



Good Bush, Bad Bush: Self Representation of Women's
Gender/Sexual Identities in Grooming Behavior

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Dedication

To Marie Beauchesne, because I can

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Introduction

The English critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) [was] unnerved by the existence of female pubic hair. He had grown up seeing Greek statues of ideal, smooth women, and apparently did not know that women even had pubic hair. The story goes that on his wedding night, he was so shocked and disgusted by his bride's muff that he could not perform, and the marriage was later annulled. (Poubelle, 2005: 8).

It is widely believed that gender and concepts of “femininity” and “masculinity” are linked and come naturally to someone based on their sex. In reality, however, it takes a lot of work and observation to learn how to act “like a girl” or “like a boy.” Erving Goffman wrote in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* of one's construction and presentation of self and the work it takes an individual to project a specific image of self in every day interactions. He used theatrical metaphors to examine social interactions, comparing individuals in society to actors in a play, who are always acting out a specific script which takes preparation both behind the curtain and in front of it to act out convincingly. People manage their bodies as well as their behavior in accordance to the social scripts they are presenting. The seeming ease most individuals have behaving “like women” and “like men” may be because this learning takes place largely during childhood, so such efforts are forgotten or taken for granted as a natural stage of growing up.

Body modification is involved in one's development of a feminine or masculine identity, whether it involves clothing, diet, exercise, tattoos, piercings, or hair removal. These forms of body modification are used to distinguish one's self from others, yet can also be used to conform to a norm. Body hair removal is a significant body modification that people do to fit in or stand out. Even though body hair management may not be apparent to the general public, it can still be revealed to some individuals in more private settings. Women's body hair removal in particular

is a strongly normative behavior among various cultural contexts today. The fact that few researchers have thought to examine the widespread behavior of female body hair removal speaks to its acceptance as everyday and commonplace actions that go unquestioned and seem almost trivial. However, the human body, male or female, produces hair naturally, in some people more than others, and for a biological, evolutionary purpose; body hair in general, for example, serves “as a trap for pheromones” and “a visual sign of reproductive maturity” (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 122) and pubic hair, serves as a safety net to protect the genital region from bacterial infections (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008, 891) and also can “function as a protective pad during intercourse” (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 122). The fact remains that it requires work for women to remove their hair even though the hairless, “feminine” look is supposedly something that comes “naturally” to women in most groups in American society today.

Previous studies examining the female body hair ideal have been conducted on college-aged women in America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and have focused on large-scale statistical analyses. These studies found that the majority of these women removed their leg and armpit hair, and also showed an increasing trend by these women in grooming their pubic hair as well. Though they suggested an increase in social pressure and acceptance for women to police their body hair growth, they were not as successful in determining a quantitative correlation between degree of exposure to images in the media, sexual orientation, and degree of feminist political leanings and the extent of body hair removal. My research takes a more qualitative approach, through the method of in-depth interviews, in examining this paradox between natural adult bodily development and the varying levels of social acceptability of visible body hair on women. My research reveals more about how and why women think they have to modify their

bodies to be seen as attractive, in their own words, as well as the details of the work that lies behind maintaining a certain appearance.

My findings corroborate past findings regarding the strongly normative phenomenon of female leg and armpit hair removal and a similar increasing trend of pubic hair grooming in college-aged women. Leg and armpit hair grooming has become something women take for granted as a necessity for being a woman and as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, and pubic hair grooming is becoming a rite of passage into sexually conscious beings. A common narrative that emerged in my interviews was that body hair grooming was a process of discovery for women that they had to learn before becoming used to the social norm to groom their body hair. All the women I interviewed reported being aware of and affected by the normative female body hair ideal, and for the most part followed the normative standard of the feminine, hairless body to various degrees, or spoke about their choices not to groom their body hair in the context of this felt societal pressure. The accounts these women gave for removing hair on armpit and leg hair also differed from the reasons they gave for removing their pubic hair, in that they saw pubic hair as inherently private and sexual, yet their choices for grooming their pubic hair hinged more on the existence and expectations of sex partners, rather than a personal aesthetic. Still, despite an acknowledgement of social pressures, most women who removed their body hair explained that they did so for personal aesthetic reasons or cited hygienic factors, despite the medical complications that may arise from hair removal, such as local irritation, or, in the case of pubic hair, the spread of viral and bacterial infections (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008: 891). My research suggests that though women use personal reasons to justify their body hair grooming practices, their concern with maintaining a certain self-presentation to others remains a significant factor motivating their behavior.

Changes in Body Hair Norms

Societal norms regarding body hair have varied historically, and changing interpretations regarding these norms have existed along with them. There are accounts of women in ancient Rome and Egypt removing body hair with hot tar and razor-sharp shells, or a process called “sugaring” that involved lemon juice and sugar (Basow, 1991: 85). In the eighteenth century Western cultures, in the midst of a rapidly expanding global economy, hair became related to fundamental notions of sexual, national, and racial difference. Not only was hair a marker of the ostensibly natural differences between the sexes, but a register of ethnic divides, separating “the controlled hair of the ‘superior’ European” from the “alleged unkempt hairiness of Africans” or “the ‘beardless’ men of the Americas and Asia” (Rosenthal, 2004: 2). Through this discourse hair became both a means of assimilation through the removal of body hair (as shaving came to be perceived as a mark of Western civilization for men), and a means of cultural resistance, of expression, contestation, and social commentary (Rosenthal, 2004: 6-7).

From the Antiquity to the Enlightenment, pubic hair was a sign of sex itself, and consequently was controlled on the female body, arguably to de-sexualize it and render it an appropriate object for male aesthetic contemplation (Rosenthal, 2004: 8). This sentiment is most evident during the art and literature of this period, which for the most part depicted the female body sans pubic hair. It was already customary for the female courtesans, who modeled for sculptors and painters in Athens and Rome, to remove their pubic hair, for reasons of cleanliness and the warmth of the climate. Furthermore, the beauty ideal ascribed to the female form was without pubic hair, and removing body hair more clearly emphasized “the essential,” or “the naked silhouette of the body” (Endres, 2004: 31). Some form of these ideas may exist in part today in American society, which traces its roots back to Ancient Greece and Rome, and may

partly account for the current normative attitude towards female body hair. Whatever the causes of attitudes towards female body hair in Western society, more recent sociological studies suggest that the hairless female body remains strongly normative today and indicate that the strength of this norm has increased in recent years.

A survey study of college-aged women in America found that the majority removed their leg and underarm hair, and cited feminine/attractiveness reasons and social/normative reasons for doing so (Basow, 1991). Further survey research by Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi (2005) conducted in the United Kingdom and Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) in Australia confirmed an increase in social pressure and acceptance for women to police their body hair growth. These studies also began to categorize different reactions and expectations for hair growth on different parts of the body. Additionally, they attempted to examine the correlation between degree of exposure to images in the media, sexual orientation, and degree of feminist political leanings and the extent of body hair removal. They all suggest that the women in their studies are responding in some degree to the pervasive social norm that a “feminine” body is a hairless body. However, despite most respondents’ recognition of the social and normative pressures to remove their body hair, respondents were consistently unwilling to identify those influences as the reason for their own personal choice to remove their body hair.

In her study, Basow traces the history of female body hair removal practices in the United States and attributes the body hair removal trend to changes in fashion and subsequent advertising after these changes. Prior to 1915, most women in the United States did not remove their body hair, and there were very few ads referencing body hair, perhaps because body hair was generally not publicly visible due to clothing styles of this time period. Still, the women who did remove body hair during this period did so because they were in professions that rendered it

visible, primarily vaudeville dancers. Visible hair on places other than the head was still viewed as “superfluous” for women (Basow, 1991: 84). Advertising campaigns for body hair removal began with underarm hair between 1915 and 1919. These ads were instructional and “informed women that new dress styles (sleeveless or very sheer sleeves) made removing underarm hair important since visible hair not growing on the head was ‘superfluous,’ ‘unwanted,’ ‘ugly,’ and ‘unfashionable.’” (Basow, 1991: 84).

Between 1920 and 1940, ads for hair removal products focused more on the brands and products rather than possessing an instructional tone, suggesting that by this time body hair removal for women had become socially acceptable, or even expected. During the 1920s, an increasing proportion of magazine ads emphasized “the importance of appearance for women in order to ‘ensure [her mate’s] fidelity in particular and home security in general” (Basow, 1991: 84). Basow speculates that leg shaving likely began during this time also due to “both the emphasis on sexual appeal and the emphasis on cleanliness and meticulous hygiene” (Basow, 1991: 84) and also due to changing trends in fashion that shortened skirt lengths and abbreviated bathing suits. From tracing the development of body hair removal trends in the United States, Basow suggests that “the primary message in most of these ads is that women need to change their looks and their bodies in order to be socially acceptable, especially to men” (Basow, 1991: 85). She speculates that this obsession with body hair visibility may serve to maintain “a certain distinction between the genders,” or “de-emphasize women’s adult status,” or convey the message that “a woman’s mature sexuality is controlled at the same time as her ‘tamed’ sensuality is on display” (Basow, 1991: 86).

Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi (2005) extended Basow’s study of “mundane” depilation by surveying a sample of women in the United Kingdom about a wider array of body regions and

removal methods, and the relationship between age and hair removal. 99% of their respondents reported having removed some body hair at some time in their lives, with the majority doing so by age 16, and removing hair from their underarms (98.67%), legs (93.66%), pubic area (85.69%), and eyebrows (82.45%). With regards to the pubic region, the most common grooming form was maintaining a “bikini line.” The most common methods of hair removal were shaving and plucking, and respondents most often reported beginning to remove hair at puberty. Since over 90% of participants reported having removed hair from their underarms and legs, and over 80% from their pubic area, Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi suggest that “hair removal from these regions in particular [...] may be understood as normative” (Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi, 2005: 403). The fact that all women naturally produce visible hair on these parts of their bodies, yet seek to police the hair on their bodies, and the fact that these standards do not fit universally across all social groups (men, for example, are not sanctioned against having visible body hair) point to the “socially constructed nature of the assumption that body hair is a flaw, unfit for public display” (Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi, 2005: 403).

Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) conducted a similar survey study using a sample of female undergraduate students in Australia, and examined respondents’ frequency and reasons for body hair removal as well as measures of media exposure. Again, the vast majority of respondents (96%) regularly removed their underarm and leg hair, citing femininity and attractiveness reasons for doing so. A significant percentage of women (60%) also removed at least some of their pubic hair, with 48% removing most or all of it, but cited reasons more related to sexual attractiveness and self-enhancement for doing so. In addition, they found that having a sex partner and having exposure to certain forms of media—namely, fashion magazines and particular genres of television— predicted pubic hair removal. Overall, Tiggemann and Hodgson

found that “pubic hair removal is currently different in connotation from leg or underarm hair, but it is likely to be on the increase,” as pubic hair removal is currently depicted as “modern and liberating and glamorous, just as the removal of leg hair was in the 1940s” (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008: 896). The removal of body hair is not a trivial and inconsequential behavior, and current trends only further the belief that “women’s bodies are unacceptable the way they are” (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008: 799).

The removing of leg and underarm hair for women has been taken for granted and strongly normative in the Western world for decades, but the increasingly popular trend of pubic hair removal is especially of note today for its health consequences. A study by Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson (2010) found that “it is now unusual for clinicians in the authors’ urban setting to examine any woman under the age of 30 who still has all of her pubic hair” and that anecdotally clinicians report “more pubic area rashes, razor burn, wax burns, and generally irritated pubic skin than ever before” (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 121). The authors of this study acknowledge that “debate about hair removal on legs and underarms has been part of the feminist discourse since the 1960s” but “there is a noticeable lack of discussion around pubic hair removal” (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 122), which would be necessary for the development of best practice guidelines for health care professionals regarding this practice. Though the human body naturally produces pubic hair, researchers found that women are socially conditioned to view women without body hair as “attractive, feminine, smooth, clean, and tidy” (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 122) and to strive to achieve this feminine ideal despite possible health consequences, which, for the respondents of the Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson study, consisted largely of ingrown hairs (81%) and razor bumps (80%).

Images in television, film, and porn of hairless women as well as changes in fashion towards more revealing attire for women contribute to the current normalization of pubic hair grooming. A recent study on media images of the female body in issues of *Playboy Magazine* published between 1954 and 2007 suggested the perpetuation of a “Barbie Doll” ideal, characterized by “a low BMI, narrow hips, a prominent bust, and hairless, undefined genitalia resembling those of a prepubescent female” and questioned the extent to which “women may be vulnerable to the harmful effects of media exposure irrespective of their physical appearance or tendency to self-objectify” (Schick, Rima, and Calabrese, 2011: 74). As sexually explicit images portraying realistic, healthy female bodies are hard to come by, pornography could be particularly influential in determining women’s perceptions of their own genital appearance. The sexualized female, whose body is almost uniformly hairless and smooth, remains a central figure in advertising, and pornography today rarely includes pubic hair that has not been significantly modified or removed altogether, compared to pornography of twenty years ago (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 128). In addition, the discourse of female body hair as unclean imparts a sense of moral duty to maintain a certain standard of hygiene. Though there is lack of evidence to suggest that pubic hair is unclean, this belief still persists in the media and is perpetuated by businesses invested in hair removal (Riddell, Varto, and Hodgson, 2010: 129). Now, magazine advertisements for hair removal products do include products for pubic hair removal or trimming, suggesting that if pubic hair removal is not already taken for granted as a female social norm as underarm and leg hair removal is, it soon will be.

Methodology

Twenty NYU undergraduate women ranging from sophomores to seniors of various racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, and majors participated in this qualitative interview

study. Participants were found using word of mouth and snowballing, and were primarily white and studying in the social sciences (Gallatin concentrators and Social and Cultural Analysis majors were placed under the “social sciences” category). For the most part, they self-identified as female, but were fairly evenly divided between heterosexual and non-heterosexual self-identifications. All materials related to participants’ interviews were kept confidential; names or any other identifying personal information were never recorded or discussed, and names that appear in this paper have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Participation and completion of the interview session was voluntary, and participants were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and that they could end the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question.

Respondent Demographics:

Race	#
Asian	3
Black	1
Hispanic	1
Two or More	2
White + Native American	2
White	13
Gender	#
Female	18
Other	2
Boi/soft butch	1
Genderless	1
Sexual Orientation	#
Bisexual/Fluid	4
Gay/Lesbian	5
Queer	3
Straight*	8
**"pretty much straight"	1

College	#	Year in School	#
CAS	8	Sophomore	1
Gallatin	5	Junior	4
Steinhardt	1	Senior	15
Tisch	6	Areas of Study	#
Majors	#	Film/Theater/Acting	6

Acting/Drama	2	Humanities	6
Anthropology	1	Music	1
Applied Psychology	1	Social Sciences	11
Art History	1	Minors	#
Cinema Studies	1	Creative Writing	2
Cultural Anthropology	1	Producing	1
Dramatic Writing	1	Social and Cultural Analysis	1
Economics	1		
English Literature	1		
Film	2		
Gallatin: Anthropology & Radio	1		
Gallatin: Black Girl Psalms/Black Feminisms	1		
Gallatin: Intersections of Feminism/Queer Theory	1		
Gallatin: Sociology of Sport and Gender	1		
Gallatin: Writing, New Media, Culture	1		
Gender & Sexuality Studies	2		
Journalism	2		
Psychology	1		
Recorded Music	1		
Urban Design and Architecture	1		

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding the general everyday routines they underwent to look presentable to the public eye in an attempt to gauge their overall investment and attention to their outward appearance. This was followed by a set of questions regarding past and current underarm and leg hair grooming practices, when they began to maintain their underarm and leg hair, why they groomed the way they did (or why they chose not to if respondents did not groom at all), and if peer pressure or sex partners affected their grooming habits. The same set of questions was then asked about respondents' pubic hair grooming practices. Lastly, participants responded to sets of questions regarding the extent and comfort with which they spoke with their families and peers about sex and sexuality related issues, and their views about and engagement with normative notions of femininity, in an attempt to discern any possible correlation between if respondents removed their body hair, and in particular their pubic hair, how much they felt pressured to do so, and how much they had been exposed to in the realm of sex and sexuality.

Findings

Everyday Routine and Maintenance of “Hygiene”

Participants were asked about the average time it took them to get ready in the morning for school or work, the specific elements of their routine, and if and how this routine changed at all for different occasions, such as going out on a date or going out with friends. Excluding the time they pressed “snooze” on their alarm and needed to prepare and eat breakfast for those who did so, respondents reported requiring an average of ten minutes without showering, to twenty minutes with showering, to get ready in the morning. With regards to their daily routine, respondents most frequently cited showering, brushing teeth and hair, choosing an outfit, and putting on makeup, with either choosing an outfit or showering usually taking the longest time, if they had not previously taken the time to choose an outfit the night before. Showers also took longer if participants needed to shave during showering, though some respondents reported showering, and shaving, if necessary, at night. For special occasions like dating and going out with friends, participants took more time choosing outfits, putting on makeup, and doing their hair and making sure they looked more presentable and put together, because they placed more importance on making impressions based on appearances when dating or going out than going to class or work.

Participants largely seemed to be trying to maximize the amount of sleep they could get before absolutely having to get out of bed and get ready for the day. Yet overall, respondents seemed to place an importance on routines that emphasized hygiene, and sought to take measures every day to appear clean and put together in public even if they actually had not completed all tasks required to be hygienic by their standards. When asked what part of their daily routine they would skip if they were forced to, such as if they were running late, participants chose to skip

more “superficial” steps like putting on makeup or choosing an outfit, explaining that they thought they could still manage to look presentable without as much attention paid to these items. However, some stated that they would skip their morning shower, or at the very most skip washing their hair in the shower, because it took the longest and was the most tedious. Some even stated that they could not forgo any part of their daily routine, as they felt their routines were already so minimized to basically putting on clothes and leaving that there were no unnecessary parts that they could do without.

Participants were also asked to describe other efforts they went through to look presentable, not as part of their daily morning routine, but still regularly. Apart from those who showered daily at night, respondents most commonly cited grooming their body hair (mostly through shaving), plucking or waxing their eyebrows or facial hair, exercising, and washing their hair and getting haircuts as part of their non-daily regular routines. The frequency at which they participated in these activities depended on the “necessity” and “urgency” that attention was required (for example, the rate and visibility of facial and body hair growth, and the degree of cleanliness of the hair on one’s head). Maintenance of hair on the body and on the head were described in terms of hygiene, in that having unwashed hair was unclean, and having visible hair on one’s face and body signaled that one was unhygienic and unkempt. This discourse of hygiene and body hair was prevalent throughout all interviews conducted, as well as the notion of maintaining a certain “appearance” to others at all times, which entailed the maintenance of body hair depending on its degree or chance of visibility.

Degree/Chance of Visibility

Regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, or major, all respondents were aware that women are supposed to groom their body hair, including their pubic hair. Respondents generally considered body hair grooming as part of an overall regular routine in which they must partake due to an expectation to be “presentable” in the company of others, like wearing clean clothes, showering, and generally being hygienic. However, they varied in the degree to which they actually partook in this routine, which in itself varied depending on the degree and chance that body parts that grow hair would be seen. One factor that influenced how participants who groomed their body hair removed their leg hair, underarm hair, and pubic hair was the probability that someone else would see visible body hair on these parts of their bodies, which depended on the nature of their body hair, as well as seasonal fashion standards. This behavior is consistent with Goffman’s theory of self-presentation and the work that is required to maintain a certain public appearance. Furthermore, what is “public” and viewable to an outside audience is constantly in flux. The weather and seasons influence what parts of the body are revealed to others, but the members of this outside “audience” also shift depending on contexts, and parts of the self that would not necessarily be revealed to a general audience may be visible in a more intimate setting.

Respondents were for the most part more meticulous about shaving their underarms than their legs, which they shaved less often or not at all during winter, when clothes would cover their legs and thus body hair would be more hidden from public view, and thus not require as much attention to maintain. Participants who shaved less often than other participants, or did not shave certain parts of their bodies at all, explained that they did so because they did not have much visible hair to begin with. “I know when I’m with my girl friends, and we see a woman

who has a lot of armpit hair, then we will notice it and remark on it,” stated one respondent, Jessica, who shaves her armpits but not her legs:

I’m Asian American and I have so little body hair, so it’s barely noticeable even if I do grow it out. It would take someone looking really closely to see that I didn’t shave my armpits, but I still shave [my armpits] because, I don’t know, I guess it’s part of the beauty standard [...] My friends were mostly Caucasian growing up and they were all talking about body hair and shaving, and even though I don’t have as much hair as they do I was still like, oh, this is something I need to do, I need to partake in this female ritual.

Erin, who is white and identifies as a lesbian, shaves regularly, but considers herself lucky that her body hair is “soft and fine” so leaving her legs unshaven for longer periods of time does not irritate her skin. On the contrary, her mother and sister “both have really thick leg hair, and they’re like, ‘if I don’t shave more than once a week my legs itch like crazy’ but then they suffer from more dry skin and razor burn as a result.”

Erica, a Hispanic woman who identifies as a lesbian, also complained of the irritation factor of longer leg hair rubbing against clothing, and mentioned her ethnic background as a factor of body hair visibility: “I have really thick hair, because I’m Mexican, so I have to shave often and I have to use men’s razors because women’s razors aren’t as sharp and effective. And I get my face and eyebrows done and stuff too because people can see the hair there easily too.” However, she talked about the necessity of planning ahead when to shave for certain occasions, because of the time required for hair to grow long enough to shave off: “I find myself thinking, okay, next week we’re going to be doing this, so I need to wait until the night before I need to wear shorts, that type of thing.” She also discussed the importance of discussions surrounding body and facial hair among females in her family:

“In middle school, my mom only wore long sleeves because she was embarrassed about her body hair, and same with my grandma. It’s always been something we’ve talked about. My grandma’s like ‘oh you shouldn’t worry about it too much, you’ll get over it,’ but my mom—she had me when she was fifteen— I

remember being five or six, and she was in her twenties, going into salons with her [...] but she kind of got over it and evolved into being more comfortable with her appearance, and now I am more [comfortable] too. But hair always been a topic of discussion, like something we talk about and think about.”

Though most participants took needing to shave their legs and underarms for granted, they varied in how often, and for what occasions. Over the years some became more lax and nonchalant about keeping clean-shaven at all times as they grew more comfortable with their bodies. Respondents typically reported beginning to shave their underarms and legs with the onset of puberty and the appearance of visible hair on those body parts, learning that the presence of hair on these locations was socially unacceptable through well-intentioned friends, jeering peers or family members. A number of respondents admitted to having remarks made about their body hair by their classmates, which was made most visible in the locker rooms, and realizing that having body hair was “not okay.” This kind of interaction with peers helped reinforce the idea that visible body hair on women required policing, and was part of the process women went through in learning these social norms. Yet some also took hair removal as a rite of passage. “It’s like belonging to a girl’s club,” said Jessica, who majors in Anthropology, about shaving, “It’s something that girls can do together and talk about. It’s kind of fun, you know, because it’s a specifically female experience you share together.” “I remember that at sleepaway camp in eighth grade all the older girls would get together and shave their legs together,” recalled Stephanie, a junior in Applied Psychology, “and that was when I realized that that was something girls were supposed to do, or would one day have to do.”

Angela, a junior in Gallatin who is white and identifies as heterosexual, recalled how she became aware that she was expected to groom her body hair, “my [older] brother was the one who told me I should start shaving when I was ten years old. He was like ‘you know, guys like girls who shave their legs.’ I was like ‘I don’t even like boys!’ but afterwards... I was like,

‘maybe I do care.’ I guess my brother kind of got to me.” In Angela’s recollection, she was made aware of a social expectation for hairless women’s bodies not by her female peers, but by a male older sibling. Most respondents reported being pushed in some way into first beginning to remove body hair, whether from a direct statement from someone else, or feeling compelled to modify their body hair to avoid embarrassment. Respondents generally said that they felt pressure to begin to remove their body hair from their peers and from “society” at large by the images of women they saw in the media and other observations they made while growing up. This pressure was so prevalent, whether consciously felt or not, that respondents were pushed to begin to remove their body hair almost as soon as they were aware that hairless female bodies were a social norm and expectation, and determined it worthy to even go against their parents’ wishes to remove their body hair in their pre-teen to teenage years.

The actual act of removing body hair is a process that has to be taught as well, whether through trial and error or through another’s instruction. Though a hairless body is supposed to be something that comes naturally to the female body, the process of grooming body hair did not come naturally to any respondents. Many respondents reported learning from mothers or older female siblings how to shave, yet tensions arose sometimes when participants’ mothers did not want them to start shaving at such a young age, such that sometimes participants resorted to sneaking behind their mothers’ backs to remove their leg and underarm hair. “I got into a terrible argument with my mom once about whether or not to shave. She thought I shouldn’t and didn’t need to because since I’m Asian-American I don’t have a lot of hair anyway. But I used to think it was so important to shave, to the point where I would go behind my mother’s back and use my father’s disposable razors and shave my legs with them.” Erin’s mother preferred that she waited until she was older to start shaving, “but I couldn’t wait two years until I was fourteen, but then

no one could really talk to me about how to shave, so I would use my dad's razor and wouldn't use shaving cream and just dry shave because I didn't know what I was supposed to do. It always hurt so bad and gave me such bad razor burn, and then one day a friend was like, 'you know, shaving cream helps you avoid that.' I'd always thought shaving cream was only for like, rich people, but then I tried it, and I was like, *ohhh*." Learning to shave was a difficult process for some because of the tension some respondents experienced between shaving and their parents' desires for them not to shave. They had to resort to trial-and-error methods or glean information from other sources, but nevertheless felt that doing so was worth it, so that they could avoid ridicule and maintain a certain public appearance conforming to a certain standard.

Many respondents pushed to overcome the learning barriers and contradicting expectations from peers and parents with regards to body hair grooming, prioritizing maintaining an "acceptable" public appearance over family wishes and removing their body hair secretly. Courtney, a sophomore in Gender and Sexuality Studies who is white and identifies as a lesbian, waxes her armpits and shaves her legs, but recalled that "I was really jealous of my friends who started shaving in fourth grade, and I felt really insecure about having leg hair, but my mom wouldn't let me shave my legs, so I shaved behind her back in seventh grade. My mom only waxes, so she got me to start waxing instead. But I wouldn't wax my legs because it would hurt too much." Leah, a senior in Dramatic Writing who is white and identifies as queer, recalled that her mother had to shave her legs for her when she first decided to remove her body hair at the age of eleven: "I wanted to be like everybody else, and I was very embarrassed about how hairy I was [...] I think I talked to my mom about it, and I tried to use an electric razor but I was terrified, so my mom had to do it for me the first time because I couldn't imagine putting something that sharp into my skin. It was scary, but I still wanted to do it because it still felt

necessary, like getting your period or getting earrings... it's a part of your life." Underarm and leg hair removal was seen as a rite of passage and a "part of life" for most respondents.

Sometimes, mothers were reluctant for their daughters to go through this rite of passage into womanhood too soon, because they believed their daughters were "too young" or should spend their time doing other things. However, peer pressure and awareness of social expectations were so strong that participants would go behind their mothers' backs to remove their body hair.

Of the twenty women interviewed, only two let their pubic hair grow completely natural. Generally, the majority of women interviewed who groomed their pubic hair shaved completely or trimmed their bikini line year round, having established a ritual around pubic hair grooming as they had around leg and underarm hair grooming. As with leg and underarm hair grooming, respondents reported being more meticulous and grooming more often during summer and warmer weather due to increased potential of visibility of body hair during those times. However, participants all assumed that removing body hair was the norm, and weather only determined the frequency with which they groomed, not whether or not they stopped completely in the wintertime until the weather became warmer. The frequency and style of pubic hair grooming were influenced by the weather because, like other body hair, summertime or warmer weather increased the chances that the bikini area would be visible to the general public. Monica, an African-American senior in Gallatin, usually shaves or trims her pubic hair, but will get Brazilian waxes before going on vacations in tropical areas, because "it's nice not to have to worry about hair being there while you're on vacation, in a swimsuit, and you don't have to worry about whether or not anyone can see anything because it's already taken care of." "There's something inherently private about pubic hair," said Angela, about why she took more care to groom her bikini line during swimsuit season, "that no one should have to see that. I would be

paranoid about moving around too much in my bikini if I didn't [trim my bikini line]." In addition to using language that suggested that visible hair in general was unsightly, as they had with leg and underarm hair, participants also expressed much more discomfort at the thought of members of the public potentially being able to see pubic hair out of a bathing suit, saying it would "look weird" or "be gross."

The Aesthetics of Smoothness

Though the prospect of body hair being visible to the public eye was an influential factor in respondents' motivations to groom their body hair, respondents more often chose to first explain their grooming practices in terms of aesthetic preference and the purported hygienic qualities of smooth, hairless skin. Although no concrete evidence suggests that bare legs and underarms are more hygienic than hairy legs and underarms, and although evidence does exist to suggest otherwise in the case of bare pubic regions, respondents continually insisted that they felt cleaner with smooth, shaven skin. "I feel like I sweat less with no armpit hair," stated Courtney, "and I like the feeling of smooth, hairless legs on myself, even if I find it hot on other women [who don't shave their legs]." This hygiene perception is reportedly a strong motivator for women to continue to shave, even as they express a desire that they could stop and devote their time to other endeavors. Gina, a senior majoring in Urban Design and Architecture, described: "I think it's more of just a hygiene thing to shave your armpits and keep it clean and groomed and not let everything grow out and get sweat to mingle with the hair and linger... especially with underarms, I think shaving is more a hygiene thing than anything, and that would be the one thing I think that would keep me from completely stopping to shave." Other respondents concurred that they personally would not be negatively affected if other women did not shave, but insisted that it was just a personal preference that they removed their own body hair. "It's just

hair,” shrugged Angela, “and women should be able to do whatever they want with their bodies and no one can tell them differently.” Still, almost all the women interviewed personally preferred to keep their bodies virtually hairless, or at least “trimmed,” “neat,” or “well-groomed.” When so many “personal preferences” align it could mean a larger factor is teaching and pressuring individuals to believe and act a certain way.

Yumi, a senior double majoring in Journalism and Economics who is Asian-American and identifies as straight, justified her reasons for shaving her armpit and leg hair as an expression of her femininity, “I think I feel more feminine. It’s like, smooth.” Other respondents also cited feeling more feminine without hair on their bodies and felt that smooth, hairless skin was attractive on women. Gina, who is white and identifies as heterosexual, also recalled going to camp when she was younger and first realizing that hairlessness was seen as attractive in women, “I lived with twenty-eight girls in my cabin, and they were very, very concerned about their maintenance routine and body grooming; so for example, they would have these sessions where they would pluck each other’s eyebrows, or sit on the porch and all shave their legs— it was definitely a kind of a peer pressure, ‘you’ll only be attractive if you do it’ type of thing.” For pubic hair, the same personal preference for smoothness and lack of hair applied. “Part of it is definitely for what I think my partner would prefer, even though no one has ever said that to me,” said Yumi, who usually keeps her pubic hair completely shaved, but will sometimes only trim it, “but I also like the way [my vagina] looks without hair, or with underwear, you know, when you’re wearing sexy underwear you want it to look smooth and not... like a mound or have hair sticking out or something.” Janice, a senior studying Anthropology who is white and identifies as heterosexual, also expressed similar sentiments regarding the aesthetic look of

shaved or trimmed pubic regions, “I used to shave, but now I just keep it trimmed because you don’t want it to be too long and poke through your underwear and it’s annoying.”

Another reason women give for grooming their body hair is to distance themselves from physical characteristics commonly associated with masculinity, and thus define their femininity through this part of their physical appearance. Many respondents gave accounts that their preference for smooth skin on themselves was an association with femininity and a desire not to be hairy, associating hairy bodies with being “like a man.” Valerie, a senior studying Recorded Music, talked about assumptions made by others based on her soft-butched appearance and lesbian identity, “people are always shocked that I shave my legs and my armpits and pubic hair just because if you’re presenting as more of a male, it’s sort of expected that you’re not going to take care of yourself like a female. There’s an association with hair in quantities, and masculinity. It’s like transguys who start taking testosterone and are excited to get their first chin hair, or boys who get their first chest hair.” But there was also a lack of clarity for many respondents about just where they felt a pressure to groom their pubic hair came from. The majority of respondents never discussed grooming their pubic hair with their mothers, but decided to start modifying their pubic hair once it started growing and once they became conscious of an unspoken expectation for girls to groom their pubic hair.

Though hair growth on underarms, legs, and pubic region are secondary sex characteristics and signs of physical maturation, there is an inherently sexual element to pubic hair that underarm and leg hair do not possess. “I used to shave [my pubic hair] all off when it first started growing when I was eleven. I was like ‘ew, what is this? I don’t want this,’ and just always kept it shaved off until freshman year of college, when I decided to stop. But back then it was kind of a rejection of a growing up thing, and then it started to be uncomfortable when it

grew back, and it was a vicious cycle that wouldn't go away", said Angela, but she recalled that there was no explicit message from peers or adults about what one was 'supposed' to do with one's pubic hair: "It was weird, I never knew if other people were... I knew if girls had had their periods yet, but no one ever talked about pubic hair so I didn't know if I was supposed to have it or not, or if everyone knew if they were or weren't supposed to shave it or what. So in the locker rooms, I would try to look and see what other people were doing. There was never enough information about what you were supposed to do with your pubic hair. But then I realized, 'oh, it's my choice.'" The locker room becomes one of the first places where respondents experience the tensions that arise from the overlapping of public and private, where what is usually hidden becomes visible to the public eye. Though one's private parts are usually thought to be strictly personal and are rarely explicitly discussed, respondents learned eventually that there are still norms associated with these parts.

Respondents generally began grooming their pubic hair in late high school or early college, later than they began grooming their other body hair, as they grew older and they and their peers became more interested in sex and became concerned about having sex, what their sex partners expected of them, and what they believed would make sex and hygiene more functionally easy. "I just thought there was too much of it [pubic hair] and it bothered me, so I started trimming it in the beginning of high school, and it was just easier to deal with, like for periods and stuff, it's just gross," said Janice, "I remember thinking, 'this is annoying, I don't want so much of this, I'm just going to chop it off.' And then my best friend shaved, so I guess I started shaving because of that, and thinking like, 'this is what you're supposed to do,' I just got that idea." However, some respondents wrestled with the notion of grooming their pubic hair and whether or not they really did so for their personal preference or for the expectations of their sex

partners. Respondents expressed having difficulty in socially exploring the more private, as they did not experience situations involving visible pubic hair as frequently as they were to those concerning visible armpit and leg hair. However, as respondents gained more experience in these situations, their attitudes towards acceptable and comfortable pubic hair styles sometimes underwent a shift. Though Janice acknowledged peer pressure as a factor for shaving her pubic hair, “now I don’t shave anymore because I was with a guy who told me that he liked hair down there and didn’t mind if I didn’t shave. After that I was like ‘this really doesn’t matter to guys at all’ – it’s not necessarily a given’ – and I don’t like having to do it as much. Now I just trim.” Still, respondents usually chose to err on the side of caution, and groomed themselves according to what they expected a sex partner would expect, in adherence to perceived social norms about groomed pubic hair, rather than risk sexual rejection or embarrassment.

A tension exists between the expectation that hairlessness is supposed to appear natural for women and the amount of time and effort it actually requires for women to remain hairless. Stephanie, who identifies as bisexual, struggled to explain why she shaved her armpits, legs, and pubic region: “I don’t know, I guess I would feel awkward if I had a lot of hair on my armpits... but I don’t know. It’s just something that happens. I don’t like doing it, but I’m used to it now.” She shared similar sentiments about her pubic hair grooming regimen, “I don’t ever let it really get it too long. It gets super uncomfortable. Once I thought that when it got to a point when it wasn’t uncomfortable anymore I wouldn’t shave ever again, but I couldn’t wait anymore and started shaving again.” She expressed regret for having learned and gotten accustomed to the hairless aesthetic, “I’ve been doing it for so long and I don’t like the feeling of pubic hair now, and I hate that because I don’t like shaving it, but now I feel like I can’t stop.” “It’s partly laziness,” admitted Janice about the reasons why she stopped shaving completely, “I mean, yeah,

I still do something with it and I don't let it get crazy," she said, referring to her pubic hair, "but it's a hassle to shave all the time and then the skin is sensitive and irritated... it's easier to just trim and I realized that guys just don't care that much."

Effects of the Public and (Potential) Sex Partners

Of all participants, the most common grooming practice for pubic hair was completely removing it, usually by shaving. The next most popular technique was trimming the pubic hair and maintaining a bikini line, followed by shaving or waxing all pubic hair except a small strip of hair in a vertical line down the center of the pubic region, colloquially called a landing strip in America. Out of twenty respondents, only two let their pubic hair grow naturally. A factor that strongly influenced respondents' choices to groom their pubic hair was its perceived sexual meaning, and the expectations and desires of respondents' sex partners, in which case, what was once private would become public to a specific group of people. This factor was not used as prevalently for respondents' choices to groom their underarm and leg hair, and instead respondents for the most part explained their grooming choices for these body parts as solely a personal choice regardless of acknowledgment of social pressures. The overall belief held by heterosexual participants was that male sex partners expected women to shave their pubic hair completely, or at the very least keep it well-groomed and well-trimmed. Queer participants varied in responses, acknowledging that everyone had a right to personal preferences, but as long as pubic hair was kept maintained and groomed to some extent, it would not be socially taboo, citing aesthetic reasons, functional reasons, and hygienic reasons for preferring a groomed pubic region.

The visually appealing, aesthetically preferable aspect of a hairless body extends not only to people who remove their body hair, but those whom they believe will come into contact with

them. Many respondents recalled first realizing women were supposed to shave their armpits and legs when they and their peers began to observe each other going through puberty, but the reasons for beginning to groom pubic hair were hazier for some. Chelsea, a senior in Gallatin who is Asian and identifies as queer, could not remember specifically why or when she began to groom her pubic hair in the form of a landing strip, “I guess [I started in] high school? I have no idea why I started. I probably just started having sex.” Other respondents also reported similar reasons for beginning to groom their pubic hair, usually when they first began dating and becoming sexually active and sexually aware of their bodies. “I think people [at school] were just starting to have sex around then,” said Michelle about when she began to trim her pubic hair in eighth grade, “we didn’t talk about how exactly you would go about shaving and trimming and those things, but there was sort of this thing just like ‘you’re supposed to trim your pubic hair,’ and I didn’t even know what pubic hair was.”

“I was never told to [groom my pubic hair] by a sex partner or anything,” said Caroline, a senior studying Journalism and Cinema Studies, “I started shaving when I was fourteen, I guess when I started having sex. I really don’t know when I started, it might have been a personal choice like, ‘I shave my legs, I might as well’ kind of thing. I never heard anything about pubic hair from my peers because I was among the first of my friends to start having sex.” “I keep my pubic hair trimmed and neat so it’s clean, but I don’t really style it or anything,” said Leah, “but I do tailor to whoever I’m seeing at the moment. Usually I don’t shave unless I’m seeing someone. If it’s just me I don’t see a point in doing anything with it. I guess I just cave into pressure with other people. I’ve never been with anyone who was okay with a lot of hair, but if I were then I would probably stop.” The desire to maintain a certain public appearance, and be accepted by a general “public” gaze, still applies to the genital regions. Though for the most part the genital

regions are hidden from view, respondents felt a need to stay “prepared” and groomed in anticipation for any situations in which these body parts were to come into a more public view.

Participants mostly described grooming their underarm and leg hair because it “felt nicer” for both themselves and their sex partners, and reported being more vigilant about removing hair from these areas once they started dating someone or anticipated a hook-up. However, participants largely spoke about grooming their pubic hair not just because they wanted to, but because they thought their sex partners expected them to. “I think I shave my pubic hair because – part of the reason is definitely for my partner, or what I think my partner would prefer, even though no one has actually said to me, ‘I want this, please do this,’” said Yumi, “but maybe that’s because I’ve never had like, a big bush to begin with, I think guys might be more iffy about that. If I’m not seeing anyone I tend to not care as much, and just shave it when it starts getting itchy and uncomfortable.” Valerie began to groom her pubic hair in the shape of a landing strip at the age of fifteen. She did not remember how she got the idea to start but guessed:

It might have been porn or something, or my girlfriend at the time who was like ‘oh I shave, don’t you shave?’ but it was definitely something I saw in a sexual setting, and I saw it and knew that it was a sexy thing to do, or that keeping yourself groomed that way puts you in a sort of sexual tier [...] and that is part of the reason why I do something more decorative than just functional. And I’ve always found that attractive on other women, so I do it on myself also.

Participants asserted that oral sex was better and easier with trimmed or shaved pubic hair, and thus explained that grooming pubic hair had a functional benefit when it came to some kinds of sex. This belief was commonly held among respondents of all sexual orientations and levels of sexual experience with male and female partners. “Obviously, it’s a personal decision, it’s entirely whatever you want, and if I love someone I can get over it,” said Michelle about how she felt about women who did not groom their pubic hair, “I think if it was such a problem that it

was like, getting in the way of sex, like, getting stuck in my teeth or something, then I might say something about it.” “From a sexual perspective, if someone doesn’t keep their pubic hair groomed, I’m not as motivated to please them because I don’t want to put my face there,” said Valerie, “there’s sort of this illusion that you’re not taking care of yourself very well. Even if it’s for a political purpose, I totally understand, but if you want me to go down there, we’re going to have to talk about it and there might need to be some compromising.” “I started shaving my pubic hair because I thought that was what lesbians did. I now know that is not true,” recalled Stephanie:

I always knew people groomed and kept neat, but none of my straight friends got rid of all of it unless there was a particular occasion to do so. It’s funny because all the lesbians I used to know used to shave it all off, but now most of the lesbians I know don’t at all. I always like, groomed myself, but when I got with my first girlfriend junior year of high school, she was totally shaved, so I started because of her because I kind of assumed that was what happened if people were going to go down on you. The first time we had sex, I wasn’t groomed, and she didn’t go down on me.

Though respondents assume their sex partners will have certain expectations, they still asserted that they would not be very willing to acquiesce to a sex partner’s demands to groom their pubic hair a different way. Still, though respondents’ answers suggested a distinctly felt tension and pressure to groom their pubic hair, very few respondents reported ever having a sex partner suggest to them to groom their pubic hair differently. However, this could be due to the fact that the women who participated in this study largely already conformed to some sort of standard regarding pubic hair maintenance. Caroline, who is white and identifies as bisexual, stated that “usually the first time I’m with a sex partner, I am [shaved], so it’s assumed to be the norm, but if anyone I was sleeping with were that bothered by my not being really ‘prepared,’ then I don’t need to be sleeping with them.” Another possible explanation could be that sex partners in reality do not mind if a vagina has pubic hair or not, and so do not think to mention

anything about it to a casual sex partner. Angela recalled being very concerned about shaving her pubic hair completely in high school, but in college she began to let it grow and only trimmed her bikini line: “I realized that guys just don’t care. Like, if they’re going to have sex with you, are they really going to stop in the middle of everything just because you’re not shaved? It’s just hair.” “I don’t think I would be with guys who would have issues with body hair,” said Evelyn, a senior in English Literature who is white and identifies as heterosexual, but she did have a generalization about men’s attitudes towards women, “I have a lot of straight male friends, and they talk about women’s bodies as if they’re these war zones or something. That to me is enraging, as a self-proclaimed feminist. I think that’s why when I’m looking for someone to be with me, regardless of whatever I decide to do they have to be okay with it.” Evelyn trims her bikini line for self-reported aesthetic reasons.

Though there is a standard aesthetic of smoothness, there are also standards for the grooming of pubic hair, and specific forms of grooming that are considered acceptable. If women do not remove their pubic hair completely, they are expected to abide by certain rules. “Once I was hooking up with this girl, but I hadn’t really taken care of my stuff for a bit,” recounted Michelle, who usually trims her pubic hair, “but I kind of did a half-assed job and it was not neatly trimmed, it was uneven and rushed and weird and [my partner] took one look and laughed. It was embarrassing.” As suggested by the responses of many participants, women are supposed to make hairlessness look effortless, despite the amount of effort that is actually required to remove their body hair, and the hair that remains, then, must be maintained and well-groomed. As the hairless underarms and legs norm is so strongly normative today, the body hair that most women have left remains pubic hair, and for many respondents, it must appear to sex partners that effort, consideration and thought has been put into grooming their pubic hair the way they

do. “Unless I’m having sex with somebody new, that I don’t want to give them the impression that I just don’t care, I wouldn’t wax my pubic hair all off, because it hurts like a bitch,” said Chelsea, who has waxed her pubic hair occasionally. “I think as long as you keep it neat, it’s fine, and guys don’t care,” said Gina about pubic hair, “like, even if you haven’t shaved that recently, and there’s stubble, it’s okay, because they know that you usually do, and you do generally make an effort to be neat and clean, even if you’re lazy sometimes.” In this sense, respondents are still actors in Goffman’s theater metaphor, acting out certain social scripts that communicate their identities to their audience. Even if a script is not completely followed, the evidence that an actor attempted to follow it, or normally follows it, is enough.

Reactions against the Norm

Common assumptions participants made about women who did not groom their body hair were that they did so for feminist political reasons, or that they were lesbians, suggesting that body hair removal for women as a norm has gone by so unchallenged that anyone to challenge it would be labeled as deviant somehow. Still, participants, while acknowledging that these stereotypes exist, were averse to suggesting that they would jump to the same conclusions. But despite trying to be non-judgmental, they still made clear that they did not resemble or identify with these stereotypes. “There are definitely a lot of stereotypes about women who don’t shave, that they’re hippies or lesbians, or hippie lesbians,” said Evelyn, “but personally I wouldn’t say that. I know plenty of hippie lesbians who shave and I know plenty of non-shavers who are not hippies or lesbians.” Though participants considered these stereotypes as negative, sometimes the strongly normative phenomenon of body hair removal can be used to signal a queer identity. Caitlin, a senior in Gallatin, is white and identifies as a lesbian. She does not groom her leg hair and will trim her armpit hair every six months “so it doesn’t poke out of [her] t-shirt sleeves, but

other than that I just let it go.” She also trims her pubic hair and shaves her bikini line because, in her words, “no one wants to see that too long... and underwear doesn’t look cute” with visible pubic hair:

I never was good about shaving my legs when I was a teenager. I shaved my armpit hair until I was nineteen, and I went on a date with this girl who was really hot and a lot more femme than I was, and she had the most amazing armpit hair and I thought it was the sexiest thing in the world, and I thought, why don’t I have that?

Caitlin’s non-normative grooming choices do not go unnoticed, as she said, “my family likes to make fun of me for it all the time, but anytime it’s showing I get looks, like when I’m at the gym. It used to really upset me, and now I’m more confrontational, like if I catch someone staring at me I’m like ‘*what?*’” She has not been unaffected by pressure to conform to a norm: “I’ve shaved my armpits since then once or twice, but for stupid reasons, like a girl I was seeing wanted me to. And then I’ve gotten pissed at them about it and myself for doing it.”

Despite the pressures from her family and peers to groom her body hair differently, Caitlin ultimately embraces her choice and uses this queer aesthetic to signal her queerness to others, “since I’m androgynous and don’t fall into either category of butch or femme I feel like I’m not enough for people. I think I look way gayer with armpit hair, and I want that. I don’t want to have to verbally come out all the time and I don’t want to be treated like I’m not a dyke. I like being a hairy lesbian feminist separatist.” Even though Caitlin does not remove her body hair in the way people usually expect, she still maintains and grooms her body hair to some extent. Kat, a junior studying Film and Gender and Sexuality Studies, is white, identifies as queer, and does not groom her body hair in any way, in adherence to her beliefs as a queer activist, and according to her, “I don’t believe in women needing to shave their bodies.” In the

process of growing out her body hair, she was not and still is not immune from criticism and her own internalized stigmatization of body hair on women:

I started shaving my freshman year of high school, and then junior year of high school I took my first Gender and Sexuality class, and stopped shaving my legs and pubic hair, but it wasn't until last year that I stopped shaving my armpits. I think there is more stigma attached to armpit hair than anything else, so it took me a long time to be able to let it grow naturally, and still find myself somewhat attractive.

Kat is very conscious about the ways in which power works to control the way people think about themselves and others, and the way she maintains her body goes hand in hand with her politics, "I would never try and claim that I am beyond stigma or beauty standards. I'm not, and I still adhere to them, and they still affect me. But I see my role in my community as an activist. As an activist that seeks and hopes for some kind of change, it's not enough if I don't embody that change myself."

Grooming one's pubic hair, specifically, brings with it the appearance of being aware of one's body and one's sexuality, and thus slightly different assumptions are sometimes made of women who might groom their more visible body hair but do not groom their pubic hair. "I think I would assume a girl who didn't shave her pubic hair was a virgin, because I think a big reason why people groom their pubic hair is for their sex partners," said Yumi, "I feel more feminine with shaved pubic hair, but I still think sex partners are a big reason for why people do it." "People think [not grooming pubic hair] is gross," said Kat, "pubic hair removal has just become so embedded in discourses of hygiene that people think there must be bird's nests in there or something, but there's no reason for that. Hair is there for a reason in the first place." Though most respondents voiced a preference for groomed pubic hair, if not completely removed pubic hair, Kat did not feel the same way: "when I see a girl that is completely shaven, I find that disgusting. It's like you're infantilizing yourself, and that's disturbing. In my experience, when I

used to shave, it just itched, so it's not smooth at all. I think they have internalized really sexist notions of what their body should look like." Jessica also does not groom her pubic hair, and cites a practical reason for not doing so, explaining, "in terms of keeping it clean, I'll wash [my pubic hair] with soap, but I don't pay attention to it otherwise. Again, I'm Asian, and we don't have a lot of hair to begin with and I technically already have a bikini line. And I know when hair grows back after being shaved it's really itchy and really a hassle and I just don't want to deal with it." She has never dated anyone or had a sexual experience, but said she "might consider" manicuring her pubic hair if someone she was seeing wanted her to, "because I feel like armpit or leg hair wouldn't get in the way as much as pubic hair would, and I'd like my partner to be comfortable and enjoy it also if he were to go down there." Caitlin, Kat, and Jessica are all affected by normative pressures to groom their body hair, even if they do not completely adhere to them, and use their body hair to signal their identity to others in the same way that other respondents used their lack of body hair.

Conclusion/Further Study

There remains paradox between natural adult bodily development and the varying levels of social acceptability of visible body hair on women, and the norm for women's bodies to be hairless has become increasingly normative as women begin to turn their razors to their pubic regions. Though studies have shown that among college-aged women, removing all body hair is a popular trend in some parts of the world, participants of this study admitted that they wish they did not have to spend the time and energy to remove their body hair. "I wish I could [stop] shaving my armpits and legs and bikini line," said Angela, "I wish I could just be like, 'whatever,' like if there was a woman that didn't do anything at all, I'm like, 'right on!' But it just doesn't feel right. If I'm wearing certain clothing or swimsuits, I don't feel comfortable. I

just don't want people to see that." When asked how she felt about women who did not groom their body hair, Stephanie responded, "Good for them. That's awesome. I don't feel comfortable with body hair; it's one of those routine things I can't get out of doing. And I think it would be awesome to feel liberated enough to not have to do that. I don't feel like I could do that." "I think it's really cool if a woman is strong enough not to [groom their body hair]," said Courtney, "I don't think I'd be comfortable enough to not shave my legs and armpits. I'm just so used to it." Despite their reluctance to stop shaving completely, most respondents reported that they removed their body hair less frequently during the wintertime, which suggests that they are still primarily motivated to groom their body hair by the probability that hair on their bodies will be visible to others.

However, some respondents stated that they thought they could see themselves stopping their body hair grooming routine when they were older and were more confident and comfortable with their bodies, and some had even already begun that process. This was especially true with pubic hair grooming, while it was harder for respondents to think about one day no longer removing their armpit and leg hair. "I feel more attractive now that I stopped grooming my pubic hair. Before I always felt like I was incomplete. I think there's a stronger expectation to groom body hair than pubic hair," said Courtney, "I think pubic hair ends up being a personal decision that only your sex partner knows about. Armpit hair and leg hair is more visible." Leah described a narrative in which she slowly became more aware of who she was as a person, and who she wanted to be, and that reflected in turn in how she managed her body, "my ideas about [body hair] change from day to day, but I feel pretty good about what I do [with my body hair]. I feel like I'm pretty self-aware about it." "I think I'm getting more flexible about having hair [on my body]," said Erica, "I used to care about people giving me looks on the subway for having hair

on my legs, but now I don't. And with pubic hair, I think the social sexual realm expects certain things, but I've come to realize that what matters in the end is just whatever you want to do. It's your body."

In the end, most participants across all sexual orientations, gender presentations, racial backgrounds, and areas of study considered body hair unclean, needing maintenance or removal, and unfeminine. They also considered pubic hair grooming to be a more personal, private choice, perhaps because of the decreased visibility of the pubic region to the general public, compared to the legs or underarms. However, despite their justifications for grooming their body hair as a personal preference, the accounts respondents gave suggested that they were more strongly motivated to groom their body hair, leg and armpit hair and pubic hair alike, to maintain a certain appearance to others. Even though participants were adamant that people should be able to do whatever they want with their own bodies, they were largely uniform in their body hair maintenance habits, which may be indicative of a pervasive, strong norm regarding body hair and women's bodies. Though some participants expressed struggling with how they felt they were expected to keep their body hair, others were more accepting of the norm and felt they were not being harmed in any way. "It's a cultural thing, unfortunately," suggested Chelsea, "or no, not unfortunately. It's just the way things are. I don't think it's a big enough thing to make it worth changing, like in the 70s when women were all like, bra-burners and grew their pubic hair out." The strong pressure for women to remove their body hair that previous studies captured is also evident in this study, though participants' reactions to this pressure varied from resigned or uncritical compliance to active resistance. Though it may seem paradoxical that an unnatural standard of "natural" beauty exists in the hairless female body ideal, one must consider the fact that very little of our world today is left in its "natural" state. As technology has advanced,

humans have been able to modify their bodies more and more, through body paints, tattoos, piercings, hair cuts, colored eye contacts, plastic surgery, and so on, to express themselves and communicate their self-identity to others. Though female body hair removal has been strongly normative for decades in America, recent studies are showing a similar trend towards body hair removal for both gay and heterosexual men (Martins, Tiggemann, and Churchett, 2008).

As this was a qualitative, small-scale study consisting only of female undergraduate students at New York University, results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Further study could be done comparing body hair grooming practices on women across cultures on a global scale, or comparing women in one culture among various demographic factors such as age, race, sexual orientation, gender presentation, or social class. More research can also be done on men and their views on female body hair removal, or on men and male body hair removal.

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