruation has received increasing social attention in Japan, particularly through discussions surrounding period poverty and the development of femtech products. People tend to talk more about menstruation and share related problems and initiatives with each other than before. Tanaka (2022) describes this tendency as the “third menstruation movement”^[1] and suggests that factors such as social media, media content such as dramas and anime, corporate initiatives, and the expansion of the femtech market may account for the increasing awareness of menstruation-related issues.

Furthermore, according to the 2024 survey by the Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office of Japan, the number of local governments taking action increased approximately 3.6-fold over the following two years, rising from 255 in 2021 to 926 in 2024. In addition, companies have also begun to support the installation of sanitary products.

Despite these developments, menstruation is still not widely discussed in everyday contexts in Japan, and awareness and understanding vary considerably among individuals. In particular, limited knowledge and discomfort in discussing menstruation—especially among men—may contribute to persistent social challenges related to menstrual health and gender equality. Koshio and Sugita (2024) report that menstrual education in Japan is insufficient and there is a gap between the needs of students and the education provided.

According to a 2021 survey by Plan International USA and Always, only 32.0% of respondents reported being open about menstruation. Japan ranked 25th out of 27 countries (average across 27 countries: 62.6%), the lowest among G7 countries. This suggests that social interest in “Femtech” or policy-level product distribution has not yet translated into individual openness or cultural shifts. To better understand these challenges in Japan, it is useful to examine contexts where gender-related education has been more actively promoted, such as in Thailand. According to the 2025 Gender Gap Index, Thailand ranks 66th, while Japan ranks 118th, indicating a substantial difference in gender equality between the two countries. Comparing these two Asian countries provides an opportunity to examine how differences in cultural and educational contexts shape attitudes toward menstruation.

In Thailand, menstruation is taught as part of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), mainly within topics related to reproductive health and puberty. Basic knowledge, such as reproductive organs and menstruation, is generally covered in school education. Students and teachers responded that “Girls entering puberty, including menstruation” had been covered in their sexual development, health and behavior classes. Depending on the students’ gender and type of school, 70–96% of students and 97–100% of teachers said the topic had been covered (UNICEF, 2016).

However, according to the report by UNICEF (2016), many students still lack a correct understanding of a range of sexuality-related issues. When asked to self-assess their knowledge, around 80% of female students reported having a good understanding of menstruation. However, only 19–30% correctly answered multiple-choice questions about menstruation and the menstrual cycle. These findings thus indicate that significant gaps remain in students’ ability to apply their CSE knowledge in their everyday lives.

^[1] Based on Tanaka (2022), the first movement dates to 1872, when the custom of regarding menstruation as ritual impurity was officially abolished. The second movement corresponds to 1961, marked by the introduction of commercial sanitary napkins in Japan.

Based on these considerations, the purpose of this study was to compare past experiences and attitudes toward menstruation among Japanese and Thai female university students and to examine cultural differences in communication, knowledge, and practical experiences related to menstruation, with implications for future menstrual education practices and policies.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were female university students from Japan and Thailand. The Japanese sample consisted of 166 students aged 18–24 ($M = 20.75$, $SD = 1.59$). The Thai sample consisted of 106 students aged 17–37 ($M = 20.41$, $SD = 1.94$).

The survey was conducted in 2024 at Thammasat University in Thailand and in 2025 through an online questionnaire in Japan.

Survey Contents

The questionnaire included items addressing the following topics:

- (1) attitudes toward menstruation (7 items) (5-point scale)
- (2) education about menstruation (1 item) (multiple-choice)
- (3) satisfaction with menstrual education (1 item) (5-point scale)
- (4) topics learned about menstruation at school (multiple-choice)
- (5) awareness of strategies for managing menstruation (5 items) (5-point scale)
- (6) menstrual-related difficulties (12 items) (multiple-choice)
- (7) personal feelings about menstruation (18 items) (multiple-choice)

Group differences between Japanese and Thai participants were examined using chi-square tests and t-tests.

Results

Attitudes Toward Menstruation

Table 1 shows differences in attitudes toward menstruation. Clear differences were observed in attitudes toward menstruation. Japanese students reported greater hesitation in discussing menstruation and lower motivation and confidence regarding menstrual knowledge. In contrast, Thai students demonstrated higher motivation and confidence regarding menstrual knowledge and reported less hesitation in discussing menstruation.

Table 1
Attitudes Toward Menstruation

item	Japanese		Thai		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n = 166)</i>		<i>(n = 106)</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
I feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation with opposite-sex friends/acquaintances.	3.40	1.29	2.27	1.20	7.21	<i>p</i> < .001
I feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation with opposite-sex family/relatives.	3.43	1.29	2.35	1.29	6.73	<i>p</i> < .001
I want to gain more knowledge about menstruation.	3.27	0.97	4.18	0.88	7.95	<i>p</i> < .001
I think I have enough knowledge about menstruation.	3.13	0.94	3.65	0.85	4.65	<i>p</i> < .001
I feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation with my partner.	3.07	1.16	1.86	1.01	8.80	<i>p</i> < .001
I feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation with same-sex family/relatives.	2.69	1.25	1.66	0.95	7.67	<i>p</i> < .001
I feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation with same-sex friends/acquaintances.	2.66	1.20	1.59	0.83	8.68	<i>p</i> < .001

Education About Menstruation

Table 2 shows differences in menstrual education. In Japan, many participants reported learning about menstruation at an early stage, such as in elementary or junior high school. In Thailand, most participants reported learning about menstruation in junior high school, and many continued to receive education in high school. Overall, menstrual education in Thailand appeared to extend over a longer period than in Japan.

Table 2
Education About Menstruation (%)

item	Japanese	Thai	<i>p</i>
	<i>(n = 166)</i>	<i>(n = 106)</i>	
Learned in elementary school classes	69.3	52.8	<i>p</i> = .006
Learned in junior high school classes	53.6	72.6	<i>p</i> = .002
Learned in high school classes	24.7	61.3	<i>p</i> < .001
Never learned about it at school	13.9	1.9	
Learned at school (don't remember when)	7.2	13.2	<i>p</i> = .003

Satisfaction With Menstrual Education

Table 3-1 shows satisfaction with menstrual education and Table 3-2 shows the results based on Table 3-1, with responses grouped into satisfied and not fully satisfied categories. 21.0% of Japanese respondents reported being either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the classes they had received. In Thailand, 29.1% of respondents reported being either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with menstrual education, which was higher than in the Japanese sample (Table 3-2). In both countries, fewer than 30% reported satisfaction, with no statistically significant difference as indicated by a chi-square test.

Table 3-1
Satisfaction With Menstruation Education (%)

	Japanese (<i>n</i> = 166)	Thai (<i>n</i> = 106)
dissatisfied	8.4	4.9
somewhat dissatisfied	37.8	30.1
neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	32.9	35.9
somewhat satisfied	16.8	25.2
satisfied	4.2	3.9

Note. Participants who reported not learning about menstruation at school were excluded from the analysis.

Table 3-2
Satisfaction With Menstrual Education (Dichotomized)

	satisfied <i>n</i> (%)	Not fully satisfied <i>n</i> (%)
Japanese (<i>n</i> = 166)	30(21.0%)	113(79.0)
Thai (<i>n</i> = 106)	30(29.1%)	73(70.9)

Note. Participants who reported not learning about menstruation at school were excluded from the analysis.

Topics Learned About Menstruation at School

Table 4 shows topics learned about menstruation at school. Among Japanese participants they remember basic topics such as menstrual mechanisms, whereas, among Thai participants, not only basic topics, but also they remember learning more practical topics such as fertility and menstrual care.

Table 4
Topics Learned About Menstruation at School (%)

item	Japanese (<i>n</i> = 166)	Thai (<i>n</i> = 106)	<i>p</i>
Physical changes during puberty and the mechanism of menstruation	62.7	87.7	<i>p</i> < .001
Physical discomforts and burdens related to menstruation	41.6	36.8	
Relationship between the menstrual cycle and the possibility of pregnancy	41.6	72.6	<i>p</i> < .001
Individual differences in menstrual cycles and menstrual discomforts	27.1	17.9	<i>p</i> = .082
Mental discomforts and burdens related to menstruation	26.5	25.5	
Types and necessity of menstrual products	21.7	19.8	
Where to seek advice or consultation when having problems or concerns about menstruation	21.1	11.3	<i>p</i> = .038
Types and necessity of medications related to menstruation	18.1	16.0	
Appropriate considerations for women during menstruation	17.5	34.0	<i>p</i> = .002

How to use menstrual products	17.5	21.7	
Daily precautions and self-care needed during menstruation	16.3	29.2	$p = .011$
Do not remember	10.8	2.8	$p = .016$
How to use medications related to menstruation	6.6	8.5	

Awareness of Strategies for Managing Menstruation

Table 5 shows the awareness of strategies for managing menstruation. In Japan, respondents tended to emphasize the importance of menstrual leave and improving men's knowledge about menstruation. In Thailand, participants more frequently emphasized the need for free distribution of menstrual products, menstrual leave, and accessible information about menstruation on the internet.

Table 5
Awareness of Strategies for Managing Menstruation

item	Japanese ($n = 166$)	Thai ($n = 106$)	p
Men need more knowledge about menstruation.	4.04	4.42	$p < .001$
Men should be given more opportunities to learn about menstruation at school.	3.99	4.51	$p < .001$
It is desirable to have more easy-to-understand information about menstruation available on the Internet.	3.89	4.77	$p < .001$
Menstrual products should be provided free of charge in public restrooms, just like toilet paper.	3.96	4.90	$p < .001$
It should be easier for people to take menstrual leave.	4.07	4.82	$p < .001$

Menstrual-Related Difficulties

Table 6 shows menstrual-related difficulties. Japanese participants reported relatively lower levels of menstrual-related difficulties across most items, including financial barriers and peer-related difficulties. In contrast, Thai participants reported higher levels of practical difficulties, particularly financial barriers to menstrual products and difficulties enduring school activities while menstruating.

Table 6
Menstrual-Related Difficulties (%)

item	Japanese ($n = 166$)	Thai ($n = 106$)	p
I was in trouble because I had no or not enough menstrual products at school or when going out.	44.0	80.2	$p < .001$
I wanted to be absent or leave early from school classes, extracurricular activities, or events because of menstruation, but I endure it.	33.7	72.6	$p < .001$
I wanted to be absent or leave early from important events such as club activities, circles, or lessons because of menstruation, but I endured it.	26.5	58.5	$p < .001$
I was absent from or left early from school classes, extracurricular activities, or events because of menstruation.	19.3	40.6	$p < .001$

I could not tell adults in a leadership position (e.g., teachers or coaches) about my menstrual discomfort.	15.1	12.3	
I felt that adults in a leadership position did not understand or empathize with menstrual discomfort.	12.7	23.6	$p = .019$
I was absent from or left early from important events such as club activities, circles, or lessons because of menstruation.	9.6	24.5	$p < .001$
I was suspected, or felt that I was suspected, by male friends, classmates, or seniors at school of using menstruation as an excuse to skip activities.	7.2	9.4	
I felt that male friends, classmates, or seniors at school did not understand or empathize with menstrual discomfort.	12.7	25.5	$p = .007$
I could not tell female friends, classmates, or seniors at school about my menstrual discomfort.	5.4	5.7	
For financial reasons, I reduced the frequency of changing menstrual products.	9.6	39.6	$p < .001$
For financial reasons, I could not buy menstrual products even when I needed them.	5.4	16.0	$p = .004$

Personal Feelings About Menstruation

Table 7 shows feelings about menstruation. Japanese students were more likely to perceive menstruation as a private matter, with less open communication about menstruation within the family. Thai students, on the other hand, were more likely to describe menstruation as physically and emotionally burdensome but reported more open family communication about the topic.

Table 7
Personal Feelings About Menstruation (%)

item	Japanese ($n = 166$)	Thai ($n = 106$)	p
Menstrual pain is severe.	38.0	73.6	$p < .001$
I don't want to have periods / I wish I could stop them.	33.1	64.2	$p < .001$
PMS (premenstrual syndrome) is hard to deal with.	28.9	62.3	$p < .001$
It is hard because I have to miss part-time work, club activities, classes, or work.	28.3	51.9	$p < .001$
I don't want to see people when I have my period.	25.9	61.3	$p < .001$
I feel irritated or angry.	21.1	14.2	
I can talk about it with my mother or sisters, but not with my father or brothers.	15.1	24.5	
I feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about it.	12.0	14.2	
People don't understand my PMS.	10.2	34.0	$p < .001$
I can't talk about it with my family.	10.2	3.8	
I can talk about it freely with any family members.	10.2	39.6	$p < .001$
I can't talk about it with my partner.	7.2	1.9	
I can't talk about it with friends.	6.6	1.9	
I feel happy when I can take a break from part-time work, club activities, classes, or work.	5.4	19.8	$p < .001$
I feel happy to have periods as a woman.	4.8	9.4	
Other	1.2	0.9	

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Discussion

The present study examined differences in past experiences and attitudes toward menstruation among Japanese and Thai female university students. The results revealed clear cultural differences in communication patterns, educational exposure, and attitudes toward menstruation among Japanese and Thai female university students.

The main findings of the differences between Japan and Thailand were as follows: Japanese students showed greater hesitation in discussing menstruation, whereas Thai students reported more open communication; Thai students demonstrated higher motivation and confidence regarding menstrual knowledge; Thai students reported more practical challenges; and Japanese students appeared to underreport menstrual symptoms.

First, Japanese students were more hesitant to discuss menstruation. In particular, they felt uncomfortable talking about menstruation with opposite-sex friends or acquaintances, as well as with family members. They showed a tendency to find it difficult and uncomfortable to discuss menstruation with anyone, regardless of the type of relationship, compared with Thai students (Table 1). For the item “I can talk about it (menstruation) freely with any family members,” 10.2% of Japanese students and 39.6% of Thai students agreed, indicating a significant difference between the two groups (Table 7).

Nagashima (2022) suggests that mothers still tend to view menstruation as something that should be hidden, and their way of thinking is inherited to their daughters. Therefore, not only menstruation education at school but also efforts to promote awareness within the family and in broader interpersonal contexts, fostering environments where menstruation can be discussed more openly, might be important in Japan. Furthermore, learning through cultural contexts, such as dramas and anime, may also play an important role in creating opportunities to engage with menstruation-related topics in everyday life.

Second, Japanese students showed lower confidence in their knowledge about menstruation. In contrast, Thai students reported higher confidence in their knowledge. Table 2 and Table 4 show that Thai students obtained diverse information and received menstrual education over a longer period, typically from junior high school through senior high school. As we describe in Introduction, in Thailand, menstruation is taught as part of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), mainly within topics related to reproductive health and puberty. This might contribute to increasing their confidence in their knowledge about it.

However, this suggests that there is a gap between students' perceived knowledge and their actual understanding. Therefore, it is important to ensure that students not only acquire but also apply this knowledge in their everyday lives.

Third, Thai students reported more practical challenges, including financial barriers to menstrual products and difficulties related to school activities (Table 6). For example, some students reported reducing the frequency of changing menstrual products for financial reasons and experiencing difficulties due to a lack of menstrual products at school or when going out.

In Thailand in 2021, social media widely claimed that Thailand had increased tampon tax to 30% by reclassifying tampons as cosmetics. Although this claim was later found to be inaccurate, it might suggest that Thai students are relatively cost-sensitive, because the cost of menstrual products may place a financial burden on their daily lives.

Finally, Japanese participants appeared to report less severe menstrual symptoms and negative feelings toward menstruation (Table 6 and Table 7). However, previous studies in Japan have consistently shown that a substantial proportion of women experience strong menstrual symptoms and negative impacts on daily life.

For example, according to the previous survey results (Matsushima & Ozaki, 2026), 67.0% responded that female university students have strong menstrual symptoms and 63% responded that it has a negative impact on daily life. Nagashima (2022) also reported that half of the young women in Japan reported that menstrual pain was severe, and 3 out of 10 young women answered they disliked menstruation or wanted to stop their periods. Koshio and Sugita (2024) also reported that 45% Japanese high school students responded that they endure symptoms during menstruation and this percentage was the highest among other menstrual management behaviors.

From these findings, many students may perceive menstruation as a normal experience because it is something that everyone goes through. As a result, some women may feel that they should simply accept it and may be less likely to talk about it openly. This discrepancy suggests that the lower levels reported in this study may not necessarily reflect actual differences in symptom severity, but rather underreporting.

Implications for Education and Policy

These findings suggest that menstrual education policies should be adapted to social contexts. In Japan, efforts may focus on promoting open discussion not only at school but also at home, as well as raising awareness in society. In Thailand, policies may focus on strengthening the connection between menstrual education and students' everyday lives, while addressing structural barriers such as access to menstrual products.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, participants were limited to female university students, and therefore the results may not reflect the perspectives of male students or individuals outside the university population. Second, the Thai sample was recruited from a single university, and regional or institutional differences may limit the generalizability of the findings.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Contact email: rumim@notredame.ac.jp