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“It Shouldn’t Stick Out from your Bikini at the Beach”: Meaning, Gender, and the Hairy/Hairless

Body

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Abstract

Women's and men's bodies and sexuality can be understood as socially-situated and socially-produced. This means they are affected by, and developed in relation to, patterned sociocultural meanings and representations. We aim here to understand a recently emergent, and potentially gendered, body practice—pubic hair removal—by examining the meanings people ascribe to pubic hair and its removal. Extending the widespread hairless bodily norm for Anglo/Western women, pubic hair removal is an apparently rapidly growing phenomenon. Men, too, are seemingly practicing pubic hair removal in significant numbers, raising the question of to what extent pubic hair removal should be understood as a gendered phenomenon. What we do not yet know is what people's understandings and perceptions of pubic hair are, and how they make sense of its removal. Using a qualitative survey, the current study asked a series of questions about pubic hair and its removal, both in general and related to men's and women's bodies. In total, 67 participants (100% response rate; 50 female; mean age 29, diverse ethnically, predominantly heterosexual) completed the survey. Thematic analysis identified five key themes in the way people made sense of pubic hair and pubic hair removal that are related to choice, privacy, physical attractiveness, sexual impacts, and cleanliness. Meanings around pubic hair and its removal were not consistently gendered, but it was still situated as more of an issue for women. With potential impacts on sexual and psychological wellbeing, sexuality education provides an important venue for discussing, and questioning, normative ideas about pubic hair.

Keywords: meanings, social norms, choice behaviour, body image, sexual attitudes, pubic hair

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“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)

This claim resonates with many anecdotes we have received from health professionals. Pubic hair removal appears to have become the latest Anglo/Western norm in female body hair modification, part of an arsenal of body “maintenance” regularly engaged in to produce a sexually-desirable—or just apparently normal—feminine body. Scholarship across the spectrum from theoretical to critical/qualitative to positivist/experimental has sought to understand the relationships among social meanings, personal understandings, and a vast range of embodied practices for women—and increasingly for men. Unfortunately, women’s negotiation of their bodies, amidst the plethora of cultural representations and meanings, is often fraught and tricky; for men, the situation appears to be one of increasing pressures, expectations, and problems.

The research we present in our paper is situated within a broadly social constructionist understanding of the body—where the body, the perceptions we have of it, the meanings we associate with it, and our engagements and practices with it are understood as socioculturally located and produced meanings and responses (Synnott, 1992; Ussher, 1997; Vertinsky, 1994). At the same time, they have an embodied material element, and meanings, desires, and even practices feel very much like our own personal preferences (Fahs, 2012). To claim meaning as socially constructed is therefore not to suggest these meanings are not powerful: socio-culturally produced meanings around bodies are “real” and weighty and they are profoundly influential in constructing individuals’ experiences. They are therefore relevant for understanding individual

psychology and embodiment (e.g., Blood, 2005)—people’s “individual” desires, experiences, practices, and so forth.

The dominant sociocultural meanings (norms) in the West construct desirable female bodies as slim and smooth (hair-free) and male bodies as toned (Bordo, 1993, 1999; Grogan, 2008). Many of the currently normative meanings around bodies are ones that render the body problematic, particularly for women, because women’s bodies rarely fit these criteria. Bodies that do not conform have been theorised as stigmatised (Chrisler, 2011). Extensive body work (Gimlin, 2002, 2007) or beauty work (Kwan & Trautner, 2009) must be enacted for most women to achieve heteronormative expectations around attractiveness, desirability, and ideal femininity. A wealth of research has demonstrated girls’ and women’s difficult and problematic relationship with their bodies, both overall and with specific aspects, as well as the impact on their psychological and physical well-being that can result (Grogan, 2008; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009; Phillips, 1991; Sarwer & Crerand, 2004; Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010). Concerns about the societal representation of women’s bodies also extend to the impacts on women’s and girls’ sexuality (R. Gill, 2008; Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Yost & McCarthy, 2012), often demonstrating a problematic uptake of sexualised media representation.

From the 1990s on, there has been increased visual attention paid to the male body (Bordo, 1999) and a “growing problematization of the male body” (Hildebrandt, 2003, p. 64), with negative impacts on men’s perceptions and experiences of their bodies (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Blond, 2008). Boys and men are increasingly experiencing body-related concerns, albeit potentially differently from girls and women (Grossbard et al., 2009; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006) and across multiple bodily domains (Grogan, 2008; Martins, Tiggemann, &

Churchett, 2008b; Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008). Our focus is specifically on hair, and particularly pubic hair, as a site of embodied—and possibly gendered—practice related to contemporary meanings around bodies, sexuality, and hair.

Body Hair and Its Removal

Body hair removal and/or alteration has a long history for men as well as for women (Cooper, 1971), both in and beyond the West (Bromberger, 2008; Hershman, 1974). We focus on the West as the context for our data collection and analysis (see Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). By the late 20th century, body hair was strongly encoded as masculine (Barcan, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), providing relatively narrow parameters for acceptable body hair display by women, and it remains the case that “hairlessness is the taken-for-granted condition for a woman’s body” (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, p. 341), despite being physiologically “unnatural.” For men, the parameters for body hair display are wider (Lewis, 1987), but they may be narrowing (Hildebrandt, 2003).

Women’s hair removal practices have been theorised as almost “compulsory,” with a mundane “hairless norm” (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998) rendering almost any visible body hair unacceptable for any woman (Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). Body hair removal often begins at or around puberty when hair may grow more thickly (e.g., on the legs) and in new places (e.g., genitals, underarms) and often because “it [is] the thing to do” (Basow, 1991, p. 92). Regular removal of at least some body hair (typically leg and/or underarm; some pubic hair) is almost ubiquitous among women in Anglo/Western countries (Basow, 1991; Rigakos, 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien et al., 2005). Reasons provided for hair removal link hairlessness to attractiveness, femininity, cleanliness, sensation, others’ preferences, and reasons of conformity to social norms (Basow,

1991; Lewis, 1987; Rigakos, 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). Notably, a social conformity rationale is more commonly applied to other women rather than to one's self.

Women who do not adhere to a hairless norm often experience negative social consequences, such as celebrities who fall victim to media spite if spotted with body hair (Caselli, 2006). Women with (visible) body hair are viewed in fairly negative ways—as less (sexually) attractive, sociable, positive, and happy and as more aggressive than women without body hair (Basow & Braman, 1998; Basow & Willis, 2001)—that are linked by some researchers to the emotional response of disgust (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). These women are subject to ridicule and abuse from others, including family and partners, who question their femininity, their sexuality, and their hygiene standards (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). For example, Fahs (2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011) had U.S. undergraduate students complete an extra-credit pedagogical exercise during which they did not remove body hair for 12 weeks and they logged and reflected on their experiences. This real-life exercise provided startling insights into what the experience of “being hairy” is like for young women who do not usually display body hair—a discomforting experience. Fahs' data compellingly documented the highly socially policed nature of body hair removal and powerful social pressures on women to remove body hair, as well as the ways this played out in racialised, classed, and sexualised ways. For example, women regularly received comments from others—including often sisters and mothers, as well as sexual partners—that explicitly informed them of their betrayal of appropriate (raced, classed) feminine gender and sexuality norms, the undesirability of their “gross” hairy bodies, and requests to conform to depilatory expectations.

The experience of having facial hair in the current Western context is often psychologically difficult for women.¹ Tying in to the cultural archetype of the freak-show, the “bearded lady” (Thomson, 2006), women often experience “excessive” facial hair as psychologically difficult and as having a negative impact on quality of life (Lipton, Sherr, Elford, Rustin, & Clayton, 2006; Maziar et al., 2010). Women with medical conditions which cause “excessive” hair growth on the face (and body), such as polycystic ovarian syndrome, report hair as one of the most distressing elements—part of a cluster of factors which can result in a questioning of their femininity and female identity (Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002).² In *Beauty Secrets*, Chapkis (1986) theorised women’s private shame around a belief that they are unnaturally hairy, compared to other women, and “uncontrollable” body hair growth has been described as women’s greatest hair-related fear, with visible (uncontrolled) hair seen as a betrayal by the body (Lewis, 1987). Shame and anxiety can be found in both research and personal narratives, such as the deeply sad personal account by British journalist Liz Jones (2009), where she describes her body hair as something that both rules, and ruins, her life, as well as her daily struggle to maintain the veneer of embodied female hairlessness. This idea of an ever-present threat from an out-of-control hair-producing body lurking in the wings ties in with Ussher’s (2006) analysis of the female (reproductive) body as “monstrous”—an ever-present source of vulnerability and danger.

Until recently, hair removal might have appeared to be a clearly gendered practice, but Bromberger (2008, p. 389) claimed a “recent neutralization of differences in hair practices between the genders,” and others have suggested that “the gender gap in body hair removal... is narrower than you might think” (CristenConger, 2011, para 4). For Western men, body hair can be a significant body concern (Martins et al., 2008b; Tiggemann et al., 2008), and body hair

removal or alteration appears to be popular and potentially even normative (Blond, 2008; Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005; Brähler, 2011; Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008a; Porche, 2007). The reasons men provide for hair removal to some extent match those for women: attractiveness, hygiene, sensation, and sexual improvement; to emphasize body muscularity; and to increase perceived penis size (Boroughs, 2009; Boroughs et al., 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Martins et al., 2008a). However, although it appears that hairlessness, or reduced hairiness, has been incorporated as one acceptable, even desirable, form of masculinity, and that there may be an “emerging hairless ideal” (Hildebrandt, 2003, p. 63) for men, the scope for male body hair remains broader than it is for women, with less social and psychological castigation, except perhaps for back hair (Boroughs, 2009).

Pubic Hair and Its Removal

For Anglo/Western (White, Christian) women, “bikini line” pubic hair removal dates back to the introduction and uptake of the bikini (Hildebrandt, 2003; Riddell et al., 2010), but there is no longstanding cultural norm of pubic hair removal prior to that. Some have recently claimed that “removal of pubic hair is not yet normative” (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008, p. 891) for women; others argue that Brazilian waxes (near or total removal of pubic hair, depending on which definition you read) “have been normalised” (Wiseman, 2011, para 3; see also Dault, 2011). Although trends are difficult to determine without longitudinal data, there does seem to have been a rapid change in women’s pubic hair removal practices, such that a hairless or virtually hairless pubis is commonplace. Despite claims that “bush is back” (Germinsky, 2008), substantial pubic hair removal for women does appear to have formed a social norm (Herzig, 2009), with the vast majority removing at least some pubic hair (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). The level of bikini-line removal ranges from 50% to 100% across

studies, but is usually at higher end of this range (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2011; Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010; Riddell et al., 2010; Rigakos, 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien et al., 2005; Weigle, 2009). Studies that have assessed more-than-bikini pubic hair removal report between 32% and 64% of women removing most or all pubic hair (Riddell et al., 2010; Rigakos, 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien et al., 2005).

The proportion of women removing pubic hair often decreases with age in cohort samples (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien et al., 2005), although we cannot be clear if this primarily reflects changing norms or age-related factors. For example, in one study of 2,451 U.S. women, the younger the women, the more likely they were to have removed pubic hair (and more of it) in the last month: 58% of 18-24 year-olds had been without pubic hair at least once in that time, but only 11% of women over age 50 had been without pubic hair (Herbenick et al., 2010). Instead, 52% of women over 50 had not removed any pubic hair; only 12% of 18-24 year olds had not removed any pubic hair (also see Weigle, 2009). In the one U.S. study that systematically explored the effect of ethnicity on pubic hair “grooming” among women 16-40 years old (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013), White women reported the highest rates overall (86% current grooming). Current pubic hair grooming was lower among Hispanic and Black women (66%). Among Hispanic women, it was higher among those women born in, or more acculturated in, the United States, suggesting an influence of U.S. culture (cf. Fahs & Delgado, 2011) and thus social norms.

Pubic hair alteration is also seemingly now very common for men. Research in the United States and Australia reported that a significant majority (62%-83%) of men have removed and/or trimmed some pubic hair at least once (Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008a; Smolak & Murnen, 2011), with less than half removing any pubic hair with any regularity

(Martins et al., 2008a). At present, the measures used to assess pubic hair removal for women and for men are not comparable so that conclusions about any gendered elements to pubic hair removal are compromised.

Reasons provided for pubic hair removal are gendered, but also overlapping. Men cite improved appearance, sensation, hygiene, and perception of increased genital size (Martins et al., 2008a). Women reference swimsuit wearing, increasing attractiveness, perceived cleanliness, liking the feeling/comfort, feeling feminine, male/partner preference, for sex or sexual pleasure, self-enhancement, and pressure from others or compliance with social norms (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2011; DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Riddell et al., 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Weigle, 2009). Media consumption has been associated with pubic hair removal for women, as has having a sexual partner (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2011; DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Just as female leg and underarm hair removal was encouraged by advertisements in fashion magazines of the past (Hope, 1982), the increasing exposure of hairless women's genitalia in an ever-growing and increasingly normalised pornographic industry may contribute to female pubic hair removal norms (Cokal, 2007; Dault, 2011; Peixoto Labre, 2002; Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011), with the same potentially applying to men, although the direct influence of pornography on pubic hair removal practices is not yet researched.

Research Rationale

Despite knowing something of pubic hair removal *practices* among men and women, our understandings of the *meanings* people attribute to pubic hair and to pubic hair removal remain under-researched. Most of the work on pubic hair removal to date has used (quantitative) survey measures, thus requesting information within a pre-determined framework, and with an often fairly narrow scope. We aim to provide a deeper understanding of the motivators around pubic

hair removal, reporting on qualitative research that examined perceptions and meanings associated with pubic hair and with its removal.

Pubic hair removal is not inconsequential: it carries some potential health risks (Dendle, Mulvey, Pyrlis, Grayson, & Johnson, 2007; Gibson, 2011; Porche, 2007; Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009; Riddell et al., 2010; Trager, 2006), with evidence of increased numbers of (mostly minor) genital injuries correlating with an increase in the practice (Glass et al., 2012). It can be also costly; and for women, it may increase dissatisfaction with vulval appearance and even lead to female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2010; Wiseman, 2011). Furthermore, if sociocultural understandings of “normal” pubic hair shift, women, and men, potentially become subject to another site of strict body-norms, and an additional site of potential bodily policing and body-related distress (which already occurs for other body hair for women; see Fahs, 2011, 2012, in press; Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Anecdotal accounts in media and from health professionals suggest this shift is occurring.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through posters displayed around The University of Auckland, word of mouth, snowballing, advertising via Facebook including a page specific to the project that people could “like” and/or share, and email notices. In total, 67 New Zealanders participated in our study. Most provided full demographic information, using primarily open-ended questions. Participants were aged 18 to 48 ($M = 29.4$, $SD = 9.34$) and were predominantly female: 50 identified as female, 16 as male, one as “other” (unspecified). Self-indicated ethnicity was very diverse, but 43 (64%) identified in a way typically understood in New Zealand as White, and most others with Māori (9), Pacific (1) and/or Asian (6) ethnicities. Two participants identified as

disabled. Nearly 90% (56) identified as heterosexual, two as bisexual, one as gay, and three as “other” (1 “asexual,” 1 “normal,” 1 “sexual”); 19 (28%) were single and 48 (72%) had children. Almost half (33; 49%) were university students (full- or part-time).

Among the sample, pubic hair removal was common: 45 (90%) women and 14 (87.5%) men had removed some pubic hair at least once; 37 (70%) women and 7 (44%) men reported removing at least some pubic hair regularly. Complete pubic hair removal was currently practiced by 9 (13%) of the women, but none of the men. Nearly two-thirds (43, 64%) overall reported currently trimming their pubic hair; only six participants (3 female; 3 male) reported never having trimmed their pubic hair.

Data and Data Collection

The qualitative survey method was used to gather views on pubic hair and pubic hair removal. Qualitative surveys offer a range of benefits (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004): they allow participants to respond in an open-ended fashion, thus not restricting the scope of responses and instead allowing a depth and richness of data; they allow standardization in questions and relatively easy comparison across a qualitative dataset; they enable easy and quick access to samples larger than is typical of qualitative research; and finally, they allow private (and in our case anonymous) responding on sensitive or embarrassing topics, potentially opening up a wider sample pool.

The “Views on Pubic Hair: A Qualitative Survey” had been designed and previously piloted and used for data collection in the United Kingdom by the first and third authors. The survey had four sections. Section 1 contained eight questions about pubic hair and pubic hair removal in general, as well as a drawing exercise which asked participants to draw “a little,” “typical,” and “lots of” pubic hair, as well as the “most attractive amount,” on outlines of men's

and women's torsos. Sections 2 and 3 each contained the same seven questions related to pubic hair and pubic hair removal, applied first to women, and then to men (see Appendix). Section 4 contained 14 demographic questions about the participant and about their hair removal practices. No personally identifying information was collected. Approval for the study was obtained from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Responses to recruitment advertisements were either received via a specifically created email address or in person. Each potential participant was given more information about the study and handed/mailed a participant information sheet. If they then wanted to participate, they were handed/mailed a copy of the survey. Instructions for completing the survey included: (a) "Please write down *your own* feelings and perspectives—*there are no right answers.*" (b) "Please write your answers in your own words, in the space directly below the question." (c) "Write as much as you like—if you are completing a paper version, there is an overflow box at the end if you wish to write more than fits in the space allocated to any one question." (d) "Where there is a question that could be answered with yes, or no, *we ask that you explain your view.*"

Participants were instructed to return the completed survey "as soon as possible," either in hardcopy (via post, to a university drop-off box or in person) or electronically. Reminders were not sent. All 67 surveys distributed were returned, with approximately three-quarters (51, 76%) being completed by hand and returned as hardcopy. All data were then entered into a Word file for analysis and initially collated by question. Each participant was assigned a code according to the order in which each survey was entered (NZ01-NZ67); extracts presented here are identified by participant number, sex, and age (e.g., 63F, 39).

Analytic Method

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying and interpreting patterns across datasets, which is suited to investigating under-researched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used a primarily inductive approach to thematic analysis where codes and themes are developed from the data content. Our aim was to develop a complex understanding of the patterning of peoples' perceptions of pubic hair and pubic hair removal, not in determining the ways they responded to particular questions. The analytic approach was situated within a critical realist framework (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007), which allowed us to talk about socially produced meanings, but still understand these as having some relationship to material or experiential reality for people. A critical realist's understanding of the body posits that meanings are "artificial" in the sense that they are not *natural*, but are *real* in that they represent perceived truth for people and society (Frauley & Pearce, 2007). In analysing these data, we treat the participants' responses and sentiments as real for them, but theorise them as stemming from socially available meanings, rather than reflecting some self-evident or inherently true physiological reality.

The data analysis was primarily conducted by the second author, in collaboration with the first author, both of whom reviewed the data, the coding process, and the data coding through reading and discussion throughout. The data were read and re-read several times, and then coding and analysis followed a four-step process. Coding focused both on the semantic content of what participants wrote and on the more latent meanings in the data (i.e., the ideas and assumptions that underpinned explicit semantic meanings; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were initially coded with the data collated by question-response, using fairly broad codes such as "embarrassing," "natural," and "personal choice." The second round of coding identified broad

patterns of meaning by re-coding the entire dataset, disregarding both the questions to which participants responded and whether they were responding to generic, male, or female bodies. The codes were also revised at this stage to add more detail, producing more complex codes such as “not embarrassing, but...,” “interferes with sex,” and “individual choice, but...” At this point, the codes identified were collated in order to develop potential themes. In the third step, provisional themes were created from the codes, such as “caveats,” “personal choice within limits,” and “attractiveness/looking good.” The fourth stage involved further refinement of provisional themes, which meant revisiting the coded data, and then the full dataset, to determine the fit of potential themes.

Results

Key Themes

The final themes identified were: (Theme 1) what you do with pubic hair is up to you (within limits), (Theme 2) pubic hair is and should be private, (Theme 3) pubic hair is not dirty but having less is cleaner, (Theme 4) pubic hair interferes with having sex, and (Theme 5) pubic hair is unattractive and should be removed. We sequentially present these five themes, developed with illustrative data examples. In line with a qualitative framework, we do not quantify the number of respondents articulating each theme, but each was expressed by at least two-thirds of our 67 participants, with the exception of “pubic hair is not dirty but having less is cleaner,” which was articulated by over half. Questions regarding gender will be primarily discussed at the end.

Theme 1: Choice. One of the most prominent themes was an endorsement of personal choice around pubic hair—but within limits. Choice was evident throughout the data, both at semantic and latent levels, and was particularly strongly expressed in relation to questions asking

about whether people in general, men, or women *should* remove pubic hair (questions designed to evoke strong responses) or *why* they might do it. Some simply expressed the view that what one does with one's pubic hair is personal choice and left it at that. For example: "It is a personal decision it's up to them what they do with it" (06M, 19); "Up to them. Personal preference" (34M, 22); "Only if they want to. Personal choice" (10M, 37); "It is an individual decision" (11F, 37); "Don't really care, it is up to them" (45F, no age given); and "I don't think people should remove pubic hair unless they want to" (30F, 41). Some explicitly framed their position as a non-judgemental one: "I think people should do what they feel is right for them. I don't judge people either way" (53M, 32) and "[Pubic hair removal is] really up to them. If they think they need to then why not? It does not make any difference from my point of view" (48M, 23).

Responses like these seem to suggest that pubic hair removal requires only a straightforward and simple personal decision. It is something individuals would simply do if they wanted, and not do if they did not want. In such responses, "choice" is rendered straightforward. Because choice was applied in this way to advocate both for and against hair removal, it appeared that it was the *enactment* of choice that was important, fitting with choice as a fundamental value for individuals in contemporary neoliberal Western contexts (R. C. Gill, 2007), so that they are understood as free agents who are free from the pressures of social constraints (e.g., see R. Gill, Henwood, & Mclean, 2005).

On first glance, it might appear that choice acted as a bottom-line argument (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995). However, when this notion of choice was elaborated, it became apparent that choice was often constructed in a conditional manner: typically, participants initially identified that they supported individual choice, but then did not approve if that choice conflicted with the choice of others. They used that conflict between different people's choices to

advocate *for* one particular “choice,” which was commonly hair removal. For example: “[It] should be personal choice—if you don’t want to, you shouldn’t have to—but I don’t want to see someone else’s pubic hair hanging out of togs [swimwear]!” (12F, 38); “It is up to the individual. Except, say, at the beach, if you are wearing togs, pubic hair should not be poking out” (63F, 39); and “Again, it’s a personal choice and depends on how much hair an individual grows. I think most people should groom their pubic areas as part of good grooming and hygiene standards” (59F, 32).

Here, pubic hair removal is positioned as a body management that avoids others’ discomfort. This pattern also demonstrates one of the main features of the data, which cut across themes: participants commonly provided a simple answer, but then attached certain caveats to their response, signalled through the very frequent use of terms like “if,” “but,” and “though.” These terms signal *conditional* responses, not dissimilar to the if-then formulation identified in discursive psychology, for instance around racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), where conditionals allow a speaker to claim an egalitarian position while simultaneously advocating discriminatory practices. Such formulations allow for the expression of ideas which may be socially unacceptable.

In relation to our data, it appears that suggesting women or men should remove their pubic hair to conform to certain aesthetics is socially problematic. This suggests that pubic hair removal is not (yet) so normative as to be a taken-for-granted practice and/or that individual choice rhetoric offers a particularly strong ideology to endorse (see Braun, 2009). The frequency of caveats in our data seems to indicate that people think pubic hair removal is not in and of itself a necessity, but rather is a body practice whose necessity is determined by context (see the

following). Effectively, when associated with context and/or the preferences of the participant, caveats worked to problematize the notion of a free choice in pubic hair removal.

Caveated responses highlight the limitation placed on personal choice, in relation both to our data and also for people making choices in the real world. Looking at 12F(38)'s quote above, a simple view is expressed—choice—followed by the caveat signalled by the “but.” As 12F(38) expresses it, she has no problem if women do not remove their pubic hair, as long as it does not impinge on her world. So although choice appeared to be endorsed, only certain types of choices were actually endorsed, specifically (a) removing pubic hair to ensure she does not see other women’s pubic hair outside their swimwear, (b) keeping “covered up,” and/or (c) avoiding the beach. The individual chooses, but the options (for women) to remove or not to remove pubic hair are not equal choices (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), either in social or personal desirability, or in how the individual then lives her or his life. Some participants were aware of this conflict:

I’m torn. I want to say no, it shouldn’t matter and should be a personal choice. But if I’m honest, I have to admit that if I saw someone on the beach with lots of pubic hair showing, I’d possibly find that a bit confronting. (22F, 37)

This quote encapsulates a situation where two conflicting positions coexist: (a) the dominant rhetoric and prioritising of individual choice (Braun, 2009; Fahs, 2011), associated with a dominant neoliberal social context, and (b) the norm of female body hair removal to which most Western women conform (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004).

Some participants who supported individual choice situated it in relation to a critique of social pressures or norms with which people may feel compelled to comply: “I think it is up to the free will of the individual whether they choose to trim or remove their pubic hair. I don't think people should be forced to follow rules about it” (62F, 43) and “I think it’s up to the

individual, but like most things I feel that there should be no pressure to conform to a standard” (42F, 25). In expressing a non-judgemental position, and promoting free choice to remove, trim, or leave untouched pubic hair, participants implicitly acknowledge that pressure to conform to certain practices does exist. It seems that the nuancing of this theme of choice, then, is that pubic hair removal should be up to the individual, but this ideal is in reality regulated by other factors—hence it is choice, within limits.

A pronounced and clearly articulated recognition of social norms was a prominent subtheme within choice, with current ideas and practices around pubic hair and pubic hair removal recognised as influenced by these norms. For example: “It is socially acceptable, almost expected, to remove/trim pubic hair—i.e., people trim because others are also trimming” [...] (09M, 39) and “[People remove pubic hair] because that’s the norm (at least in this country it is, i.e., France it’s different—very different) to have hair hanging out your [bikinis] on the beach is way bad!!” (27F, no age given).

Some respondents explicitly identified where they felt their views had come from: “When well groomed it is less unattractive but I prefer a little and not covering more than the pubic bone area. I believe this is convention based on my generation and media” (57M, 27). Exposure to media has been found to coincide with pubic hair removal practices (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). In contrast to some predictions (Yakas, 2009), but in line with other Australasian research (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998), participants in our study did identify social pressure in regards to pubic hair removal. Those who identified norms, however, often still suggested that individuals have the choice to adhere to them: “[People who remove pubic hair] wrongly think it’s ‘normal to/should do’” (28F, 20); “...I think some people buy into trends and they think they need to look a certain way” (30F, 41); and “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” (62F, 43).

Although recognition of (the power of) social norms was clear, the ultimate emphasis was still on individual choice (as in 62F[43], who “chooses” to conform rather than “make a public stand”). This emphasis suggests that individual choice should override unthinking social conformity, even if sometimes it does not. Individuals’ perception of their “freedom to choose” has been identified as empowering (Herzig, 2009), but some have argued that this notion of choice is dangerous (Lippman, 1999) because what appears to be choice is far from free, with choice rhetoric masking pressures to conform (the comparison of the two studies in AUTHOR, DATE, demonstrates this nicely).

Overall in our data, personal choice appeared to occupy an idealised position around any decision or suggestion to remove pubic hair, but limits were placed around this central idea, effectively undermining the concept at the same time that it was valorised. The four remaining themes we discuss provide common-sense meanings around pubic hair and its removal, which potentially serve as regulators that limit or impinge on the shape or form choice around pubic hair may take.

Theme 2: Privacy. Limits on the enactment of choice seemed at least partially contingent on visibility, something not dissimilar to the constructed but enforced invisibility of women's body hair in general (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). This invisibility seemed to rely on a construction of pubic hair as private—our second prominent theme was “pubic hair is and should be private.” Some participants simply expressed the view that pubic hair is private. For example, responses to a question on their immediate responses to the words “pubic hair” included:

“Private” (44M, 44), “The immediate response would be a little bit of personal privacy” (48M, 23), and “A private thing...” (59F, 32).

Responses to other questions which asked for explanation saw participants express how pubic hair not only is private, but also ought actively to be kept private, both visually and socially, by individuals: “It is not acceptable to expose pubic hair in public” (40F, 48); “[Pubic hair] is generally frowned upon in Western society. The general trend is it should be well kept and not talked about” (57M, 27); and “...I do think that people should remove bikini line hairs if they wear swimsuits that make it obvious. I think visible pubic hair makes others uncomfortable and that it is just like how you would shave your legs or underarms” (18F, 23). These examples stress the importance of keeping pubic hair out of the public eye because it is deemed unacceptable and people do not like to see it. Participants also expressed their own preference not to see others’ pubic hair exposed in public. This perspective implies that it does not actually matter where pubic hair is, or how much an individual has, as long as it is covered up. For women, specifically, exposure of the skin of the bikini line was acceptable as long as it was hairless. Pubic hair, but not the skin beneath it, was framed a private matter; to adhere to privacy, it must be rendered invisible (in practice, removed). This analysis fits with Hildebrandt’s (2003) claim that body hair signifies the private body, whereas its absence signifies the public body.

In some responses, in contrast, the private nature of pubic hair was associated with the private nature of the genitals, so exposing pubic hair in public was potentially akin to exposing the genitals in public: “Showing off my pubic hair would be like showing off my genitals...” (63F, 39); “Only [embarrassing] when exposed in areas that I wouldn’t be comfortable exposing my genitals in!” (13F, 26); and “It suggests nakedness to see hair peaking [sic] out from the side of swimwear/underwear, so removing hair could be about wanting to appear clothed (and

therefore protected rather than exposed or vulnerable), even when we're not wearing very much?" (22F, 37).

The private meaning around pubic hair may have its origin in the private nature of the genitals (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). If pubic hair is situated as a marker or signifier of genitals, its exposure would be undesirable, akin to socially prohibited act of public genital exposure. This conflation could contribute to frequency with which embarrassment was expressed by participants in relation to pubic hair, primarily related to visibility in public space: "It can be [embarrassing] if it is visible in public e.g., at the beach" (10M, 37); "Yes [it's embarrassing] if it's on public display. I wouldn't want hair peeking out of my swimming togs" (60F, 45); and "Only [embarrassing] if it's like a full on visible bush through your bikini or something, I think a little bit of pubic hair (such as trimmed or landing strip or whatever) is totally fine, doesn't bother me at all but I'd definitely want to avoid everyone being able to see my pubic hair out of my bikini bottoms" (50F, 18).

The main problem with pubic hair in these accounts was the potential for it to be seen; when covered up, or publicly invisible, the problem was side-stepped or disappeared. Pubic hair itself was not typically framed as inherently embarrassing, rather it became so only if seen by others in an inappropriate context, typically involving swimwear. Although underwear or changing rooms were sometimes mentioned, swimwear seemed to occupy an almost iconic shorthand status for the public/private boundary. The bikini line, in particular, was typically situated as the notable site of concern—not surprisingly, because magazines like *Cosmopolitan* advise readers that "a flawless bikini line is essential" ("Get a perfect Bikini Line," 2012). Displaying pubic hair beyond swimwear has been described as "an extreme fashion faux-pas"

(Trager, 2006, p. 118), and swimwear was the most common reason cited by women in another Canadian study for why they removed pubic hair (Riddell et al., 2010).

The experience of hair exposure did not just apply to pubic hair for women, and to some extent the gendered focus on the bikini line may also reflect male swimsuit preferences in New Zealand (typically long loose “boardshorts”), as well as some underwear styles. However, the gendered focus possibly also partly reflects the contrast between visible pubic hair on female bodies that are otherwise relatively (and normatively) hairless. Pubic hair on a woman that protrudes beyond the cover of swimwear or underwear cannot usually be disguised as leg or abdominal hair, as it may be for a man. With the female body ideally and normatively hairless (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), visible pubic hair, especially if dark, is salient.

Theme 3: Cleanliness. The third theme—“pubic hair is not dirty but having less is cleaner”—related to cleanliness. When directly asked if pubic hair was dirty, a majority of participants identified that it was *not* dirty: “No—it gets showered as much as any other body part” (16F, 31); “No, it’s hair—if you shower then it’s clean” (47M, 25); “No. Because it gets cleaned when you have a shower” (33F, 21); “No it’s very natural no more dirty than your head or even less so as it is covered at day time” (44M, 44); and “I only think pubic hair is dirty if it contains crabs or lice or flaky skin” (09M, 39). In contrast to some other studies where pubic hair has itself been seen as dirty (Weigle, 2009), almost all participants expressed the idea that if it was cleaned regularly, like any other part of the body, pubic hair would not be dirty, but acknowledged the potential for pubic hair to be dirty if not washed or cleaned.

However, this explicit claim to cleanliness was somewhat contradicted by a prominent theme related to pubic hair removal specifically, where participants suggested that people would remove hair to be or feel cleaner, as well as to make the genital area easier to keep clean: “Makes

it easier to keep clean...” (04F, 18), “Cleaner self and won’t get infections” (55M, 20), “Cleanliness...freshness” (64F, 28), “For hygiene reasons!” (31F, 45), “Perception of cleanliness” (24M, 20), and “Personal hygiene based on sweating” (57M, 27). This explanatory framework situates pubic hair as a perceptual or material site of potential dirtiness. Other studies have similarly reported that participants expressed the idea that women’s pubic hair was unsightly and unclean, stating that less hair felt cleaner and less sweaty (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; see also DeMaria & Berenson, 2013). Similarly, media reportedly promote the “Brazilian” wax as a way to make women feel cleaner (Peixoto Labre, 2002). Because the capture of pheromone scent is a suggested function of pubic hair (Ramsey et al., 2009), it might be expected to smell and thus be perceived as unclean.

Such negative attitudes toward body hair on women have been directly related to “disgust sensitivity” (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004)—an individual’s sensitivity to experience, report on, and act in relation to the emotion of disgust. The power of disgust around women’s body hair was illustrated powerfully in Fahs and Delgado’s (2011) U.S.-based qualitative work on women’s body hair growth and display. In contrast, in our data, this theme was non-gendered, which is interesting when we consider that women's genitals also have been traditionally thought of as more “dirty” and “contaminating” than men's (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). This would fit with an argument of gender-neutralisation around pubic hair removal (Bromberger, 2008) and broader changes in male grooming practices and appearance concerns (Elsner, 2012).

Theme 4: Sexuality. The fourth theme relates to the way pubic hair was understood as something which “interferes” with having sex. One common reason given for removing pubic hair was that less pubic hair makes sex easier and that people should or would remove pubic hair for this reason: “Without pubic hair one could experience more skin to skin contact during sex,

or tongue to skin contact, during sex, or finger...etc.” (13F, 26); “More erotic when having sex as the area becomes more sensitive with removal of hair” (09M, 39); and “Should be removed if it is in some way interrering [sic] with sex life” (63F, 39).

Pubic hair was seen to interfere with having sex in numerous ways, such as by decreasing physical closeness and reducing sensitivity in the genital area, applying to both female and male bodies. Conceptually, pubic hair becomes situated as something like an oven mitt, eliminating direct contact between two surfaces and thereby reducing sensitivity of response. In the construction of pubic hair as interfering with having sex, pubic hair becomes an undesirable and effectively unnatural part of the body so that its removal is conceptually logical and warranted. This logic fits with reasoning surrounding the rise of genital cosmetic surgery for women, which is also framed around enhancing sexual pleasure (Braun, 2005); only a few participants (such as 63F, 39) stipulated that pubic hair should be removed if it is interfering with sexuality. Although such views were nuanced, their existence suggests the idea that “pubic hair *can* interfere with sex” is a common story about it—and something likely to increase hair removal practices. Other research has demonstrated sexuality as a reason for pubic hair removal by both men and women (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Martins et al., 2008a; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Weigle, 2009), but empirical evidence does not yet exist to confirm—or contradict—claims around actual sensitivity and sexuality (Ramsey et al., 2009).

As well as affecting having sex in general, pubic hair was seen to interfere with oral sex in particular. Participants suggested that people should or might remove pubic hair in order to make oral sex easier or to be more considerate to a sexual partner who was performing oral sex. For example: “No one wants a mouth full of pubes” (50F, 18); “Partly because it might make oral sex nicer (no hair in the mouth)” (46F, 26); “To aid in oral sex. ie [sic] shaved testicles”

(53M, 32); “No pubes to spit out after oral sex” (09M, 39); and “Could make aspects of sex (e.g., oral sex) easier for her partner” (16F, 31). This idea that removing hair would be considerate to a sexual partner has been found in other research, with women stating that they had removed hair because a male partner had suggested that they make their pubic hair tidier or neater (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). Indeed, having a partner predicted women’s pubic hair removal practices in one study (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008).

Although the examples above identified pubic hair as a physical barrier to having sex, and a concern for oral sex frames it potentially positively with an ethical erotics framework as “care for the other” (Carmody, 2005), it is also worth considering the intersection of this meaning with the themes related to cleanliness and attractiveness (discussed next). If having less hair is thought to be cleaner and more attractive, it also makes sense that people would be more willing to perform oral sex on a partner with less pubic hair, or that someone with less pubic hair might feel more comfortable receiving oral sex. The idea of pubic hair interfering with having sex may partly or primarily reflect these other meanings. Indeed, in relation to labiaplasty, the psychological reassurance of an “aesthetically pleasant” appearance is framed as important for a fulfilling sexual response (Braun, 2005).

Theme 5: Attractiveness. The final theme relates to a common explanation that pubic hair is and should be removed to be attractive, or to become more attractive—situating pubic hair itself as unattractive. In some instances, the unattractive nature of pubic hair was explicit: “It’s natural, but not the most attractive thing” (58F, 35); “Sweaty, unattractive” (17F, 32); “I do know that it is body hair but it just looks more gross” (49F, 18); and “The only hair on a women’s [sic] body should be on their head and eyes” (37M, 21). Like 37M(21) some participants identified pubic hair as unattractive in regards to women only, even when responding to a question that did

not specifically ask about women's pubic hair. Fitting with a normatively, if unnaturally, hairless female body (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; Yakas, 2009), participants generally situated pubic hair as more unattractive on women than on men, with pubic hair removal framed as a way for women to look more attractive. “Brazilian” waxes, specifically for women, have also been represented in the media as a way to increase attractiveness (Peixoto Labre, 2002).

For men, in contrast, pubic hair was not perceived to impact their attractiveness in the same way: “I think females [sic] pubic hair is less attractive than males [sic] pubic hair because females ‘now days’ are expected to be well groomed, ‘plastic fantastic’, from head to toe” (36F, 20); “It’s natural but I think it looks yuck on females. Although it’s the opposite for males, I think it’s more attractive if they’re ‘all natural’ rather than hairless or with a little bit” (03F, 19); “[Pubic hair removal for men] must be very painful to remove it and unlike women, I can't see how it could possibly make them more attractive” (32F, 22); and “Pubic hair removal is rendered an unnatural, unnecessary activity for men, with pain” (23F, 21)—also cited as a rationale for no removal.

For women, pubic hair removal effectively was presented as something that moves the female body from unattractive to attractive; for men, from normal to possibly more attractive or possibly less attractive. The contrast in talk about the attractiveness of male and female bodies evokes and produces a gendered double standard where women, but not men, could be expected to remove (pubic) hair to look (more) attractive. This contrast situates pubic hair removal as an almost natural act for women, reiterating and perpetuating gendered constructions of appearance as the domain of women (Black & Sharma, 2001). Men are able to remain “all natural” with little negative judgement, possibly even gaining attractiveness by displaying their natural state. Our finding contrasts with U.S. research, where men reported “sex appeal” as the second most

common reason for body hair removal in general (Boroughs et al., 2005), but whether this difference is persistent would require more detailed research into men and body hair removal in New Zealand.

An increase in the perceived size of genitalia (which in some cases linked to attractiveness) was frequently given in our data as a reason or advantage for men removing pubic hair: “Makes the penis look bigger. Looks more attractive” (04F, 18); “Make penis look bigger. Experimentation—to see if partner likes the look” (09M, 39); “To make their [penises] look bigger and be like the porn stars” (61F, 30); and “More sensual feeling, looking ‘bigger’” (44M, 44). Because many men do worry about, and are dissatisfied with, or distressed by the size of their penis (Lever, Frederick, & Peplau, 2006; Martins et al., 2008b; Morrison, Bearden, Ellis, & Harriman, 2005; Tiggemann et al., 2008), often believing it to be smaller than average (Lee, 1996; Son, Lee, Huh, Kim, & Paick, 2003), men may be more concerned with the size of their penis than with hair removal per se (Tiggemann et al., 2008). On a shaving company’s website, a how-to video for men shaving the groin contains a voiceover statement that “taking care of the hair down there certainly has its benefits; you might say when there's no underbrush, the tree looks taller” (“Body Shaving for Men—Gillette,” 2010). In contrast, for women, pubic hair removal has been suggested to lead to greater insecurity about genital appearance and has been associated with increases in genital cosmetic surgery to *decrease* female genital size (Braun, 2010).

In our data, removing hair “to be attractive” was represented as a highly gendered activity—something in which women engaged, and should engage, but not something men did or needed to do. Furthermore, for women the primary concern seemed to be the unattractiveness of the hair itself; for men, it was the appearance of their genitalia. The emphasis on men removing

pubic hair for genital size does work to situate appearance as a concern for men (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Grogan, 2008), but male genital aesthetics were not linked in other ways to pubic hair. Therefore, with this meaning, a woman's "natural" body with pubic hair is rendered conceptually *unattractive* in a way a man's is not.

Gender and Pubic Hair Meanings

Gendered differentiations in pubic hair meanings were neither consistently present nor prominent when comparing responses either by gender of participant or across differently gendered bodies. The themes of sex and cleanliness, and to some extent privacy and choice, were non-gendered in that male and female participants did not provide notably different responses when talking about male or female bodies. However, as the final theme of attractiveness illustrated, there were some ways in which responses were gendered, and these were oftentimes subtle. Choice, for instance, appeared more frequently in responses related to male bodies, perhaps intersecting with the recognition of social norms; if so, this suggests that participants understand pubic hair removal *for women* as part of the depilation norm for Western femininity (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), but that male practices remain situated outside a norm, despite the apparent frequency of male pubic and other body hair removal (Boroughs, 2009; Boroughs et al., 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Brähler, 2011; Martins et al., 2008a; Tiggemann et al., 2008).

Privacy was another meaning where a gendered element was rarely explicit, but it was invoked with specific feminine references such as bikinis or other body hair removal sites typical for women, such as legs and underarms. Furthermore, although pubic hair was framed as a generically private thing, the act of keeping it private was highly gendered. Although participants expressed the notion that they did not want to have to see anyone's pubic hair, it was typically

represented or judged to be more offensive on women if publicly visible. Thus, keeping pubic hair out of sight was situated as an important imperative for women, more so than for men; this may explain why regular removal rates of at least bikini line or more pubic hair seem to be higher in woman than in men (Martins et al., 2008a; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008), although direct gender comparisons have not yet been fully researched. Factors like swimwear and underwear styles, which for women tend to be more revealing, are also important factors to consider. Although both men and women are increasingly engaging in pubic hair removal, and there may be mounting pressure on men to remove, our data suggest there is more pressure on women to regularly remove pubic hair to be attractive and to keep their pubic hair invisible by full removal, perhaps even in the private spaces of sexual interaction. Further investigation of the gendering, or not, of public hair removal is warranted.

Finally, there was a pervasive assumption that pubic hair removal practices and norms were applicable only to women. This assumption was salient not only in our data, but also in interactions with potential participants. During recruiting, the second author was often asked whether men were allowed to fill out the survey. The assumption that a study on pubic hair and pubic hair removal would only be about women, or that only women's opinions would be sought, may have contributed to our higher proportion of female participants and may have resulted in a male sample more open to thinking about pubic hair and pubic hair removal as applicable to men. For future researchers, this observation suggests a need to make very explicit the sample characteristics being sought.

Discussion

Our research provides another strand of inquiry into the social construction of (gendered) bodily desires and practices, and one which resonates with existing scholarship. Our intent was

to map common patterns, not to provide an exhaustive account of every meaning. Participants' views on pubic hair and its removal told a highly patterned, if sometimes contradictory, story. Four of the five most common meanings provided by our participants—privacy, cleanliness, interference in sex, and attractiveness—overlap with reasons provided in other research of pubic hair removal practices, which have mostly been accessed via quantitative surveys (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2011; DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Martins et al., 2008a; Riddell et al., 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Weigle, 2009), including improved appearance/attractiveness, increased sensation/sexuality, better hygiene, the context of wearing a swimsuit (for women), and desired perception of increased genital size (for men). That these continuities exist across different research paradigms and contexts suggest persistent and robust patterns of meaning available within Anglo-western contexts to make sense of pubic hair and which can inform the options, choices, and desires of individual women and men.

The central theme of personal choice within limits was not one that resonated with previous hair-removal research, but it seemed to reflect a strong sociocultural ideal for making sense of individual acts: we *should* act as choosing individuals and make sense of our own, and others', acts in these ways. This cultural logic has been demonstrated in related areas of (female) body modification and sexuality. Authors analysing topics such as pole dancing for exercise (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009), female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2009), lingerie advertising (Amy-Chinn, 2006), and general advertising practices (R. Gill, 2008) have demonstrated the centrality of “choice rhetoric” and the resultant positioning of women as agents who make their own empowered choices to produce (conforming) sexy bodies and/or perform particular sexual acts (for quantitative research exploring similar questions, see for example Halliwell et al., 2011; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Yost & McCarthy, 2012). Such work on choice has questioned the

validity of framing such acts as just individual choice. Our research has demonstrated the ways choice to remove (or not) pubic hair was bounded by other meanings that coexist around pubic hair and pubic hair removal, highlighting both the prevalence of the rhetoric and the way genuine choice is simultaneously undermined. Quite apart from the influence of social norms, meanings related to privacy, cleanliness, sexuality, and attractiveness curtailed the extent to which hair removal could be understood as an unencumbered choice. Both men's and women's personal choices to remove pubic hair, and/or keep it out of sight and private, may be swayed by ideas of cleanliness, sexuality, and attractiveness but ultimately, because attractiveness and privacy were gendered, it appears that women in the New Zealand context are likely to experience mostly implicit pressure to remove their pubic hair. In a supposedly "post-feminist" context (McRobbie, 2004), in which "it's my choice" appears to offer an ultimate validation for practices others might regard as problematic—such as "pole-dancing" (Donaghue, Kurz, & Whitehead, 2011; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) or heterosexual "girl on girl" kissing at college parties (Yost & McCarthy, 2012)—this line of critical scholarship provides a useful framework for theorising "choice" as an enactment of culture.

Overall, our analysis does suggest that pubic hair is now strongly located within the domain of the modifiable body and thus is a part of the body on which individuals can be judged by others, as well as judge themselves, and it appears to have a clearly gendered dimension. Fahs' (Fahs, 2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011) work around women's body hair display has empirically demonstrated this in contexts of everyday life. Considering pubic hair and pubic hair removal thus becomes relevant to psychology and to questions of well-being, vulnerability, and harm, as has been shown in many other body-appearance domains (e.g., Grogan, 2008). They also become an important part of the wider feminist psychology project of understanding and

challenging the problematic relationships girls/women (and increasingly boys/men) have with their bodies, as well as the intersections of cultural representations with personal practices. So it complements the multiple analytic projects that are aimed at interrogating the implications for girls and women (as well as boys and men) of contemporary sexualised media representations (for a range of approaches, see American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2006; R. Gill, 2008, 2011; Halliwell et al., 2011; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Schooler & Ward, 2006).

Practice Implications

Research—which, like ours, moves beyond the widely used psychological frameworks of body image (Grogan, 2008) or self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) to explore body practices from a socially situated constructionist perspective—has argued for the deep enmeshment of people within culture, as well as for the deeply problematic ways sociocultural norms and ideals affect people's (often women's) relationships with, and practices on, their bodies (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998). In a domain where personal practice appears to be shifting, the interrogation of pubic hair meanings becomes an important intervention in challenging cultural norms that provide imperatives to women—and men—to alter their bodies in yet another way, perhaps before it becomes culturally mandatory. For those with children and teenagers, and for those working with them on body- and sexuality-related matters, making explicit the topic of body hair and pubic hair practices, and giving people tools to question norms, seems vital. One obvious place for the incorporation of such messages is into sexuality education programs (as DeMaria & Berenson, 2013, also suggest), especially given both the developmental appearance of hair on the body at this time, and the links among body hair meanings, practices, and sexuality our and other research has highlighted.

Methodological Reflections and Future Research

As a qualitative survey study, we generated meanings around pubic hair and hair removal in an open-ended yet structured fashion. The questions we asked (see Appendix) delimited the range of our focus, yet participants were still required to use their own sense-making frameworks to answer the questions in their own words. Our analytic approach of seeking themes across the entire dataset, and in response to both semantic and latent meanings, was intended to circumvent an analytic frame defined by our questions. That the meanings provided did resonate so strongly with previous (often quantitative) research around pubic hair from different locales (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2011; DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Martins et al., 2008a; Riddell et al., 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Weigle, 2009) suggests both the tenacity of Western cultural meanings around pubic hair and their spread across Anglo/Western cultures. It also reinforces the convergent validity of that research with our own and demonstrates the suitability of the qualitative survey as a tool for understanding socially-located meanings around “personal” bodily practices.

However, our research did focus on one particular cultural context—New Zealand—features of which may be different from other places. For instance, as a location with a strong “beach culture,” the pubic hair and swimsuit question for women may be more salient in New Zealand than, for instance, central Canada. But that is a question that needs to be addressed empirically. Furthermore, although there was considerable ethnic diversity in our sample, the story told here is a familiar one, and one that is often implicitly about White (women’s) bodies, although research around race, ethnicity, and pubic hair is lacking (although see DeMaria & Berenson, 2013). Given the intersections of race (with class and sexuality) around body hair meanings demonstrated in Fahs’ research (Fahs, 2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011)—as well as

work around ethnicity, hair, and body image more generally (e.g., Gordon, 2008; Jefferson & Stake, 2009; Patton, 2006; Sabik, Cole, & Ward, 2010; Watson, Ancis, White, & Nazari, 2013), exploring pubic hair meanings and practices beyond the White Western heterosexual body would be important to identify the similar, as well as different, experiences and pressures on the bodies of women and men situated outside the White heteronormative context (see Fahs, 2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011).

Although our purpose for our research was not comparative (across gender, race, sexuality etc.), the limited number of men in the sample meant we could not systematically explore the relevance of participant gender. Some research has reported somewhat negative views from heterosexual, but not queer, women about male body depilation, except for back hair (Boroughs, 2009). Basow and Braman (1998) found no gender difference in judgements about a woman with body hair, and a gender difference of more positive attitudes towards female body hair by women was explained by feminist attitudes. Fahs' work (Fahs, 2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011) similarly demonstrated that female body hair negativity and policing are not clearly gendered—suggesting that gender, and indeed sexuality, remains an interesting domain to explore more fully in relation to body hair, and specifically pubic hair.

Like Toerien and Wilkinson (2004), we would conclude that the qualitative survey method provided a very useful tool for assessing pubic hair meanings, providing a balance between structure and openness. Another advantage is that the method provides the opportunity to gather a sample larger than would often be feasible using other qualitative methods, allowing for a greater breadth of response: for instance, it would not have been logistically feasible to interview all 67 of our participants. The cost is that qualitative surveys do not typically produce the depth and detail, nor the interrogation of meaning, that interactive qualitative methods allow.

Our project has therefore only touched the surface of meaning around pubic hair and its removal. More in-depth qualitative explorations around pubic hair will offer depth and richness to current knowledge. Research that explores pubic hair meaning for different groups of women and men, that examines the intersections between pubic hair removal and other aspects of body modification, and that explores the locally-generated meanings available in different cultural contexts will result in greater insights into the ideas, expectations, pleasures, tensions, and anxieties around embodiment and sexuality that the (new) focus on pubic hair removal and embodied hairlessness may produce.

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Footnotes

¹ In contrast to the experience for many (heterosexual) women, some lesbian and/or feminist women have “reclaimed” and displayed facial hair as symbol of their political resistance to hetero-patriarchal feminine beauty norms (Basow, 1991; Kidd, 1999).

² As a contrast, women who experience head hair loss through chemotherapy for cancer experience the hair loss as problematic and are often advised by others to hide it (Hilton, Hunt, Emslie, Salinas, & Ziebland, 2008). We do not explore further the meanings and practices associated with head hair for women or men (but see Barber, 2008; Patton, 2006; Rooks, 1996; Weitz, 2001).

Appendix

Views on Pubic Hair Qualitative Survey (open-ended questions)

- 1.1 What are your immediate responses to the words “pubic hair”?
- 1.2 Do you think that pubic hair is the same as other body hair? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.3 Do you think pubic hair is dirty? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.4 Do you think pubic hair is embarrassing? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.5 Do you think pubic hair is attractive? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.6 Do you think pubic hair serves any functions on the human body? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 1.7 Why do you think people remove or trim their pubic hair?
- 1.8 Do you think people *should* remove or trim their pubic hair? *Please explain why you think this.*
- 2.1 What do you think of “natural” pubic hair (i.e., untrimmed, not removed) on a woman?
- 2.2 *Why* do you think *women* remove pubic hair?
- 2.3 Should women remove *some* pubic hair (e.g., a bikini wax)? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 2.4 Should women remove *all* pubic hair (e.g., a “Hollywood/full Brazilian”)? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 2.5 Should pubic hair removal and/or trimming be part of a regular “beauty” regime for women? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 2.6 What *advantages/benefits* might be associated with pubic hair removal for women?
- 2.7 What *disadvantages/risks* might be associated with pubic hair removal for women?
- 3.1 What do you think of “natural” pubic hair (i.e., untrimmed, not removed) on a man?
- 3.2 *Why* do you think *men* remove pubic hair?
- 3.3 Should men remove *some* pubic hair? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 3.4 Should men remove *all* pubic hair? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 3.5 Should pubic hair removal and/or trimming be part of a regular “grooming” regime for men? *Please explain your view(s).*
- 3.6 What *advantages/benefits* might be associated with pubic hair removal for men?
- 3.7 What *disadvantages/risks* might be associated with pubic hair removal for men?