

"Basically, it's sorcery for your vagina": Unpacking western representations of vaginal steaming

Abstract

Vaginal steaming made global headlines in 2015 after promotion by celebrity Gwyneth Paltrow. One of many female genital modification practices currently on offer in Anglo-western nations – practices heavily promoted and critiqued – vaginal steaming is claimed to offer benefits for fertility and overall reproductive, sexual, or even general health and wellbeing. We analysed a selection of online accounts of vaginal steaming, to determine the sociocultural assumptions and logics within such discourse, including ideas about women, women's bodies, and women's engagement with such 'modificatory' practices. Ninety items were carefully selected from the main types of site discussing vaginal steaming; news/magazine; health/lifestyle; spa/service providers; personal blogs. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, within a constructionist framework which saw us focus the constructions and rationalities that underpinned the explicit content of the texts. Within an overarching theme of 'the self-improving woman' we identified four themes: 1) the naturally deteriorating, dirty female body; 2) contemporary life is harmful; 3) physical optimisation and the enhancement of health; and 4) vaginal steaming for life optimisation. Online accounts of vaginal steaming appear both to fit within historico-contemporary constructions around women's bodies as deficient and disgusting, and contemporary neoliberal and healthist discourse around the constantly improving subject.

Key words

Genitalia

Gender

Healthism

Female sexuality

Responsibility

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'You sit on what is essentially a mini-throne, and a combination of infrared and mugwort steam cleanses your uterus, et al. It is an energetic release—not just a steam douche—that balances female hormone levels.' (Goop 2015)

A practice called vaginal steaming (aka 'v-steam', 'yoni steam', 'chai-yok') has been offered by 'holistic health spa clinics' in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) for some time (Heifetz 2010). Widespread public attention and media coverage only occurred after celebrity and self-professed health and lifestyle guru Gwyneth Paltrow blogged enthusiastically about it on her popular site Goop.com in early 2015. In this practice, the vulva is exposed to heated steam, typically infused with herbs such as mugwort and wormwood (Burd 2015). Various 'medicinal' benefits, often evidenced by client testimonials, are claimed; responses to vaginal steaming have ranged from adoration to scepticism, rejection and concern, with some, often medical professionals, critiquing the practice as potentially hazardous (e.g., Gunter 2015).

We can conceptualise vaginal steaming as the newest addition to an existing arsenal of practices available to western women to 'improve' their (troublesome) genitalia, including douching, pubic hair removal (Braun, Tricklebank, and Clarke 2013; Herbenick et al. 2013), and even cosmetic surgery (Braun 2005, 2010). Vaginal douching, the existing western practice most akin to steaming, involves 'cleansing' the vagina through an injected liquid solution, such as vinegar and water (Martino, Youngpairoj, and Vermund 2004). Douching has a long history (Nicoletti 2006), but now is usually practiced after menstruation or sexual intercourse, for perceived hygiene, cleanliness, the elimination of odour, relief of vaginal irritations, and to tighten the vagina (Anderson et al. 2008; Cottrell, 2010; Martino, Youngpairoj, and Vermund 2004). It is a practice most common in the US (Farage and Lennon 2006) – a quarter of US women aged 15-44 are believed to douche regularly (Office of Women's Health 2015). Public health professionals dismiss douching as at best unnecessary and at worst unhealthy, linked with various adverse gynaecological outcomes (see Luong et al. 2010; Martino and Vermund 2002; Zhang, Thomas, and Leybovich 1997). Regular douching can damage the mucosal lining of the vagina, and increase women's vulnerability to infection (Fashemi et al. 2013; Luong et al. 2010; Martino and Vermund 2002).

Vaginal steaming also bears similarities to practices associated with 'dry sex' in various African, South American and Southeast Asian countries (Hilber et al. 2010; Hull et al. 2011; van Andel et al. 2008), which aim to dry the vagina and/or alter or eliminate 'unpleasant' odours and discharge (Hilber et al. 2010; Hull et al. 2011). Performed most commonly postpartum, to purify the body and 'make it attractive again' for male partners (van Andel et al. 2008, 86; Hull et al. 2011), these

practices are also potentially risky – heated steam may disrupt healthy vaginal flora, leading to infection, or result in scalding of sensitive vulvar tissues; women report experiencing vaginal irritation, pain, bleeding and sores; ‘dry sex’ has been linked to increased risk of infection (Hull et al. 2011; Smit et al. 2011).

Vaginal steaming is worth examining as part of a broader pattern of imperatives to work on and improve the female body, and for how it potentially re-inscribes ideas of the female body as (always, potentially) defective or even disgusting, to be feared and managed (Fahs 2015). Women’s genitalia have long been a source of both fear and fascination, positioned as abhorrent, uncontrollable, dangerous and to be feared (Braun and Wilkinson 2001; Ussher 2006). Contemporary western sociocultural representations of women’s genitalia tend to be more nuanced than in the past, but still in subtle ways position them as unhygienic, disgusting, and/or shameful (Braun and Wilkinson 2001; Fahs 2014). Our aim is to examine online media coverage of Western vaginal steaming to explore the constructions and rationalities the practice relies on, and reinforces, including ideas about women, women’s bodies, and women’s engagement with such ‘modificatory’ practices, and to interrogate their implications for women’s wellbeing.

Our analysis is situated within constructionist theoretical frameworks (Burr 2015), and an understanding of the meanings and practices of the female body as socially produced rather than inherent or natural (Braun and Wilkinson 2001). This means we treat representation as doing the work of producing ontological realities, desires, and embodied possibilities for action. The concept of neoliberalism (Brown 2006; Rose 1996) has also proved fruitful for analyses of the body (Phipps 2014) and genital modification practices (e.g., Braun 2009). Neoliberalism’s ideology of ‘privatisation, personal responsibility, agentic individualism, autonomy, and personal freedom’ (Weiss 2008, 89) has quite radically shaped the ways westerners now think about ourselves, our bodies, our sexuality and our wellbeing, as well as the practices we engage in (Brown 2006). Neoliberalism asserts ‘an almost hyper-responsible self’, who understands themselves as ‘free from the influence of cultural norms and expectations’ (Braun 2009, 236) in how they choose to act and what they desire (Brown 2006; Gill 2008a; Phipps 2014), an ‘enterprising’ self, invested in ‘self-help’ and transformation (Rose 1996) towards perfection. The ideology dubbed ‘healthism’ situates the pursuit of not just of health, but health optimisation, as a moral obligation (Cairns and Johnston 2015; Crawford 1980, 2006), and vital to contemporary (neoliberal) selfhood. The subject seeks out, assesses, and participates in, self-improvement strategies; without work, the body/self is incomplete, but the task is endless (e.g., Cairns and Johnston 2015; Neasbitt and Rodriguez 2011; Raisborough 2007; Wegenstein 2012).

The ideology of neoliberalism folds into and congeals with postfeminism (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004), where the female subject is positioned as ‘liberated’, free to choose and enact any femininity, how and when they see fit. Postfeminist rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ has become central to how body modification practices are marketed to women (Braun 2009; Gill 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Lazar 2006; McRobbie 2004). The self-as-project, ‘improved’ through ‘proper’ consumption, produces a culture of self-scrutiny (Gill 2007) in which women engage in constant self-monitoring and body-disciplining practices, such as ‘routine surveillance and maintenance’ (Fahs 2014, 214) of their genitalia. The possession of ‘perfect’ genitalia becomes vital to empowered (authentic, and sexy) womanhood. This context produces accountability and culpability: women who do not engage in bodily (and psychological) ‘improvement’ options become responsible for a less-than-desirable self/body, knowable as somehow defective or deficient (Lazar 2006; Phipps 2014). Women who use vaginal douches report perceiving those that do not as dirty and irresponsible, as not taking care of themselves (Lichtenstein and Nansel 2001); unmodified or visible pubic hair is similarly read as dirty or disgusting (Braun et al. 2013; Tiggeman and Hodgson 2008). Despite ‘free choice’ rhetoric, choice has a strong moral dimension – certain choices are ‘right’ (genital ‘improvement’); others are ‘wrong’ (no genital modifications). The individual woman is expected – even obliged – to make the right choice (Braun 2009); non-compliance is seldom feasible (Bordo 2003).

Method

The dataset comprised a stratified sample of 90 online items related to vaginal steaming, from a number of predetermined site types (news/magazine [30]; health/lifestyle [20]; blog [20]; spa/provider site [20]). Data were collected through web searches (April – June 2015) using Google regional search engines (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, US). Search terms used were ‘vaginal steaming’ and ‘v steam’; as search results were initially saturated with news and magazine articles pertaining to Paltrow’s recent blog post, search terms were delimited to include sites specific to ‘health and lifestyle’ (‘lifestyle’), spas and service providers (‘spa’) and personal blogs (‘blog’). Our sampling criteria excluded certain other site types (YouTube; online marketplace/classified advertisements; discussion forums; non-English websites). The 90 items in the sample represent the top-ranked hits from each search, after removal of duplication, as we were interested in accessing the types of text-based pages lay persons are likely to encounter if they turn to the Internet for information about vaginal steaming. After review, we decided to exclude user-comments, as we were interested in the initial construction of vaginal steaming.

We followed Hookaway’s (2008: 105) ethical ‘fair game-public domain’ approach when determining what content was suitable to collect and analyse: content of webpages that were open access.

Information which could potentially identify the individual respondent was disguised or excluded from data extracts presented (Convery and Cox 2012; Hookaway 2008). Data were analysed using a social constructionist version of thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012). We aimed to identify the assumptions, logics, and rationalities within these representations of vaginal steaming. Our methodological approach was inductive and primarily latent: coding and theme development were initially grounded in data content. Textual web content was downloaded into Microsoft Word, and the first author (TV) undertook the early stages of analysis, in consultation with the second author (VB). After a rich and thorough coding process, we reviewed codes and clustered them into eleven ‘candidate themes’. With subsequent revision and development, several themes were demoted to subthemes or were merged; others we decided to explore analytically as epistemological framings for knowledge claims, rather than meaning-based themes (see Discussion). The final analysis reports four themes, captured within one overarching theme: ‘the self-improving woman’. Data extracts are numbered and identified by type of data item and a number (N = news/magazine; L = health/lifestyle; S = spa/providers; B = personal blogs). Spelling errors/typos have been corrected to facilitate readability.

Analysis: a self-improving woman who steams

E1: Often, I think some take the care of their vaginal/perianal area a little too lightly. It is the core of who and what we are as women; it brings forth life, love, pleasure, etc. We must learn to take care, treat and respect our vagina and womb. (B5)

A woman¹ who engages in various ‘self-improvement’ strategies for both body and mind was the imagined subject who dominated the dataset. A perfect child of neoliberalism, this imagined subject operates within the ideology of ‘healthism’ (Crawford 1980, 2006), where the pursuit of not just of health, but health optimisation, becomes a moral obligation and vital to contemporary selfhood. We discuss four themes that evoke the self-improving woman in distinct ways. The first two – (1) the naturally deteriorating, dirty female body and 2) contemporary life is harmful – construct vaginal steaming as effectively a solution for a (health) problem. The others – 3) physical optimisation and the enhancement of health and 4) vaginal steaming for life optimisation – construct vaginal steaming as enhancement for already healthy women.

The naturally deteriorating, dirty female body

The first way this self-improving woman was evidenced was in constructions of an inherently ‘faulty’ female reproductive body, which reinforced and justified a need for self-surveillance and action:

E2: The combination of steam and essential oils from the plants penetrate deeply into the cervix and uterus to dislodge indurated menstrual fluids and pathological accumulations that have not properly sloughed off with each monthly cycle. (S12)

E3: After the steam you may notice some slight cramping or vaginal discharge. This is normal and ok. The cramping is a way for the uterus to rid itself of toxins and any blood that is stagnant and old. (P4)

The female reproductive body here is inevitably 'unclean' and 'toxic'. Concern about toxicity reflects and reinforces the entrenched cultural narrative around women's genitalia as a dirty contaminating 'liability' that require ongoing maintenance and purification (Braun and Wilkinson 2001, 2003; Fahs 2014), part of a broader discourse of women's bodies as polluting (Douglas 2002). In these extracts, a specific defectiveness is applied to menstruation, a metaphoric construction of menstruation as a 'machine in disrepair' (Martin 1987, 45) which permeated the dataset. Here, women suffer through their defective bodies, with defectiveness evident in both mechanical and structural aspects. The uterus, an organ with an amazingly long history of blame related to women's health (Meyer 1997), was itself singled out as faulty:

E4: My uterus sits pretty far back and is slightly tilted and as a result old blood gets stuck up in there relatively easily. Unfortunately this means that with each new period, my uterus has to contract something fierce to get all this hardened and thickened old blood out, hence the painful cramping. What a job our uterus' have huh?! (B8)

E5: A lot of discomfort to do with menstruation et al, can actually be caused by having a misaligned uterus. I never knew that the uterus could become misaligned, but I guess it makes sense. I mean, the uterus does a lot of work. (B20)

These extracts link design faults (location, orientation, alignment) with problematic menstrual experiences. However, reflecting the contradictory social meanings ascribed to women's genitalia (e.g., Braun and Wilkinson 2001, 2003; Fahs 2014), negative constructions coexisted with a more positive account of a 'hardworking' organ. At the same time, this ultimately relies on an imagined problematic female body – a body that requires hard work. Building on the idea of defective-by-design, women's reproductive bodies were also described as reaching a point of 'stagnation':

E6: Many infertility problems are related to coldness and stagnation [...] The chai-yok treatment is effective for coldness or poor circulation in the lower part of the body because it increases the blood circulation, and blood supplies nutrition, so the more blood supply, the faster the healing process. (L2)

E7: Stagnation is not a good thing when it comes to any organ system, but when it comes to the uterus it can cause a myriad of issues with menstruation and fertility. (L3)

A claim of stagnation related to fertility reflects and reinforces cultural constructions of 'disease, decay, atrophy and senility [as] the inevitable outcome of the end of fecundity' (Ussher 2006, 127). The female body was regularly positioned as inevitably deteriorating from an optimal to a sub-optimal state, a process depicted as both natural and inherently problematic, and to be battled against. Vaginal steaming was, for instance, framed as a 'detox':

E8: Vaginal steam baths are basically a detoxing facial for your lady parts. They cleanse, tone, and nourish your cervix, uterus, and vaginal tissues. (B4)

E9: I was drawn to it as a way to detoxify a part of my body that is not easily accessible yet important to keep clean. (L14)

A claim to 'detox' evokes a needed cleansing process, and a starting state of pathology that is removed. Through a factually-oriented claim around 'importance' (E9), a responsible and self-policing neoliberal subject (Neasbitt and Rodriguez 2011) is evoked, a woman who recognises a problem and seeks to resolve it.

Within the data, the female body was situated within this biologically-determinist narrative of inevitable decline (Twigg 2004), but decay was positioned as something that could and should be resisted. Negative cultural narratives surrounding women's genitalia and reproductive bodies have long been mobilised in the marketing of genital modification practices (Ussher 2006), such as vaginal douching in the 1940s; vaginal steaming is positioned as a (new) technique women can now use to disrupt decline and dirtiness, the 'solution' that rational, responsible women should utilise to maintain their declining 'unruly' bodies and bodily processes.

This was particularly evident in relation to fertility enhancement, a key desired outcome of vaginal steaming processes. Fertility was constructed as inherently fraught; always at risk, always potentially sub-optimal or declining – that ticking 'biological clock' (Friese, Becker, and Nachtigall 2006). Given that gendered identity for women and childbearing are almost inextricably linked in pronatalist western societies (Greil, Slauson-Blevin, and McQuillan 2011), women were unsurprisingly often depicted in states from eagerness to improve fertility to desperation to (re)gain fertility.

E10: That brings me to the story of my one experiment with vaginal steaming, when I was a desperate woman about to try IVF for the second and last time and was willing to give anything a shot [...] When you're dealing with infertility, you end up reading about anything and everything that has ever helped a woman get pregnant. (L16)

Stories of ‘the miracle pregnancy’ following vaginal steaming were not uncommon:

E11: In fact, Niki Han Schwarz, owner of Tikkun Spa (where Gwyneth gets steamed) told the LA Times that after battling three years of infertility, she was able to get pregnant at age 45 after only five V-Steam treatments. (L15)

Decay (infertility) is here conquered through vaginal steaming. Infertility was often described using warfare metaphors, such as ‘battling’ (E30), explicitly as well as implicitly framing the female body as an enemy, something to be ‘battled’ against and beaten. So although decline was positioned as inherent in womanhood, it was to be resisted by the self-improving woman who steams.

‘Modern women are really suffering’: contemporary life is harmful

E12: What’s really ruining our health is all the toxic sh*t we keep putting into our bodies, not a traditional practice that’s been used by women for a very long time. (B8)

The female body wasn’t only positioned as naturally defective and deteriorating. The deterioration of women’s bodies and health was frequently positioned as a result of contemporary Western cultural contexts and meanings, with vaginal steaming situated as a practice that women should use to liberate themselves from these forms of sociocultural oppression. The female body was situated often as effectively under assault:

E13: With all the torture we inflict on our vaginas these days – waxing, lasering, chemical-laden douches, synthetic tampons and pads, antibiotics, hormonal birth control, vaginal rejuvenation surgery, bleaching, spermicides. I could go on and on – I’m frankly shocked at the recent backlash in the media about vaginal steaming. (B8)

E14: We live in a culture that likes to traumatise its vaginas. We wax it, shave it, give it a buzz cut and pluck it within an inch of its life. We pierce it. We vajazzle it. We ‘cleanse’ it even though it cleans itself just fine. And we are constantly bombarded with perfumed products to douse it with because some people are afraid of what a real woman smells like. But this steamy vagina business sounds like something I could get on board with. (L19)

In such accounts, genital modification and ‘maintenance’ become normalised, the ‘we’ positioning all women as participating, as complicit. Here, the damage or risk to women’s bodies effectively comes from the practices women (choose to) engage in. While some women referred to contemporary life in a generalised way (‘toxic sh*t’; E10), others singled out specific practices as a point of comparison:

E15: I question why people are up in arms about hot water near a vulva when people are still putting toxic cotton tampons IN their vaginas... talk about changing the vaginal flora! (L11)

Setting up a contrast between contemporary ‘damaging’ practice and vaginal steaming achieves two things: it legitimates vaginal steaming as normative within a range of modificatory practices and it situates it as inherently different to those. E13 and E14 do this positioning implicitly, but in E12 and E15, vaginal steaming is explicitly positioned as a ‘safe’ alternative that contrasts with toxic and damaging, yet normative, practices. In E15, the use of the word ‘still’ positions tampon use as pre-enlightened. Through contrasting a claimed ‘known risk’ with a practice (vaginal steaming) depicted as neutral (‘hot water near the vulva’) or even healthy, women are positioned as morally suspect (see Raisborough 2007) if they use (‘toxic’) tampons – and we argue, especially if they do not (then) engage in vaginal steaming. This constructs a sort of imperative that ‘responsible’ women would take up vaginal steaming in an effort to preserve their health, as conscientious consumers in postfeminist neoliberal times (Evans and Riley 2013; Gill 2007; Lazar 2011).

The theme of a female body damaged by western culture was also evident in accounts of a medicalised and pathologised female (reproductive) body:

E16: You may snicker at the idea of steaming your vagina, but in a culture that pathologises our bodies and medicalises our reproductive ailments, bringing back this time-tested technique could serve a lot of women well. (N4)

Western biomedicine was often positioned negatively in data items which promoted vaginal steaming:

E17: Maybe you’d like to turn this into a protective rite, to ensure that various institutional ignoramuses keep their grubby paws off of your vagina [...] and stop treating your body as the property of their dubious enterprises. (S16)

Here, the entire medical establishment is suspect, a ‘dubious’ mode of control of women’s bodies. The caution in E17 extends a long (feminist) critique both of the institution of medicine, and processes around the medicalisation of women’s ‘normal’ bodies and bodily changes, particularly related to women’s genitalia, sexuality and fertility (e.g., Braun and Tiefer 2009; Cacchioni 2015; Moynihan and Cassels 2005). Medicalisation relies on, and reproduces, very particular and normative ideas of what is ideal for women’s ‘reproductive’ body and sexuality, and indeed what is normal. Through evocation of this critique, vaginal steaming is positioned as a holistic modality that women can use as both alternative, and resistance, to western medicine, as potentially empowering (Barrett et al. 2003; Madden 2012) and authentic. However, the language of western medicine

remains in the texts, through reference to ‘symptoms’, ‘conditions’, and ‘ailments’, which vaginal steaming is claimed to resolve. Despite a critique of medicalisation, the terms of reference blend and blur, used to legitimate vaginal steaming as a ‘cure’ for real problems.

‘Isn’t your health worth that?’ Physical optimisation and the enhancement of health

E18: The periodic use of the yoni steam technique can enhance overall reproductive health for women. (S17)

Women’s health was situated as something to endlessly be ‘improved’, ‘enhanced’, and ‘optimised’. Vaginal steaming was routinely portrayed as a means to optimise the body and maintain general health:

E19: The V-Steam can be used to maintain health and wellness in addition to treating more complex issues. (B19)

E20: The vaginal steam bath is used for just about everything, it is used to promote and healing and rejuvenation for just about any woman's reproductive health ailment. (S3)

Vaginal steaming is constructed here as an almost all-in-one solution to whatever ails a woman – both specific ‘ailments’ as well as more ephemeral wellbeing. Reflecting healthism, the only acceptable body becomes situated as the ultimately-health-optimised body (Cairns and Johnston 2015). In some cases, a state of perfection was positioned as something women had had, and could return to, evoking the narrative of decline evidenced in the previous theme:

E21: The 30-minute service – which costs \$75 for one session, or \$750 for 12 – uses 'healing herbs to irrigate the vaginal passage to restore optimum health. (N16)

E22: Vaginal steaming to help maintain internal health as well as keep your skin looking young and healthy. (S1)

Although sometimes situated as ‘maintenance’ (E19, E22), others evoked restoration, and a return to an optimal past. ‘Youth’ and ‘health’ were conflated – implicitly positioning change as bad, and resonating with broader discourse not only of healthism, but a related ‘successful aging’ discourse (Meletioui and Meylahn 2015). Fertility and sexual pleasure were particularly targeted for optimisation. Fertility was situated both within a theme of decay (previously discussed) and in terms of a general orientation towards optimisation. Women were encouraged to use vaginal steaming as a preventative measure, a way of optimising something not (yet) ‘broken’:

E23: Vagi-steam is best done every two weeks when used for treating a fertility issue. For general fertile vitality (preventative maintenance), Vagi-steam baths are best done twice a year. (L3)

E24: Renew Fertility V-Steam: For women who are trying to get pregnant or are interested in preserving their fertility. (S13)

Vaginal steaming here becomes a practice for every woman who cares about her fertility – something to be attended to, worked on, and optimised (in a context where fertility-blame and responsibility is often gendered; Bell 2013). Within the neoliberalist discourse evident in the data, women are encouraged to adopt a ‘self-policing gaze’ (Gill 2003) to work to ameliorate the risks to fertility; fertility optimisation via vaginal steaming becomes positioned as a key marker of ‘productive and conscientious citizenship’ (Lavrence and Lozanski 2014, 85).

Vaginal steaming was regularly depicted as a tool to improve women’s sexual experiences:

E25: For women looking to boost their sexual energy. An energetic steam that aids in increasing blood flow and circulation enhancing chi thereby improving sexual response and sexual vigour. (S13)

This appears to offer an ‘empowered’ narrative: with women the primary beneficiaries of ‘increase[d] sexual gratification’ (S11), they are situated as entitled to sexual pleasure (Braun 2005). Such sexual pleasure was, however, often situated within very heteronormative framings: sexual pleasure was framed as occurring typically only within heterosexual couplings, and even often specifically heterosexual marriage:

E26: We have some clients who say that after they've had the V-steam their husbands can't stay away from them. (N16)

The claim that vaginal steaming would ‘improve the marital relationship’ (S11) was sometimes explicit. The (often) unspoken risk of not having a vaginal steam becomes marriage decline, though her inattention to body or sexual response. Like the domain of female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun 2005), vaginal steaming becomes a legitimate, potentially even obligatory, practice for women in pursuit of an optimal body and (through that) hetero-relationship.

The texts frequently utilised ‘feminist’ language evoking an empowered woman, to frame this as an activity women undertook for themselves. Concepts such as being ‘in control’ (N4) or having (self)confidence appeared regularly:

E27: It can be used to enhance sexual arousal and self-confidence. (S11)

E28: And why should you do this before Valentine's Day?? Nicole specifically told me that after the treatment many of her clients feel confident, refreshed and ready to hurry home to their man!! (L17)

A claim to self-confidence and/or increased sexual control affords a 'moral justification' (Braun 2005) for vaginal steaming, through evoking an empowered, confident woman whose sexuality is her own – even if it was depicted, as in E25, as revolving around a man. This discourse echoes contemporary 'sex advice' texts where women are coached on how to become sexually 'self-assured' (Gill 2009). Such claims situate vaginal steaming within the cluster of practices marketed to women under 'because you're worth it' rhetoric (see Gill 2008b), where physical actions are psychological actions, with broader and widespread ramifications. In a medicalised context where a 'sex for health' discourse is prevalent, and sex positioned as crucial to diverse facets of wellbeing (see Gupta and Cacchioni 2013; Marshall 2012), vaginal steaming for better sex becomes steaming for better health and wellbeing.

Overall, vaginal steaming was depicted as a tool already-well women should utilise to optimise their body, and in particular, their reproductive capacity and sexuality. Despite the neoliberal tone, the rhetoric employed echoes a longstanding western-cultural definitions of the vagina (Braun and Wilkinson 2001, 2005) as the 'centre of a woman's being' (S14); the sexual and reproductive enhancement focus mirrors the two modes through which western societies have traditionally valued women: sexual availability for men (within marriage) and childbearing.

'Go for it – pamper yourself!' Vaginal steaming for life-optimisation

E29: I have a great vagina. Really, I do. I've never had a problem with yeast infections, never had a Pap smear come back abnormal, never had to deal with menstrual cramps. I have the kind of vagina that deserves to be pampered, so when I heard about 'vaginal steaming,' I thought to myself: Vagina, you deserve a spa day. (N15)

Finally, vaginal steaming was situated as a way for women to 'pamper' themselves:

E30: It is called a Vagina Steam and yes, my Vagina really loves it! It feels really cleansing and is perfect to do just after your monthly or if you just feel like giving your little friend a little special treat! (B17)

E31: Think of this luxurious modality as a facial for your lady parts. (S13)

Comparison to the 'facial' and evocations of 'TLC' [tender loving care] (L2) situate vaginal steaming within the domain of luxury, and for the perfectly-fine body, rather than a body in deficit that needs

some improvement. Again echoing ‘because you’re worth it’, this situates certain (sometimes painful) female body practices as ‘pampering’ (Gill 2007). The spa visit has been positioned as an important part of women’s regular health-and-wellbeing routines (Little 2013), and steaming is here linked with practices presented to women as entitlement, the ‘earned’ right to be ‘pampered’ (Lazar 2009). Positioned thus within neoliberal framing, vaginal steaming becomes a treat women should do for themselves, if they really value themselves. This final theme reveals an inherent paradox in many of these texts: vaginal steaming is depicted as both a necessity for health, and a ‘treat’ that a woman does ‘for herself’. This sets up an ontological state for women’s genitalia as never there, as always available for (more) intervention, whether ‘faulty’ or fine.

Frequent references were also made to the notion that women will be able to ‘reconnect’ with their bodies or selves as a result of vaginal steaming:

E32: Yoni steaming is about more than uterine health [...] The practice brings a reconnection to the female body and to the wisdom of plant medicine. It is an opportunity for women to celebrate and cherish our bodies, and learning to enjoy our wombs as the beautiful, sacred center from which we radiate our capacity to change the world. (S7)

E33: It was a beautiful experience! Every woman should do this because it does feel good. It sensually awakens the senses of my yoni. It feels different afterwards, like, I am in touch with myself as a woman. It feels very intimate and sexy. (B14)

Some made reference to the idea of ‘reawakening’ (L12) an ‘inner goddess’:

E34: To awaken your inner goddess, please call us at [...] (S4)

E35: For women who want to connect to ‘their inner goddess’. A pampering, nurturing and relaxing steam for your ‘down there area’. (S13)

Located within new-age ‘inner self’ discourse, this argument appears the opposite of neoliberal ‘pampering’ discourse, yet both rely on the logic of improvement of an essentially ok (reproductive) body – and through that, self. And, albeit in a different way to the idea of a facial, the notion that vaginal steaming can unlock an ‘inner power’ (S20) constructs it as a transformative practice. Vaginal steaming discourse here has continuities with complementary and alternative medicine, around which women articulate similar purposes (e.g., Brenton and Elliot 2014). The outcome of vaginal steaming is more than a ‘toned’ reproductive system or even ‘comfort and relaxation’ (S15); it offers an opportunity to become the ‘sensual’ and ‘divine’ goddess the woman already has the potential to be. Metaphors of interiority – references to ‘reconnecting with’ or ‘reawakening’ something ‘inside’ (see also Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011) – evoke an unknown entity blocking a woman from

accessing her 'true' self. Vaginal steaming, resembling a search and rescue device tailored to discover/recover formerly neglected, repressed, or forgotten qualities, liberates. It is presented as a way for women to experience the self-exploration and self-realisation that are a crucial element of both the neoliberal 'project of the self' (Rose 1996), and new age discourse. Others have noted the power (and paradox) of 'Eastern exotic' practices within the west, and the inherent paradox of the expensive selling of holism (e.g., Lau 2000).

Discussion

Our analysis aimed to unpack some of the sociocultural assumptions, logics, and rationales mobilised in online accounts around vaginal steaming. Each theme identified a facet in an overall story about contemporary (cisgender) womanhood, where women are willing participants in working towards maintaining or achieving an 'ideal' reproductive body and feminine identity. Vaginal steaming rhetoric echoes neoliberal, postfeminist, and healthist ideologies, colliding with pervasive sociocultural understandings of the female reproductive body and genitalia both as core of womanhood (Braun and Wilkinson 2005) and as 'embodied pathology' (Ussher 2006). Here, the always-risky female (reproductive) body is a project of self-improvement, and a source of worth (Gill 2007), for the woman. Engagement in this project is voluntary, but also obligatory. Blending in new age discourse, as well as the endorsement of celebrity (Gwyneth!), appears to offer a framework through which vaginal steaming is a highly marketable practice.

Accounts of vaginal steaming are sites of meaning-making and meaning-contestation. Cutting across the themes discussed, three notable and distinct epistemological frameworks were utilised to make and refute truth claims: Eastern mysticism, Western biomedicine and/or Experience. Each oriented to a quite different truth-base to validate their promotion or debunking (sometimes both!) of vaginal steaming. Eastern mysticism, which appeared most commonly in data items which sought to promote vaginal steaming (e.g., spa sites, personal blogs), rationalised the practice by chronicling a tradition of vaginal steaming and attributing its origin to one or more non-Western cultures, typically within Asia. Vaginal steaming tended to be described as a long-standing practice that has 'stood the test of time' (L1) – evoking effectiveness and credibility. Exhibiting orientalist (Said 1978) discourse, 'the East' was exoticised, and implicitly positioned as more authentic and 'uncontaminated' than western nations. Vaginal steaming, constructed as a 'holistic' practice which 'incorporates body, mind and spirit wellness' (S8), was often contrasted with Western medicine, which was positioned as too heavily focused on the body, or extensively critiqued (as noted in theme 2). Vaginal steaming was, in contrast, often depicted as completely natural and non-invasive, and positioned as therefore a safe alternative to many 'conventional' medicines. Indeed, claims based within Eastern mysticism

often portrayed vaginal steaming as a form of resistance to Western medicine and, sometimes, Western culture more broadly.

In contrast, Western biomedicine privileged scientific evidence and rationality, and was typically deployed to dispute beneficial claims about the practice, and the practice itself, not least through highlighting the lack of ‘credible evidence’ (L20). Claims used to justify the practice were often positioned as ‘dubious’ (N7) and pseudo-scientific, both anatomically and physiologically. Texts drawing on western biomedicine often positioned the female body as basically naturally physiologically competent – with vaginal steaming positioned as a threat to that. Risks were emphasised – ‘Worst case scenario? Death’ (N21) – and claimed-healthy alternatives (e.g., diet, exercise, medication) were encouraged for anyone experiencing the conditions vaginal steaming was claimed to cure. This epistemological framing situated Western biomedicine as the authority on women’s bodies; women who promote and engage in vaginal steaming were positioned as ‘dupes’.

The Experience epistemological frame – used to argue both for and against the practice by women who have tried it – based claims in the author’s personal, embodied experiences of vaginal steaming – evoking a hard-to-dispute ‘experiential authority’ (Kitzinger 1994). Personal testimony-based framing was used to dispute the validity of ‘any randomised controlled double-blinded clinical trial’ (L2) as the basis for deciding whether the practice had merit, situating it as more important or valid than Western biomedical ‘evidence’ standards. Vaginal steaming was commonly promoted on the merit that it felt good – ‘I felt great: clean, relaxed, at ease’ (N15, emphasis in original) – even if it did not deliver the claimed or desired effects.

Together, the themes and epistemological framings highlight that meaning around the ‘new’ practice of vaginal steaming is constructed, and contested, in remarkably familiar ways, rearticulating meanings that have longstanding and/or widespread cultural resonance. The way vaginal steaming is promoted online simultaneously reflects and reinforces traditional derogatory understandings of the vagina and women’s reproductive bodies as dirty and defective (e.g., Braun and Wilkinson 2001), and despite rhetoric of liberation and empowerment, appears to operate as a conservative regulatory practice (Ussher 2006). It appears to promote very particular forms of feminine embodiment, and particular modes of selfhood practice for women, which fit with neoliberalism, healthism, postfeminism, and the production of self-hood through consumption.

We examined a range of easily accessible online texts. Examination of online texts offers a way to understand and unpack sociocultural assumptions and logics, but it does not tell us how women make sense of these texts. The ways everyday women make sense of these practices is another important step for understanding their implications for women’s health and wellbeing. It could also

be interesting to explore how vaginal steaming gets constructed on fora such as YouTube videos². YouTube has become a popular medium for the dissemination of varied and, often critical, commentary, as well as accounts of embodied practice and experience (Kavoori 2011; Young and Burrows 2013), and may provide a fruitful site for analysis around vaginal steaming.

This study contributes to the wider literature on genital modification practices and sociocultural constructions of women's bodies and genitalia, and to the question of what selves, subjectivities and practices are offered to women in neoliberal times. Our analysis suggests the meanings associated with vaginal steaming are still highly contested, and not (yet) socioculturally solidified, but the practice, and the way it is discussed and described, remains familiar and resonant. Whether it poses the same risks as vaginal douching remains to be seen.

Notes

¹ An essentialised notion of womanhood, whereby a) a woman has a vagina and b) a vagina is regarded as central to *being a woman* (Braun and Wilkinson 2005), as well as an orientation to the female body as reproductive, permeated the dataset. Although such cis- and hetero-normative assumptions trouble us, we use the terms 'woman', 'women', and 'female' in a way consistent with the data – to reference cissexual/cisgender women (women whose sex and gender identities match those assigned at birth). In noting these assumptions, we attempt to avoid simply reproducing societal heterosexism and cisgenderism in and through research (see Ansara and Hegarty 2014).

² A YouTube.com search for 'vaginal steaming' in October 2015 generated over 5,500 hits.

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