
Article**Pubic hair and its removal: A practice beyond the personal**

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Abstract

Pubic hair removal, now common among women in Anglo/western cultures, has been theorized as a disciplinary practice. As many other feminine bodily practices, it is characterized by removal or alteration of aspects of women's material body (i.e., pubic hair) considered unattractive but otherwise 'natural'. Emerging against this theorization is a discourse of personal agency and choice, wherein women assert autonomy and self-mastery of their own bodies and body practices. In this paper, we use thematic analysis to examine the interview talk about pubic hair from eleven sexually and ethnically diverse young women in New Zealand. One overarching theme – pubic hair is undesirable; its removal is desirable – encapsulates four themes we discuss in depth, which illustrate the personal, interpersonal and sociocultural influences intersecting the

practice: a) pubic hair removal is a personal choice; b) media promote pubic hair removal; c) friends and family influence pubic hair removal; and d) the (imagined) intimate influences pubic hair removal. Despite minor variations among queer women, a perceived norm of genital hairlessness was compelling among the participants. Despite the articulated freedom *to* practice pubic hair removal, any freedom *from* participating in this practice appeared limited, rendering the suggestion that it is just a 'choice' problematic.

Key Words

Pubic hair removal, femininity, hairlessness, queer women, gendered bodies

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The actress Cameron Diaz kicked off 2014 with a call for women to retain their pubic hair (O'Toole, 2014). The *newsworthiness* of this announcement of Diaz's opinion reflects societal shifts in the last decade or so in Anglo/western cultures, where substantial or total pubic hair removal has become an increasingly common practice among women, especially young women (see Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010;

Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Although the introduction of bikini into the United States in late 1940s led to a 'requirement' for some pubic hair removal for some women (Hope, 1982; Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010), pubic hair per se had remained 'acceptable' for most women, as it was "one of the few areas of the body that remaine[d] private or unexposed, even in the skimpiest bikini" (Hildebrandt, 2003, p. 62). Evidence suggests this has changed. The pubic region appears to be following women's legs and underarms (Basow, 1991; Hildebrandt, 2003)., as a viable and frequent site for removal (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008).

In this paper, we examine the interview talk of a small but diverse group of young women, identifying the intersection of personal, interpersonal and sociocultural influences in the way women talked about pubic hair and its removal. Particularly, we complicate and negate the notion of 'personal choice' commonly articulated in women's meaning making around feminine bodily practices. By doing so, we contribute to not only the limited scholarship on women's meaning making around pubic hair practice, but also the understanding of the complexities, contradictions and connections in women's engagement in 'feminine' bodily and genital practices.

What do we know about pubic hair and its removal?

Pubic hair removal has recently become relatively normative among women, at least in Anglo/western societies research has typically focused on (see Butler, Smith, Collazo, Caltabiano, & Herbenick, 2015 for the U.S.; Terry & Braun, 2013 for New Zealand; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008 for Australia; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005 for the UK), and especially among younger age groups (Herbenick et al., 2013; Toerien et al., 2005). Cleanliness is one commonly expressed reason, and is often intertwined with 'sexiness' – less hair is considered cleaner (despite medical evidence suggesting otherwise, see Hoffman, 2016), and/or more sexually appealing, and sometimes enabling of sexual acts or pleasure (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). This highlights a perceived link between pubic hair removal and sexuality (Fahs, 2013a), and having a sexual partner has been associated with pubic hair removal (Herbenick et al., 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Another suggestion is that pubic hair seen on a female body displayed in public breaches a public-private boundary, as it evokes the (private) genitalia (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013).

It also needs noting that body hair norms appear racially/culturally contextual. Research has associated pubic hair practices with white, thinner, younger women (Basow & Willis, 2001; DeMaria & Berenson, 2013), not unlike other feminine bodily practices (Bettie,

2014; Evans & McConnell, 2003).

Theorising pubic hair removal as a female bodily practice

Synnott (1987) suggested that hair is not only a sexual symbol, but also an ideological symbol, signifying compliance or transgression of conventional definitions of femininity (or masculinity). Pubic hair removal is highly gendered: although it appears increasingly common among men (Boroughs & Thompson, 2013), men still report feeling entitled to more varied degree of hairlessness in pubic region (Butler et al., 2015; Terry & Braun, 2013). The history (and indeed present) of ‘compulsory’ hair modification for women and men is not the same, indicative of fundamental differences in gender norms, as well as in the material and symbolical conditions and context men and women are subject to (Butler et al., 2015). With body hair embodying “the young man's glory” and “a woman's shame” (Synnott, 1987, p. 390), hair removal has typically been seen as a ‘women’s issue’ (but see Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008). As a ‘hairless’ body evokes a prepubescent body (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003), some have argued that a female hairless norm contributes to construction of the ideal female body as subordinate and inferior to men (Basow, 1991; Labre, 2002).

Pubic hair removal has also been theorized as a disciplinary practice, characterized by removal or alteration of a woman’s material body parts considered unattractive or

'inadequate,' but otherwise 'natural' (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Sharpe, 2004). Pubic hair is understood and experienced by women as a problem area of a derogated female body (Aubrey, 2010; Fahs, 2014b). This feeds into a construction of the female body as deficient in the natural state and requiring constant discipline in order to achieve endless, largely unachievable, sometimes contradictory feminine ideals (Bordo, 1993). Hildebrandt (2003) theorized body hair as a site of control and suppression, which is maintained by women's (willing) acceptance of a hairless norm and self-surveillance of their own body within this hegemony. However, along with some other feminine bodily practices (e.g., hair, dress, makeup), young women often identify pubic hair removal as an intentionally self-sexualizing practice to appear more sexually appealing (Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014).

The prevalence of pubic hair removal among women is contingent with messages in popular discourses, where pubic hair is constructed as a 'problem' to be 'solved' by services such as Brazilian wax (Labre, 2002). Pubic hair has become a site of commercialization, where women's (sexual) body is problematized in order to create demand for *unnecessary* interventions or solutions (Kissling, 2006). In recent years, we have seen a pubic hair grooming industry expanding, with even extreme services such

as so-called 'virgin waxes,' created for pre-teen girls to wax off 'unwanted' hair before it grows fully during puberty (Rao, 2008), apparently on offer. Specialized (and pricey) services have been created to 'complement' Brazilian waxing, including replacing pubic hair with stick-on crystals in various patterns ('vajazzling'), and treating ingrown hair and skin irritations caused by pubic hair removal with the labial equivalent of a facial ('vajacial'). Like the beauty industry in general, this commodification of pubic hair grooming draws on an ostensibly positive rhetoric of 'beauty', 'rejuvenation' and 'pampering the self' (Black & Sharma, 2001), constructing a subjective experience of empowerment. We have to question, however, whether it is truly empowering as women are encouraged to continue to see their (sexual) body as less than adequate, and their body parts including pubic hair as needing 'betterment' (Gill, 2008b).

The discourse of personal choice

Standing opposite to theorisations of culture's grip on female bodies (Bordo, 1993), a discourse of personal choice has risen in dominance in explanations of women's engagement in bodily practices. Nurtured by postfeminism (see Gill, 2008a), this discourse constructs a neoliberal feminine subject, one who asserts autonomy and self-mastery of her own body in making sense of bodily practices (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). Pubic hair removal has been reported as 'freely' chosen for the purpose of self-

enhancement (Braun et al., 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Associated with more positive genital self-image (Herbenick et al., 2010), removal of pubic hair seems to offer “immediate pleasure” through increased sexual confidence, as well as “relief” (Labre, 2002, p. 127) from body shame associated with pubic hair. This echoes women’s accounts of other bodily ‘disciplinary’ practices such as cosmetic make-up, diet and dress as positive ‘improvement’ and ‘self-modification’ (Bartky, 2002; Black & Sharma, 2001) rather than negative imposition. Engagement in these practices *is* rewarded for women, producing a body that conforms to cultural expectations around femininity and sexiness, and enhancing their status in a dominant social order (Bartky, 2002; Harvey & Gill, 2011).

However, this discourse is insufficient in accounting for women’s bodily experiences: women’s ‘individual’ choices appear typically homogenous and invariable, with the ‘freely chosen’ outcomes characterized by similar aesthetic physical appearances (Talley, 2012). ‘Bikini line’ removal appears basically mandatory (Braun et al., 2013), and ‘au-naturel’ pubic hair is not a non-viable option for women seeking (hetero)sexual desirability (Fahs, 2013a, 2013b).

Furthermore, research has persistently documented sociocultural influences and/or constraints on choice. Exposure to certain magazines (e.g., fashion) and TV shows has been positively associated with pubic hair removal (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2012). Normative representations of women's genitalia as hairless in mainstream pornography (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011), along with increased accessibility of such material (Cokal, 2007; Ramsey et al., 2009), may also contribute to the perception of pubic hair removal as normal, expected and indeed essential to desirable hetero-femininity. Interpersonally, some women report influence or pressure to remove pubic hair from sexual partners, family or friends (Fahs, 2013a, 2014b).

However, "the neoliberal subject is required to actively reject any suggestion that his or her actions are compelled by wider social influences and institutions such as media or government" (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012, p. 101) or subordination to patriarchy (Jeffreys, 2005). The rhetoric of 'free choice' relies on neoliberal discourse. Achieving sexual appeal (promised by pubic hair removal) is reduced to a matter of self-determination and personal responsibility, ignoring cultural and interpersonal pressures to look a particular way (Rich, 2005), and complicity within a bigger enmeshment of power. This kind of sexual 'agency' takes the form of an always 'up for it' sexual appeal (Gill, 2003),

which has become compulsory for some women, thus can be theorised as also oppressive (Gill, 2008a, 2008b). Through interconnections with (popular) postfeminist ideological assumptions, neoliberal individualising discourse is very hard to name (and shame), making oppression difficult to both identify and resist (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012).

Method

Data were generated through interviews with 11 women, who all resided in New Zealand and ranged in age from 19 to 35 years (mean 27.5), for a project on younger women's genital experiences and meaning (approved by the University Human Participants Ethics Committee). The age limit was set to best capture possible generational patterns informed by existing literature (Hoffman, 2016). Participants were recruited mainly through advertising through researchers' networks and subsequent snowballing (Patton, 2002). Given the often underrepresentation of non-heterosexual women in such research (e.g., Martino & Vermund, 2002), we deliberately 'over-sampled' non-heterosexual women. Of the 11 participants, 4 identified as lesbian, 2 as gay, 1 as bisexual, and 4 as heterosexual. Six of the women reported having had sex with both

men and women, one with 'women only', three with 'men only', and one with 'men mostly'. The women were ethnically diverse: three self-identified as New Zealander or New Zealand European, two as South African, one as Latin American, one as Irish, two as 'Kiwi Chinese' (referring to ethnic Chinese who were born or raised in New Zealand) or Chinese, one as 'of Indian origin', and one as Russian. Most were working, and middle-class.

Participants took part in an individual or small-group interview, conducted by Alex Li, at a location of their choosing (e.g., their homes, workplaces, and university seminar rooms). All interviews were transcribed verbatim by Alex, with words, pauses, laughter and emphases retained; removal of unrelated data is indicated as "...", and words strongly emphasized by participants are underlined. Transcripts were subsequently anonymised.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify, describe, and interpret patterns (themes) within data, from a broadly constructionist framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We looked beyond the data surface for underlying assumptions or structures "informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Our analysis identified pubic hair meanings from the participants' frames of reference, as well as interrogating these from our own theoretical interests and related existing

theorisations (see also Fahs, 2014b). We particularly attended to how participants made sense of pubic hair practices in relation to external influences, in comparison to the rhetoric of personal 'choice'. Analysis involved repeated readings of the transcribed data, followed by generating initial codes across the dataset. We then looked for potential patterns and contradictions within and across women's accounts. Recurrent themes were generated from grouping of codes (i.e., an orientation to 'internal homogeneity' of themes) and further reviewed through comparing one another for different exclusivity (i.e., an orientation to 'external heterogeneity' of themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final analysis reports four themes, clustered underneath one overarching theme, that provided the 'best fit' to address our research question.

Analysis

We first report one overarching theme across women's talk of pubic hair and its removal: pubic hair is undesirable; removal is desired. Four themes are then discussed in detail: a) pubic hair removal is a personal choice; b) media promote pubic hair removal; c) friends and family influence pubic hair removal; and d) the (imagined) intimate (i.e., sexual partner) influences pubic hair removal. The notion of pubic hair removal as a 'free choice' is presented in theme 1, and then interrogated and problematized through themes 2-

4where we argue pubic hair removal as a disciplinary practice intersects societal expectations of the female body.

Pubic hair is undesirable; removal is desired

All participants reported having removed pubic hair. This resonates with some previous studies, especially among younger women (95% in Butler et al., 2015; 86% in Terry & Braun, 2013; 85.69% in Toerien et al., 2005). Pubic hair was typically positioned negatively, and removal was generally advocated as a body-practice, maintained in everyday life and particularly 'enabled' by certain contexts where pubic hair is visible (e.g., in swimwear, or sexual interactions).

Some participants, even ones who reported not perceiving pubic hair removal as *imperative*, talked about a perceived need to manage pubic hair in association with wearing swimwear:

Jade: (...) it's like this big culture of going to beach (int: ok), every weekend, since you're very small yeah (...) you're always like oh yeah you know, buying bathing suits and going to the beach now, so it's always 'oh yeah well I'll have to shave' 'oh I'm gonna' you know bikini wax (...) (32, lesbian, Latin American)

Carol: (...) I probably only do it during summer when—when—when I go swimming, when I have to put on smaller clothing, you know swimming suits and stuff (27, heterosexual, Chinese)

Hildebrandt (2003) argued that for women particularly, body hair signifies the “private” body, suggesting pubic hair should not be seen in public. A ‘beach culture’ appears to be an exemplar of a societal context where the potentially private body is made public, causing concerns around the visibility of pubic hair (Braun et al., 2013). However, in sexual encounters, the most *private* of interactions, pubic hair removal was also deemed mandatory by some participants—.

Mel: (...) if you sort of you know you’re going down on someone, it’s easier if there’s no hair there, because I mean I’ve—I’ve heard of a few people who’ve gotten hair stuck in their teeth (int: alright (chuckles)) and that’s—that’s quite gross (laughs) (20, lesbian, South African)

A hearsay ‘tale’ of getting (otherwise harmless and ‘normal’) pubic hair present in one’s sexual encounter seems to qualify as a sexual mishap; it also functions as a rhetorical warning of the risks of pubic hair, and thus an admonition to remove. As other participants elaborated, the sexual undesirability expressed around pubic hair was associated with a notion of uncleanness.

Tina: (...) I guess if it [pubic hair] looks out of control and not clean, it won't—it won't be a turn-on (27, lesbian, Kiwi Chinese)

Both frequently reported as reasons for pubic hair removal, attractiveness and cleanness are often intertwined (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). It should be noted however, that Tina's account may suggest some room for variations in terms of what 'acceptable' and even 'sexy' look like with pubic hair (i.e., trimmed rather than completely off) (see also Terry & Braun, 2013).

Other participants talked about pubic hair in comparison to a state of having less or no pubic hair, which was considered cleaner, implying pubic hair can be unclean if left unattended to.

Bailey: (...) I'm obsessed with showering, but they feel like when it's longer it seems to get smellier down there for some reason (27, heterosexual, NZ European)

Though an oft-cited reason, hygienic benefit of pubic hair removal lacks medical verification, and research has documented negative consequences that can follow pubic hair removal, such as extreme skin irritation (Trager, 2006). Accounts which portray pubic hair removal as a preferred, or necessary, practice point to an underlying construction of body hair as dirty, disgusting and inherently unhealthy (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). It

reflects and also contributes to a construction of women's genitals as dirty (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Ussher, 1989).

Indeed, the notion of pubic hair as natural was contemplated by some participants, but this often gave way to its lack of appeal, resulting in a disaffirmation of the 'natural existence' of pubic hair.

Mel: (chuckles) don't like pubic hair (laughs) not at all yeah I'd—I'd find it very, unappealing I know it's a natural thing but, (clicks tongue) that's why they invented razors (20, lesbian, South African)

Bailey: (...) I mean in an ideal world, they just wouldn't grow down there (both laugh), but I guess it does have its purposes for being there (...) I feel more comfortable about myself when it's all sort of nicely trimmed (27, heterosexual, NZ European)

Overall, participants' responses were situated within wider notions of body 'shame' (Smolak & Murnen, 2011) and bodily deficiency (Bartky, 1988): a female body is undesirable in its natural state, if not unacceptable. Pubic hair removal or some form of 'management' not only affords a shift for a female body from a potentially unacceptable or deficient state to an acceptable one, they also appear to promise a more sexually

desirable body. Across our four themes, we expand this discussion and place the practice of pubic hair removal within the intersection of personal choice and social influences.

Theme 1: Pubic hair removal is a personal choice

Through associations with a more acceptable and desirable body, pubic hair removal was often constructed as an act chosen solely due to *personal preferences*. This is evident in the following accounts.

Mel: (...) I'm not saying that people with pubic hair are gross, as everyone has their own preferences, but me personally I just find it better, without (20, lesbian, South African)

Joanna: (.) maybe it's—I don't even care what like I think it's just my personal feeling, that's how I feel, I like it being naked (19, heterosexual, Russian)

Often used by women as an 'ultimate trump card' to make sense of their engagement in genital and other bodily practices (Braun et al., 2013), 'personal choice' links to neoliberal discourse, which values free choice, personal responsibility and individual advancement through 'self-betterment' (Rich, 2005). This rhetoric constructs pubic hair

removal as one option among equally valid 'alternatives' (i.e., not managing pubic hair, or managing in a minimal fashion), but prioritises 'improvement' work of the self/body.

The 'choice' rhetoric cannot sufficiently explain why pubic hair removal has taken the form of a widespread trend. The following excerpt provides some insight into how women feel compelled to participate in the practice in some way:

Sarah: (...) if I could um (.) [be] permanently without I'd probably get rid of (.) [pubic] hair (all chuckle) (30, gay, NZ)

Rose: I'm going with you on that one (32, gay, NZ)

Sarah: (chuckles) um then I would because it's just me being, you know, anal and lazy (...)

Rose: I'm the same way I agree, if I can permanently remove hair (Sarah: yeah), you know, and not having it grow back, and I'd spend thousands and thousands of dollars to do it, I would because I'm lazy (Kat: mm) I—you know (.), I can't be arsed and I hate the ingrown (laughs) eh

Kat: I'm in the exact same boat but, I—I—I think I would like a bit of hair (27, lesbian, South African)

These participants' expressed wish to be permanently rid of pubic hair can be

interpreted as a desire to be free from both undesired hair *and* the *labour* involved in managing it. Pubic hair removal is constructed here as a 'chore', both mandatory and time/energy consuming (Fahs, 2014b). However, both Sarah and Rose located their negative feeling about pubic hair removal not to the perceived pressure to engage in this practice, but to their own 'laziness', an individual 'shortcoming' getting in the way of properly maintaining the practice. The expectation of such practice itself is left unquestioned and unchallenged (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012); leaving pubic hair be is not an option.

Having discussed that women tended to 'choose' pubic hair removal without perceiving the norm as externally imposed, the following three themes offer access and analysis of a different way of talking about the practice. Implicitly and explicitly, participants situated 'personal' preference and practice in relation to societal meanings around pubic hair removal, which are conveyed in mass media, interpersonal interactions with family and friends, and real or imagined intimate situations. Through these accounts, a social nature to pubic hair practice is articulated, and women's 'choices' can be theorized more as 'self-policing' according to a seemingly hegemonic female hairless norm.

Theme 2: Media promote pubic hair removal

It has been noted that the development of body hair norms and the growing scrutiny of body hair have occurred “in tandem with the growth of the mass media, consumer culture, and the growing power of the image” (Hildebrandt, 2003, p. 66). Many participants noted pervasive discussion of pubic hair removal in mainstream ‘female-oriented’ media:

Margaret:(...) I suppose you pick it up from media as well, like for example watching *Sex and The City*, or watching um (.) a lot of programmes, that [pubic hair removal] would be mentioned you know in some way or another, like um, someone’s going to the beach (...) get the bikini waxed and (...) in most gossip magazines, even *Cosmopolitan* or something like that (...) (35, bisexual, Irish)

Joanna: (...) I think it was *Cleo* magazine, and they had a um statistics of guys and what they like and stuff and I think, (.) the majority (...) it’s like Brazilian waxing and stuff (...) (19, heterosexual, Russian)

Here, pubic hair removal is presented as part of mass media discourse, readily available in the women’s social worlds. Although our participants only talked about their observation of media, not how *their* practice was affected by media messages, other

research suggests women's practice of pubic hair removal *is* influenced by exposure to fashion magazines, girls' magazines or TV productions (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2012) – though we note the idea of self-aware media influence assessments as problematic.

Some participants also spoke of pornography and the sex industry as promoting a hairless ideal:

Carol: (...) the other things I can think of that really promotes perfect vagina would be in porn (...) and they usually don't have hair, just that typical look (27, heterosexual, Chinese)

Through identifying homogeneity in women's hairless genital images in pornography, participants implicitly located pubic hair removal as a culturally produced and regulated practice. One participant described the ways that imagery and representation of pubic hair removal "pervades consciousness":

Margaret: (...) it's sort of just become common knowledge, but it just seems to be (.) there, it's kind of like that it's just – now everyone talks about it (35, bisexual, Irish)

Margaret's lay account captured the subtle yet pervasive ways media construct a hairless norm as "common knowledge" (Bartky, 1988), which in turn becomes a commonality in people's discursive/material practices. However, none of the participants talked about

being personally affected or limited by media's 'ubiquitous' effect (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). This perhaps again indicates the imperative to agentic, neoliberal subjectivity, where any suggestion of constrained choice, let alone disempowerment or victimhood through social influences, is rejected (McRobbie, 2007).

Theme 3: Friends and family influence pubic hair removal

Friends and family were identified as influencing pubic hair removal as a normative idea and a practice.

Joanna: [I came across waxing] probably through like mom I guess and like some friends, yeah cos it's like shaving, at the same time like, show more confidence (19, heterosexual, Russian)

Tina: (...) I know my sister does it as well because yeah well we just go together (...) just go get waxed (27, lesbian, Kiwi Chinese)

These accounts highlight the role of women's 'homosociality' in initiating or sustaining feminine bodily practices (Fahs, 2013a). The other side of this is social policing of women's bodies. This social policing is achieved discursively and perhaps also with action. Prior to *advocating* pubic hair retention in 2014, for instance, the actress Cameron Diaz

revealed a 'humorous' story on the popular Graham Norton Show: she had "pinned down" a female friend with unmodified pubic hair and forcibly "defuzzed her", thus doing her (and her husband) a favour (O'Toole, 2014). According to our participants, it is not uncommon for friends to recommend, remind, and urge each other to keep pubic hair 'managed'.

Margaret: (...) I'd ask them [my friends] and they say yeah you need to go here, and see this person, everyone seems to do it [pubic hair waxing], so it seems a very common thing among women that I know (35, bisexual, Irish)

Jade: (...) if that's your close friend you're like 'oh please go and shave' or something
(...) (32, lesbian, Latin American)

Such accounts suggest an inspecting gaze is adopted not only to discipline one's own, but also other women's pubic hair. This echoes Fahs and Delgado's (2011) participants, who stopped removing body hair, and were accused by their sisters or mothers, among others, for being unwomanly, unclean and disgusting. Germaine Greer's (1991) claim that if women "do not feel sufficient revulsion for their body hair themselves, others will direct them to depilate themselves" (p. 43), continues to be fitting here. Women's surveillance of each other around body presentation can be considered an extension of

their self-policing, disciplining the female body while reproducing a normative embodiment of femininity.

Theme 4: The (imagined) intimate influences pubic hair removal

In this final theme, we examine the influence of the (imagined) intimate (i.e., sexual partners) in women's accounts around pubic hair and its removal. Although 'sexiness' has been reported as a key reason women remove pubic hair, what this means in practice is under explored. In our study, women repeatedly demonstrated that pubic hair practices (and meanings) are produced not just in and through broad interactions with society, but also in the highly specific arena of intimate interactions, influenced by sexual partners' real or imagined preferences or desires. Firstly, some participants identified sexual partners' explicit preference for hairlessness:

Mel: (...) when I first started dating my partner, um, I didn't shave, coz I didn't even think about it I was just like yeah, and then she said to me 'oh you know you should really (mouth clicks), shave it off', and since then I just have shaved all the time (20, lesbian, South African)

Joanna: (...) when [genital area is] totally naked (chuckles), they [sexual partners] like it

better (...) (19, heterosexual, Russian)

In Mel's account, her initiation of pubic hair removal was 'directed' by her (female) partner (see Greer, 1991); Joanna's practice was apparently reinforced by (male) partners' preference (Butler et al., 2015). The issue of control in sexual encounters has long been linked to gendered power relations (Holland et al., 2004), and this can extend to body practices beyond sex (e.g., Pole, Crowther, & Schell, 2004). Some of the (heterosexual) women in Fahs and Delgado's (2011) study noted that after they stopped removing body hair, their boyfriends became increasingly threatened by the 'manliness' they associated with the women's growing body hair, and expressed intense hostility in attempting to get them to shave again. These narratives demonstrate the ways body hair removal, as Synnott (1987) argued, can be exercised as a political act of sexual control and suppression between intimate partners.

However, our participants did not seem to react to this 'control' in a negative way (nor did this expression of hairless preference only apply to male sexual partners). Bailey described male sexual partners' expressed dislike for pubic hair on her body as "understandable".

Bailey: the only comment I've had is like when a guy goes down on you they don't like it being too hairy down there , which is understandable (...) I guess if their (.)

tongue's all down there then I don't really like the thought—hair in the mouth just doesn't feel that nice (...) (27, heterosexual, NZ European)

Like Bailey, many participants articulated a 'disembodied' construction of pubic hair: the practice of pubic hair removal appeared motivated not by the women's *own* embodied sexual sensations or desires, but by concerns about the partner's sensory experience. Indeed, only one participant explained her pubic hair removal from the perspective of her own embodied sexual pleasure.

Mitzka: (...) in terms of sensation and stuff, I personally feel as though having less hair (...) doesn't obstruct your um sensations as much (26, heterosexual, of Indian Origin)

Secondly, sexual partners' *expressed* preferences seemed less important to many participants than imagined or assumed preferences (see Wiederman, 2000). Women's reported self-surveillance about body hair was particularly intensive when they were anticipating a sexual partner's gaze:

Margaret: (...) for example this weekend, I'm—I'm going out with this guy right so (...) you need to (...) get yourself a wax (chuckles) you need to make sure that's taken care of (...) (35, bisexual, Irish)

Jade: (...) if you're going to the beach with just somebody and you know you're gonna get lucky [with sex] (both chuckle), chances are, you are, so um yeah, you definitely wanna have like a nice bikini line (...) "oh yeah I'm going to beach with this girl and it's just gonna you know, look nice" (...) (32, lesbian, Latin American)

Women's practice of pubic hair removal may not be so much influenced by their sexual partners' appraisal as an imagined *other* – an audience in relation to whom their femininity is measured against normative ideals (Holland et al., 2004). The imagining operates through women's collusion with a hairless norm (Bordo, 1997); a partner's (anticipated) appraisal, and a woman's own adoption of normative hairlessness, become inseparable. Therefore, as Joanna expressed below, a partner's (anticipated) presence becomes inextricably connected to a woman's 'real' experience of her body (i.e., decreased sexual confidence).

Joanna: (...) sometimes you just forget about it and you just like do it—have sex um, yeah, but I don't know—I feel unconfident [sic], for some reason I have to have it like bare I think that guys don't like it (...) (19, heterosexual, Russian)

Overall, our data suggest many young women share a common understanding of a 'need' to prepare or maintain the female body (e.g., Moran, 2012), particularly in the context

of (casual) sexual relations (Farvid & Braun, 2012). However, we do not wish to suggest the role of sexual partners in one's practice of pubic hair removal is absolute. Some instances of variation were evident in some lesbian participants' accounts:

Sarah: well [shaving pubic hair is] to be expected but (..._) [my girlfriend] and I are just as bad as each other really you know, (...) you eventually get around to it (...) I can't expect my partner um (.) to do something that I'm not prepared [to do] religiously myself (...) (30, gay, NZ)

As Terry and Braun (2009) point out, long term relationships *in general* may create space for transgression of normative practices or notions (in contrast to casual sex, see Herbenick et al., 2013). In same-sex relationships, understandings of gendered practices such as pubic hair removal (i.e., the amount of efforts required) may more likely be shared by both partners, enabling such space also. Tina affirmed Sarah's account and described a gender-based 'leniency' when it came to sexual partners' 'transgression' of the hairless norm.

Tina: (...) [getting pubic hair stuck at the back of your throat is] not a pleasant feeling but I think in general women are nicer to each other and if it does happen and we can kind of joke about it and you're not gonna be like 'oh that was disgusting' (27, lesbian, Kiwi Chinese)

Both Sarah and Tina described a degree of flexibility with pubic hair removal that was not present in accounts of sex with men. However, we take caution against over-claiming this as a substantive pattern, due to our small sample. Additionally, our data suggest if this room for transgression indeed exists, it may not be large. Also implied in Sarah's and Tina's accounts is a normative and unquestioned acceptance of pubic hair removal as a desired practice, and pubic hair as inherently unappealing.

Furthermore, other queer participants such as Mel explicitly expressed a strong hairless preference for her sexual partners:

Int: so is [shaving everything off] what you would prefer in your partner as well?

Mel: (overlapping) yes, yes. That's—that's a huge preference for me (20, lesbian, South African)

In fact, only one of all non-heterosexual participants voiced neutrality around, or 'acceptance' of pubic hair, and its lack of removal on other women's bodies:

Jade: (...) I don't mind if that's (.) their preference, I really don't mind, I think that's—that's alright, but um, it's not like a must (...) (32, lesbian, Latin American)

In our data, then, an association of hairlessness with the sexually ready and desirable female body was as apparent in queer women's accounts as in heterosexual women's. It appears women across sexual identities feel compelled to engage in pubic hair removal.

Although queer women's accounts did display a degree of variation, Basow's (1991) argument that lesbian and bisexual women may conform less to the hairless norm than heterosexual women did not apply. One possible reason is that since queer women may well be situated in the same heteropatriarchal discursive field as straight women, how much being queer affords transgressive subject positions when it comes to hegemonic feminine body ideals is likely to vary (see Clarke, Hayfield, & Huxley, 2012 for a review of existing research on queer women's body image that points to mixed findings). Furthermore, some heterosexual men and woman identify (some) pubic hair as desirable, indicating "space for greater variation of expression" of a feminine body may also exist among heterosexuals (Terry & Braun, 2013, p. 17). The ways in which (pubic) hair removal intersects with, or ignores sexuality, calls for more research and a deeper theorization of hair removal as a gendered and sexualized practice.

Discussion and conclusion

Identifying pubic hair removal as common among our participants, our data suggest a link between the practice and a sense of shame and embarrassment associated with pubic hair (see also Roberts & Waters, 2004; Ussher, 1989). This construction of shame and embarrassment has been more widely identified in relation to women's genitalia, as well as women's bodies overall (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001, 2003). Pubic hair removal is

now an important dimension of what Fahs (2014b) terms the “genital panics”, and signifies “immense emotional and cultural baggage for women” (p. 275).

Mass media and the wider (socio)cultural context have been identified as playing an important role in perpetuating particular and narrow feminine ideals, and a notion that a female body is unacceptable without alteration or transformation (Basow, 1991; Toerien et al., 2005). Such representations are ubiquitous, setting up ‘standards’ for women to achieve and to constantly self-monitor against (Bartky, 1988). These are then reinforced and reproduced in interpersonal interactions, and through women’s surveillance of each other (see Fahs & Delgado, 2011) and of themselves (Fahs, 2014b).

The women in our study identified the presence of these media or social influences on pubic hair removal, but were unsurprisingly ambivalent about their own practices as being influenced or produced socially (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). Instead, the rhetoric of ‘personal choice’ was commonly used in their talk to make sense of pubic hair removal. A sense of dissociation and detachment from the sensation of one’s material body was evident in women’s talk. Instead of articulating pubic hair removal in terms of embodied experience, including around sexual pleasure, many women seem more concerned with their material body (i.e., pubic hair) not meeting a real or imagined expectation from one’s sexual partners or affecting their partners’ sexual experience . A material body

(with pubic hair) seems to be experienced as unclean, socially unnatural and undesirable, ruptured from the social construction of an ideal female body (Bartky, 1988). In this sense, it may be that sexual partners' preferences, whatever they may be, are somewhat "powerless against women's own distaste for their bodies" (Greer, 1991, p. 43; Wiederman, 2000) and their self-policing to conform to a socially inscribed ideal of desirability.

These norms of desirability are, however, also temporal and changing, creating a precarious and changing context. During our research, a young woman we casually talked to said, "You know what I fear most now? I worry that one day the whole bushy trend of pubic hair is gonna come back, cos I've gone through the laser thing and am now completely hairless!" This captures the potentially never-ending anxieties around hair, if women want to conform to "an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity" (Bordo, 1997, p. 91). Such anxieties are not unfounded, given Cameron Diaz's exhortations, and social media based feminist movements over the last few years to disrupt hairless norms for women. Additionally, it suggests some young women *are* aware of the potential precariousness of such bodily trends, but they 'choose' to comply with them nonetheless.

Our analysis reiterates that the question of 'choice' is the wrong one when considering

body practices. Although women make choices, our data demonstrate that these 'choices' are not individualized and decontextualized (e.g., see Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). Although women – such as our participants – may take pleasure in these practices, and even feel empowered through the conformity to sexual norms, any choice not to participate in the homogenizing norms would not be an easy one. Whether sociocultural attempts to shift hairless norms have any substantive impact on women's practice remains to be seen. Our data affirm Fahs' analysis that "women may have the freedom to groom their pubic hair into triangles, landing strips, or Vajazzled ornaments (...) but they cannot go au natural or not shave their bodies without serious social punishments" (2014a, p. 280) .

The discussion around women's autonomy in pubic hair removal places the practice within the ongoing feminist debate of sexual liberty as divided by positive liberty (i.e., freedom to do something) and negative liberty (i.e., freedom from repressive structures) (Fahs, 2014a). Fahs observes the 'negative liberty' battles have been falling out of focus as compared to the small victories of the 'positive liberty' in feminist movement. This parallels the overpowering of postfeminist discourse over critique of gender inequality and oppression. Incorporating the two, she suggests, is key in campaigning for and

discussing true freedom for women's sexuality. This involves linking up the 'personal' (i.e., empowerment) and the 'political' (i.e., repressive norms), and exploring the space in between or accountable by *both*. We have identified women's practice of pubic hair removal as sitting at the 'division' of 'personal' and 'political'. But have we inadvertently overlooked how this 'division' simultaneously signals an overlap between 'personal' and 'political'? Although we identified pubic hair removal as a disciplinary practice that goes beyond personal 'choice', variations diverging from a hairless norm (and articulated by the same participants embracing 'personal choice' rhetoric) and suggesting individual agency did appear in our data. Albeit not prominent, these variations suggest how a female subject both 'free to' remove pubic hair and 'free from' a hegemonic hairless norm could possibly be imagined.

Limitations and directions for future research

We acknowledge the small sample size of this study, but note that the data generated were rich and complex. Furthermore, the sample was characterised by ethnic and sexual diversity (despite the slight trend towards ethnicities from 'western countries' among participants, western countries are not identical in terms of pubic hair practice so this should not be considered a major issue). This sample make-up counterbalances any suggestion of homogeneity, giving access to potentially diverse perspectives, which

nevertheless converged into coherent patterns and themes.

Unanimously, pubic hair removal appeared desirable among participants, but there were suggestions of possible variations around sexuality, which calls for further investigation.

Lesbian participants did not report less compulsion or desire to participate in pubic hair removal than heterosexual participants, in contrast to research suggesting lesbian women are less subject to body hair norms (Basow, 1991). However, when talking about sexual relationships, same-sex relationships appeared to offer more perceived space for genital hairiness, especially after some time had elapsed in the relationship. Whether this sexual difference would sustain with larger samples would need exploration in future research using different methodologies or a larger sample of lesbian identified women.

Additionally, we did not have space or sufficient data to explore cultural/racial discrepancies around any female hairless norm, but note that Tina and Carol, the two Chinese identified participants, did observe some of their Chinese peers or families did not practice pubic hair removal or see it as normative. This echoes the theorisation of 'hairless norm' as "a component of femininity for white women in white-American culture" (Basow & Willis, 2001, p. 571), and warrants future research attention.

Another implication for future research is around the relation between pubic hair

removal and material body. Though we only touched on the seeming disconnection between the two in our analysis, further discussion might do well to explore (dis-)embodiment and agency, as a potential vehicle for exploring complicity and resistance in normative body practices. Young women's "empirical materiality" is crucial to the assemblage of social and cultural questions that make up 'girlhood' or 'womanhood' (C. Driscoll, 2002, p. 27). As we are cautious against a postfeminist over-evaluation of a female body as a site of empowerment, a stronger emphasis on material body would benefit future discussion on feminine practices, especially body practices (Fahs & Swank, 2015). In our paper, we argued against pubic hair removal being a personal 'choice,' but do not deny that some agency can exist around such practices (see Ringrose, 2013).

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