

“Well nobody wants to see a hairy fanny
do they?”

Exploring the Everyday Narratives of Young Women’s
Perceptions and Practices around Genital Appearance
and Sexual Identities

Lesley-Ann Smith, Laura Reed, Laura Hickinbotham,
Callum E. Cooper & Rachel Evenden

Psychology Division



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHAMPTON

Culture, Gender and Social Norms

- The idealised female body in modern Western society
- Feminine/Masculine social constructions
- Pubic hair
- Gendered practice?
- Media influence



Culture, Gender and Social Norms



- Women who do not adhere to a hairless norm often experience negative social consequences ([Caselli, 2006](#))
- Women with (visible) body hair are viewed in fairly negative ways:
 - as less (sexually) attractive
 - Less sociable
 - Less positive
 - Less happy
 - More aggressive than women without body hair ([Basow & Braman, 1998](#); [Basow & Willis, 2001](#))

Culture, Gender and Social Norms

- Practice largely ceased in late 19th C – restarted in the 1980's (Ramsey et al., 2009)
- “It is now unusual for clinicians...to examine any woman under the age of 30 who still has all of her pubic hair” ([Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010, p. 121](#))
- Rising trend to remove all hair in Anglo Western societies (Fahs, 2014)



Gendered practice?

- 50% of women removed pubic hair from bikini line, 30% removed all of their pubic hair (Kiddell et al., 2010)
- For men, the parameters for body hair display are wider ([Lewis, 1987](#)), but they may be narrowing ([Hildebrandt, 2003](#))
- “the gender gap in body hair removal...is narrower than you might think” (CristenConger, 2011)
- Less social and psychological castigation, except perhaps for back hair ([Boroughs, 2009](#))



Manscaping?

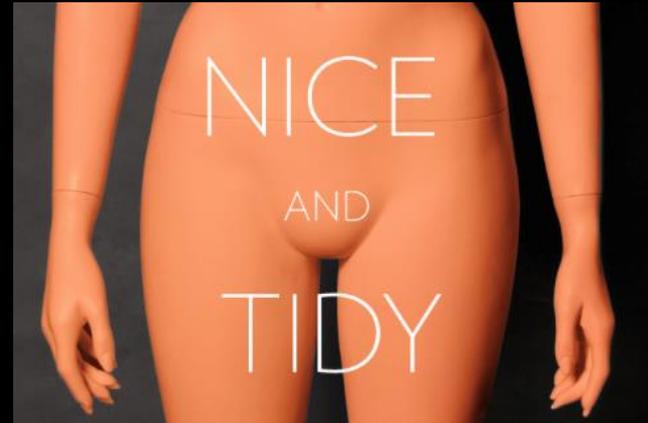


Media influence

- Do media factors influence perceptions of the idealised female body image?



Media influence



Braun et al., (2013) TA - Five key themes...

- **Choice:** *“I don't think people should have to remove some pubic hair to conform to societal expectations, but personally I find it easier to **conform** than make a public stand on pubic hair removal” (F)*
- **Visibility:** *“I think visible pubic hair makes others uncomfortable” (F)*
- **Cleanliness:** . *“pubic hair is not dirty but having less is cleaner” (F)*
- **Sexual Impact:** *“Could make aspects of sex (e.g., oral sex) easier for her partner” (F)*
- **Physical attractiveness:** *“It's natural but I think it looks yuck on females.” (F)*



Methodology

- Participants:
 - 21 females aged between age 18 and 30 years (activity appears to decrease with age)
 - Differing disclosed sexual identities (still interviewing and transcribing)
 - Bi-curious
 - Bisexual
 - Heterosexual
 - Lesbian
- One-to-one, semi-structured interviews
- Full ethical approval from the Staff Research Ethics Committee at The University of Northampton
- Discourse Analysis

Areas of Interest from preliminary analysis

- Aesthetics/Hygiene
- The importance of complying to other people's desires in relation to shaving and sexual activities
- Shaving as a means of engaging in sexual activity or not (within casual sexual relationships and long-term sexual relationships)
- Surveillance



Aesthetics/Hygiene

- ...and it just looks dirty and it is dirty and that's what people think because no-one has hair and most celebrities well all celebrities are so clean and shiny...there's not a great big bush of hair there and it looks like a fanny and you know every fanny's different but if you shave it, it's nice and little and all in place (Cassie, 18 year old, bisexual)
- ...everything's getting more exposed isn't it with the internet and obviously with fashion things are getting shorter and shorter and the last thing you want is to put a pair of high waisted shorts on and bend over and pshhh bush everywhere so I think there is definitely a pressure to be nice and clean (Judy, 25 year old, heterosexual)

Aesthetics/Hygiene

- ...I know it sounds cringey when I say it but girls obviously you have your periods and all that sort of stuff and if you've got a lot of hair down there you need to get rid of it cause otherwise then it clings on (laughs) (Charlotte, 19 year old, bisexual)
- ...because some people have said that when a woman is hairless it's perverted because they look like a young school girl depends which way you look at it really...I think in, in a male way when all of its gone it looks a lot better (pause) and you look clean, you don't look all ergh (Judy, 25 year old, heterosexual)

Aesthetics/Hygiene

- ...like the idea of it doesn't really bother me like people can do what they want basically erm I can understand the reasons why people might do it erm if they think its kind of like if they think it's a clean thing I don't really agree that it is necessarily like completely a clean thing erm and like not shaving isn't or if its just like sexual pleasure or whatever doesn't really bother me they can do what they want but to me it's like I don't care like I don't care about having hair on my body erm I never really have erm and I'm quite open about that...(Lou, 20 year old, lesbian)

The importance of complying to other people's desires in relation to shaving and sexual activities

- ...obviously males they've got all these porn sites haven't they and there all clean shaven...so they've got this idea that that's what its supposed to look like and if a girl doesn't do it in my head I think guys will think ergh you know that's not sexy...so I would shave (Anna, 24 year old, heterosexual)
- ... you don't know what a guy's reaction is going to be to and because there are some girls who never shave and are fine with it but I think if I did that what would a guy's reaction be and I would hate them to be like look there's too much going on down there and I'm not going down there (laughs) so yeah just to prevent any kind of rejection I think (Abigail, 26 year old, heterosexual)

The importance of complying to other people's desires in relation to shaving and sexual activities

- I would like to but I wouldn't stop doing it because you know I know that my partner (male at the time of the interview) wouldn't be happy about it if I did so I feel like I couldn't...I mean its not exactly the most pleasant thing you know you can hurt yourself but they don't care because you know its what they want they don't actually think about how you feel about it at all (Charlotte, 19 year old, bisexual)
- It wouldn't bother me and my girlfriend sometimes trim and stuff but if we don't shave for a while then that is fine um we are both fine having hair down there...I think really it is a male preoccupation the no pubes bit (Lou, 20 year old, lesbian)

Shaving as a means of engaging in sexual activity or not (within casual sexual relationships and long-term sexual relationships)

- ... if you're going to go down on a girl you are putting your face, your mouth, your nose in everything in all the pubes and it's just not very comfortable and I know people that have had pubes you know end up in their mouth and teeth...so I wouldn't lick a girl out with hair (Cassie, 18 year old, bisexual)
- ...he was like I'm not going down on you because you haven't shaved and he still touched me and everything like that and had sex with me but he ended up going down on me anyway so (slight laugh) but I think they think that they mind until they get horny (laughs)...no he trims a little bit and he used to until he made that comment at me and I said well how about you trim or a I won't give you a blow job (laughs) and now he doesn't mention my pubes (Katy, 19 year old, heterosexual)

Shaving as a means of engaging in sexual activity or not (within casual sexual relationships and long-term sexual relationships)

- And well if I am going into town on um a Friday night and I haven't shaved then no I won't have sex with a guy and I do that on purpose sometimes you know don't shave because then that would definitely stop me having a one night stand you know to be judged in that way as being messy (Abigail, 26 year old, heterosexual)
- Well if I have a one night stand then I quickly nip to the loo wherever we are and before we start um doing stuff and I go and shave it off really quickly so that there are no shocks for the guy (Amanda, 20 year old, heterosexual)

Shaving as a means of engaging in sexual activity or not (within casual sexual relationships and long-term sexual relationships)

- I've only had sex with one person and that's my girlfriend so I'm like comfortable enough that if I didn't shave for like two weeks they wouldn't care and I'd kind of care because like I'd rather shave because I like it more like but they their opinion doesn't really matter it's more my opinion of myself...but if it was a one night stand I'd be like eugh God go home (Molly, 20 year old, lesbian)



Surveillance

- ...you no like when I was in PE there was a girl that didn't shave and she got bullied it for it...so that's why you think eurgh I better shave so you end up shaving...because of the schools and bullying and it's all exposed enit (Judy, 25 year old, heterosexual)
- ...my friend and this must have been about four years ago so we weren't old at all and we were down the river and my friend was wearing really short shorts and she was sitting like in a straddle position and you know the people that were with her said they could see little bits of hairs coming out of her and you know that was taken and was getting the piss taken out of her for ages and ages (Cassie, 18 year old, bisexual)

Surveillance

- I felt a pressure when I was younger because it was just the thing that everybody did and like in high school year 10, 11, its just you I don't know I followed the norms more then but now I just I don't care if like the whole world decided that they were going to not shave I'd still shave (Molly, 20 year old, lesbian)
- ... there was a girl who never used to shave but you know everybody knew in the year because the girls would come out of the changing rooms and say eurgh her pubes are sticking out of her pants and it's like so what and we were like 13, 14 years old (Cassie, 18 year old, bisexual)

Surveillance

- more so and I think that especially when in school days and the boys would get involved because I think they think it's hilarious because it's a fanny haha but it would all spring from girls bitching and it was the only way it'd get around because girls wouldn't bitch about and say you're having a sleepover or whatever and the girls saw something on somebody's fanny or saw it might have been a bit different or whatever and it doesn't take much for that girl to kind of go and bitch to someone else but it's probably because they've got something wrong with their fanny and it's like a domino effect really (Dee, 20 years old, bisexual)

Summary so far...

- Issues around hygiene/attractiveness dominant discourses across all interviews
- The importance of other people's desires seemed to focus on participant's perceptions of what sexual partners would want – for males the dominant narrative here was fully shaved
- Shaving as a means of engaging in sexual activities focussed primarily around oral sex and again the perception of being clean and tidy. Males seen as the main driver in terms of sex and complete shaving – porn cited here
- Surveillance – from interviews this particular issue was more enforced and noticeable during Secondary school years and lessened with maturation

Thank you for listening

- Contact: lesley-ann.smith@northampton.ac.uk