

Deeply Rooted: An Analysis of How College-Aged Women View Body Hair and Body Hair Removal

Lexi Abrams, Vanderbilt '25

Abstract: This study explores the ways in which college-aged women view body hair and body hair removal. Drawing from interviews with 10 undergraduate women at Vanderbilt University between the ages of 19 and 21, this essay suggests that there appears to be a cognitive dissonance when it comes to young women's views on body hair removal. Throughout this study, participants acknowledged the burdens of body hair removal, whether those be financial, physical, or social. They also understood how ideas around body hair removal are inherently tied to racism, misogyny, and classism. And yet, they report feeling bound to continue removing their body hair, in order to fit in and conform to societal standards. A lack of body hair is linked to feelings of confidence, desirability, and greater sexual function. Participants expressed how having little to no body hair is often an expectation while engaging in sexual activities, though these expectations may fluctuate depending on the nature of the sexual relationship. Although this study is in no way statistically significant, these 10 interviews reveal important findings about how young, college-educated women understand and engage with body hair removal. These findings speak to how far we as a society have come with body hair removal, and how much farther we need to go.

Body hair removal through shaving, waxing, Nair, laser, electrolysis, or other methods is a deeply rooted practice in Western society, particularly for women. The idea that women should present themselves with little to no visible hair on their bodies, particularly in the armpit, leg, and genital regions, is a widely-accepted notion. This expectation has developed and fluctuated throughout history, and today carries racist, misogynistic and classist baggage.

After learning about the history of body hair removal in a class last year, and having personal experiences with body hair removal, I began the journey of researching and conducting interviews on this subject in the fall and spring of my sophomore year at Vanderbilt University. In the end, I conducted individual interviews with 10 cis-identifying women at Vanderbilt University, ranging from 19 to 21 years old. I asked these women — who come from different backgrounds, cultures, races, sexualities, and religions — about their personal experiences with body hair and body hair removal and their perceptions of body hair on others, among other questions. Each woman I interviewed — who I will refer to with pseudonyms — had very personal, unique, and sometimes emotional experiences with body hair and body hair removal. There were, however, important themes that emerged throughout all of the interviews, representing the struggles that women across the United States face when it comes to these issues.

After conducting these interviews in conjunction with outside research, I observe that women are experiencing a sort of cognitive dissonance when it comes to body hair and body hair removal. Although we, as women, can acknowledge the plethora of problems that body hair removal invites — such as physical pain, financial burdens, racism, and self-consciousness — we seem unable to throw off society's expectations, and thereby unable to curb the extent to which we remove our body hair. In fact, those I interviewed even attributed body hair removal to greater self-confidence, comfortability, and sexual function. Women may recognize that such “benefits” of body hair removal are based on problematic societal norms, yet continue to remove body hair as a direct result of internalizing these perceived benefits.

Literature Review

In the introduction to her book *Feminist Interrogations of Women's Head Hair: Crown of Glory and Shame*, Amit Kama begins by exploring the malleability of the human body: “The human body is indeed malleable to the extent that none of its features is considered to be free of cultural norms and societal dictates” (Kama & Barak-Brandes, 2018, p.1) This idea presents a foundation for thinking about body hair and body hair removal, in that society and cultural norms are the driving forces behind our notions of what is acceptable. Hair, especially, serves as the perfect tool for malleability, as it grows back and can be changed based on its shape, color, or thickness. “[H]air illustrates best and most conspicuously the malleability of the body for it is the easiest and most versatile body feature to manipulate and tame” (Kama & Barak-Brandes, 2018, p.4).

Over time, these manipulations have come in a variety of different forms. Body hair removal has been common since ancient times, but seems to have gained prominence in the 21st century alongside the advent of the Internet and social media. In a review of pubic hair and sexuality, Ramsey et al. observe that Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and European art all depict body shaving in some form. However, body hair removal, especially of pubic hair, has become much more mainstream in modern times — a phenomenon Ramsey et al. partly attribute to the internet-based porn industry, where trends have gone “from the natural look in the 1970s to the ‘Hollywood’ or ‘Brazilian’ highly maintained look” (Ramsey et al., 2009). This shift has helped promulgate the idea that “pubic hair is dirty,” while the “modern removal of pubic hair is associated with both sexiness and cleanliness” (Ramsey et al., 2009). We see this manifest itself

in contemporary media, including film, television, and social media. “Clean shaven” is the new normal. Aesthetics have become intertwined with cleanliness and caused society to view body hair as “gross” and a sign of poor hygiene.

As a result, people have integrated body hair into their sexual preferences and have developed a shared conception of what is “normal” in sexual encounters. Mullinax et al. completed an anonymous internet-based survey asking people about their thoughts, preferences, and feelings about female genitalia. This study acknowledges its many shortcomings with data collection, but presents important findings nonetheless that “[by] far the most common dislikes reported by women and the second most common dislike for men focused on the theme of pubic hair” (Mullinax et al., 2015, p.425). Evidently, schemas from the porn industry and media have manifested in people’s sexual preferences and opinions. Many share a dislike for pubic hair on female genitalia, with women citing shame and men citing a general disgust. Naturally, these two feelings are inextricably linked: Women are ashamed of showing their body hair because men — and other women — perceive it as “gross” and evidence that a woman is “neglectful of her private area” (Mullinax et al., 2015, p. 425). One man in the study even said it was a “turn-off” for him.

This phenomenon is particularly fascinating considering the extreme pain body hair removal can cause. Shaving, waxing, laser hair removal, Nair, or any of the countless other ways to remove body hair can cause infections, irritation, burns, sexually transmitted diseases, or scarring. They also present an extreme financial burden, as Dr. Jonathan Trager notes in his study on pubic hair removal: “Catering to this trend [of body hair removal] is a host of personal products designed for pubic hair grooming including specialty razors, electric shavers, and trimmers as well as pubic shaving gels and after-shave lotions. Salons and medical practices are touting pubic hair removal by waxing and lasers. Web sites and popular magazines are offering pubic hair removal tips and products for the novice as well as the experienced” (Trager, 2006, p.117). Body hair removal serves as a socioeconomic barrier, in that women who cannot afford these products, services, or resources are viewed as “dirty” and less attractive. People, many of them being men, are taking advantage of women’s perceived need to remove their body hair, and profiting off of it by introducing new products aimed at assisting with body hair removal. Body hair removal at its core is an intersectional issue, touching on socioeconomic status, race, privilege, sex, and more. It hurts women – physically, financially, and mentally – and yet is so ingrained in our culture and is unlikely to dissipate any time soon.

Methods

Due to the personal and individualistic nature of this subject, I conducted one-on-one interviews as a means of collecting data for this research project. I decided to focus on college-aged, female-identifying students and their beliefs about body hair to examine their perceptions of body hair, the ways it affects their self-confidence and self-worth, and the ways they think others view women’s body hair and its removal. As a student at Vanderbilt University, I obtained permission from the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct interviews with my chosen demographic on campus.

Between February and April 2023, I interviewed 10 young women at Vanderbilt. The vast majority of these participants were my friends, who I chose to interview because I felt the strength of our preexisting relationships would allow me to gain the most intimate and truthful information.

The interviewees were all cis-gendered women who ranged from 19 to 21 years old. They all grew up in the United States, including the West Coast, Northeast, South, and Midwest. They

were diverse in race, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality. I believe that their diverse experiences, backgrounds, ideas, beliefs, and opinions represent much of what women around the United States, and perhaps even the Western world, think about body hair and body hair removal.

Results/Discussion

A number of compelling trends and themes emerged from the 10 interviews. These included stories of participants' first encounters with body hair and body hair removal, a milestone that signified to participants – and their parents – a transition into adulthood. Many of these parents resisted their daughters from shaving as long as possible, forcing participants to shave in secret or turn to other role models for support. Once this cycle of body hair removal began, participants described creating their own routines and philosophies around removal, choosing how often, which type of hair, method of removal, and so on. They learned that body hair is most stigmatized when it's visible and found ways to work around this: leaving blonde hair alone, shaving less in the winter.

As interviewees grew up and became more sexually active, their habits of body hair removal became more complex and influenced by societal pressure. Suddenly, body hair removal was linked to desirability and cleanliness. Participants noted feeling unhygienic with “too much” body hair and directly linked a lack of body hair with feelings of confidence, especially in sexual encounters. However, interviewees did acknowledge that their body hair removal practices change depending on the context of a sexual encounter. A long-term or same-sex relationship seems to be a less pressurized situation than a one-time hook up or heterosexual relationship.

Participants then turned to how their race and identity has influenced their relationships with body hair. Those with genetically darker hair reported feeling out of place with their white peers, but had an easier time talking with family members about removal practices. Those with lighter or thinner hair shared that they struggled to broach topics of body hair removal with family members and had to be more independent.

Each interview ended with interviewees musing on the future of body hair removal and whether these practices will be forever ingrained in society. While many shared hopes of a world in which women were not pressured to remove their body hair, most conceded that this dream is not likely to be reality for a very long time, if ever.

First Encounters

The first question I posed to participants was when they first became aware of their body hair. Interviewees' answers ranged from 5th through 7th grade. In this two to three year period, they were suddenly confronted with the idea that they had body hair, and something should be done about it. Whether it was someone pointing out Yasmine's hair at school, Maya having to shave for swimming, Brooke hearing older peers talk about 'needing to shave', or Daniella's mom telling her it was time to start thinking about shaving, every single interviewee had a moment where she was suddenly aware of body hair: her own and other women's.

Every single interviewee's first act of body hair removal was done via shaving. Shaving, it seems, is the most accessible and inexpensive option for young women. It's also the most discrete method, an important factor for those interviewees who chose to remove their body hair without the consent, or even against the will, of their parents. Seeking maternal advice on body hair removal was another across-the-board trend: girls starting their journey of body hair removal by asking their mothers for advice, suggestions, or permission.

Half of the interviewees shared that their moms suggested, or insisted, that their daughters wait before starting to remove their body hair. As Brooke put it, “I feel like any parent,

when [the daughter] is like ‘oh, I’m gonna start shaving,’ [...] they’re a little bit like ‘we’re gonna wait, we’re gonna wait.’” The idea of being “too young” to start shaving is one that revolves not necessarily about the physical act of removal, but about what it represents. As Jessica put it, “Moms want to delay our adulthood as much as possible.” The removal of body hair represents young women growing up and getting ready to present themselves as desirable, more sexual beings. Lizzie felt that her first time shaving represented her “transforming my body to fit the male gaze” and was wary about telling her mother about shaving for this very reason. Others had similar experiences, in which their mothers were hesitant to let them shave, for fear that this would signal their daughters’ readiness to be viewed within the male gaze. For many of the participants’ mothers, the first act of removing body hair was analogous to their daughter presenting herself as a sexual object.

This wariness translated to many interviewees resorting to removing their body hair in secret. Brooke revealed that she started shaving her arms “behind my parents’ back”. Yasmine said she resorted to stealing her mom’s razor after she had been told she was too young to shave. And just as Lizzie felt uncomfortable telling her mother about her first time shaving, Selene shared that she “didn’t really know how to bring it up to my mom”, instead turning to her 10th-grade sister for advice. The subject of body hair removal was somewhat taboo in Selene’s household: “My mom brought up periods, but never shaving.”

Ever since these first encounters, each participant has developed her own philosophy and routine around body hair removal. Some, like Yasmine and Ava, shave every time they shower, others like Lizzie save their body hair removal for an “everything shower”, as they’re commonly called. Maya has had laser hair removal and no longer needs to worry about removing her body hair. Interestingly enough, most of the women I interviewed said they shave less in the winter months, when their bodies – and therefore their body hair – are less visible.

Visibility

This idea of visibility is deeply connected to body hair removal. Interviewees shared the main reason why they shave substantially less in the winter months: because, as Brooke put it, “no one’s gonna see my legs”. Although some of the interviewees said that they shave pretty consistently because they like the way their body feels, or they don’t like the way the stubble feels when they let their hair grow out too much, most of their comments came back to visibility. During our interview, Daniella was very candid about this topic: “In relation to my skin, I feel like [my hair] is very visible, like the contrast almost. I feel like I’m more inclined to remove it when it’s visible because I think more people would notice and I’m concerned about what other people see.” That a woman’s body hair – in specific places – could be viewed by herself, or others, is an unthinkable notion for many. There are women who skip days at the beach because they don’t have time to get their pubic hair waxed. There are women who are late to important events because they have to shave their legs before they leave. There are women who refuse to raise their arms in public because they forgot to shave their armpits. Somehow, women today feel like their body hair is a barrier to entering society.

But there is an important caveat to this rule. Women’s body hair is not accepted in society, if it can be seen, in the wrong places. Blonde hair does not need to be shaved, women can get away with not shaving their legs as frequently when they wear pants in the winter, and dark, shapely eyebrows are worshipped, as long as they don’t grow into a unibrow, of course. When it comes to body hair, it’s allowed if it’s a certain color, doesn’t create too much of a contrast with a woman’s skin, or if it’s in a place on the body that we as a society deem valid.

Maya, whose family is from Colombia, told me that her cousins used to dye their thigh hair blonde instead of shaving it: “They would always shave from the knee down but then like thigh-up, would never shave and they would just dye it blonde.” Body hair becomes a problem when it’s visible.

Cleanliness

When body hair *is* visible to society, it’s often deemed gross or represents a woman’s laziness or inability to keep herself clean. “Body hair equals unhygienic”, Lizzie told me matter-of-factly during our interview. When I asked Ava what she thinks an unshaven woman represents, she said things like “feral”, “doesn’t care about her hygiene”, “lives in the woods” and “dirty”. This was a theme that manifested itself across many, if not most, of the interviews. Every single participant alluded to this idea that body hair was in some way unclean, and over half the interviewees were explicit in their beliefs that body hair is synonymous with dirty and unkemptness. They talked about how an unshaved woman is often viewed as not caring about hygiene nor interested in being seen as desirable.

Not only did the participants say they feel as though society views women who do not remove their body hair as dirty, they themselves feel somewhat unclean or unkempt if they do not remove their most visible body hair. Fiona described herself feeling “embarrassed that if I don’t do it [shaving], then it’s like, ‘Oh, she’s not keeping up with herself, she’s unkempt.’”

Fiona and I went on to have a fascinating conversation expanding upon this topic, comparing body hair to acne or brushing your teeth. If you don’t brush your teeth, she said, people will think “you do you but you’re letting yourself go”, and it shows how “disciplined you are at taking care of yourself”. The same goes for body hair removal for women. While it’s not a necessity that a woman removes her body hair, the presence of body hair somehow communicates undesirability and an inability to take care of oneself. Clean teeth and no body hair are the expectations in social situations, and they somehow come to reflect the overall nature of a woman. There are, of course, a number of differences between brushing teeth and removing body hair, but the sentiments are indeed quite similar. A seemingly insignificant part of a woman’s body somehow represents her as a whole and communicates who she is to society.

Interestingly enough, many participants expressed that the dirty feeling surrounding body hair also made them feel less feminine. “I have to shave in order for people to think I’m feminine, and that’s the only reason why I’m doing it,” Krystal confessed. Daniella said that part of her motivation for removing her body hair was to not “be seen as like... manly.” When Fiona first realized the existence of her body hair, she said she felt “manly and dirty. It wasn’t a good feeling.” For these women, dirtiness and lack of femininity are both viewed as negative traits, ones that can be avoided by removing their body hair. Having less hair on their bodies makes many participants feel more feminine, a feeling that is related to desirability, confidence, and comfortability.

Desirability

In every single interview I conducted, the conversation around cleanliness always turned into one about desirability. “It’s crazy that shaving makes you feel, like, prettier and cleaner,” Selene said. There is something about having little to no body hair that makes women feel more desirable and causes them to believe that others find them more desirable as a result of their body hair removal. And the reverse is also true: “Everyone agrees, it’s the common consensus, that body hair is undesirable,” Jessica told me matter-of-factly.

Whether they identified their preferred partner as male or female, the interviewees divulged that they feel sexier and more sexually liberated when their pubic hair is removed. When she first began shaving, Lizzie said that although she knew that removing her body hair was akin to “oversexualizing myself”, she felt “okay with it because I was like ‘well, I want a boy to like me!’”

Multiple interviewees mentioned the idea that society seems to infantilize women’s pubic regions. 7 out of 10 interviewees spoke about how creepy, weird, and concerning it is that people prefer women’s pubic regions to look as bare, as they did pre-puberty. “A vagina with no pubic hair is a fucking pubescent vagina,” Lizzie said, “I got vagina hair in middle school. So if you’re telling me a man is attracted to no vaginal hair, that means he’s attracted to an 11-year old.” Fiona described it as “lowkey pedophilia”. Ava commented on how strange it is that her confidence “derives from feeling like a 12 year old.”

And yet, they all still continue to remove body hair from their pubic regions and attribute that removal to feelings of confidence. Many of these expectations come from what people see in the media: porn, movies and television, models, social media. Both men and women see hairless women in the media, reinforcing the notion that women are more desirable and sexy when they do not have hair anywhere on their bodies.

Male Gaze

One topic that naturally emerged from these discussions about desirability is women removing body hair specifically for men. 7 out of 10 of the interviewees explicitly stated that at least part of the reason they remove their hair was for men. Jessica told me candidly: “I am presenting myself for boys and what’s deemed as more appealing in our society is that you’re well-shaven.” Almost every participant said that having less body hair, especially in the genital region, makes them feel more confident in a sexual setting.

The majority of my interviewees said that they feel like there is an expectation when entering unfamiliar sexual situations to have their body hair removed. “I would view shaving or removing my body hair as part of getting ready for something with a man,” Daniella said. In fact, Ava shared that she once “stopped physical intimacy because I [hadn’t] shaved.” Evidently, the presence of body hair can even serve as a barrier to sexual activity. The confidence, sexiness, and desirability that is associated with having little to no body hair directly links to sexual function and comfortability.

However, many interviewees revealed that despite these expectations about body hair, many of their past male sexual partners did not particularly care whether they had body hair or not. While describing one of her past sexual encounters, Selene revealed that the boy told her he would “prefer it to be shaved but it doesn’t matter.” Now, she doesn’t think her current boyfriend cares too much. Ava said that when she asked her high school boyfriend if he cared about her shaving, he responded “No, not really.”

And yet, all of the interviewees, including both Selene and Ava, still approach sexual encounters believing that they must remove all or most of their body hair in order to meet basic expectations and be viewed as desirable. This is especially true for those encounters in which interviewees do not have a close or long-lasting relationship with the other person.

Relationships

One of the questions I posed to participants was whether body hair is viewed differently in different relationship contexts, such as long versus short term or with men versus women.

Daniella said that if she was in a relationship, over time she would stop putting in as much effort with shaving “because I know this person likes me for other things.” Conversely, Yasmine mused that with a short-term hookup, “it’s like you don’t know where their head’s at, you don’t know who they’re going to talk to so I think you still want to have a good impression almost.”

There appears to be more pressure to remove body hair in the first couple of sexual encounters because many women believe it’s one less thing to be embarrassed about or to be talked about afterwards. In awkward situations such as first time hookups or the discomfort that goes along with an undefined relationship, playing it “safe” and conforming to societal expectations by removing body hair makes sense. “If I’m going to have a one night stand with someone, then I need to be shaved,” Maya said. When there are so many other unknowns, it’s logical that women would want to feel as desirable and comfortable as possible. As relationships progress and women feel more comfortable with their partner (and there are less unknowns within the relationship), there is less pressure to shave, wax, laser, etc. Krystal told me, “If it’s with a guy, 100% I will be shaving for those first few times. But if I’m dating a guy for months and months, I’m not going to care as much – they will see me in every shape and form of hairiness.” This comment perfectly encapsulates the idea that expectations around body hair removal start to fade away as the relationship goes beyond being just physical.

Sexuality

Of course, for women who are not just attracted to men, body hair removal is much more nuanced. “I think it is more of a female gaze type of thing to have body hair. Definitely not male gaze,” Yasmine said. Half of the participants of this study identified themselves as bisexual, each providing unique insights into the differences in body hair removal habits.

Many of the patterns in heterosexual encounters remained true in homosexual encounters, including that most people do not actually have strong preferences when it comes to body hair and body hair removal. Krystal revealed that if she’s with a girl, “I really don’t care if she’s shaved anywhere or not” and Jessica said both men and women she’s been with didn’t care what she did with her body hair.

However, participants revealed that they do feel more pressure to remove their body hair when being sexually involved with men than with women. Selene argued that “it’s just less expected if I was to be with a woman, like that’s just not as much as the expectation as with a guy.” Yasmine offered that she’d “probably do the same but I’d emphasize it more with a man”. Krystal said that with the “women-on-women dynamic, it’s not as prioritized. It’s very much a male-female heterosexual relationship.” This goes back to the societal belief that men must care more about body hair in sexual encounters. Or, alternatively, perhaps it’s that women think that men care more.

This could be as a result, again, of the porn industry and how it influences men in particular, and their sexual expectations and preferences. It could also be because women can empathize with other women when it comes to the struggle that comes with body hair and its removal. In a relationship with another woman, it may be much easier for them to come to a mutual understanding to stop removing their body hair as a result of their shared dissatisfaction with these practices. Similarly, women may also just feel more comfortable around other women. The fear that Yasmine brought up, about not knowing where a person’s head is at in a hookup situation, might not be as relevant when it comes to a hookup with another woman. The same uncomfortability that arises in a short term relationship context might be heightened even further

with a man, pressuring women even more to ensure that they appear presentable and desirable by removing their body hair.

Race

Several of the women I interviewed were pushed to start shaving for the first time as a result of racial norms or outright prejudice. Brooke felt pressure to shave as early as elementary school because her Hispanic heritage caused her to have darker hair than her white peers. She said she was “definitely more aware of it”. Maya, who is also Latina, was only in first grade when one of her white friends made a comment about her darker leg hair: “I had this one friend and we were just like all sitting there, it was either at recess or something, and we all had our legs out [...] and I just remember someone made a comment about my leg hair.” Both girls wanted to fit in with their white peers and sought to get rid of their darker body hair as soon as possible. Maya had her first laser hair removal when she was 12.

On the other side of the spectrum, Fiona comes from Korean heritage, which predisposes her to have less body hair. The body hair she has is thinner and less dark than other races, which she said makes her feel “almost more inherently feminine because I’m less hairy”, a notion that was also reflected in a number of other interviews. However, Fiona also told me that there are some kinds of body hair, such as eyebrows and eyelashes, in which her lack of hair presents a problem in terms of societal expectations. She said that Asian women like herself tend to adopt beauty standards “in terms of body hair, based off of, like, European beauty standards”, despite not having the genetic ability to necessarily live up to those standards. Although Fiona might be seen as “blessed” for not having very visible body hair on her legs or arms, she revealed that she is still self-conscious about her other body hair as a result of the Eurocentric expectations of body hair. Fiona’s commentary reveals, once again, how society values body hair on certain parts of women’s bodies and abhors it on others.

Selene also expressed how she is conscious of her body hair for this reason. She identifies as East Asian and feels as though she has “more hair than the average East Asian”, which makes it difficult for her to talk to family members about body hair removal. Because of the expectations surrounding body hair in her race, she felt out of place as she was discovering her body hair during puberty. Throughout Selene’s interview, she continuously referenced having to Google questions she had about body hair or experimenting on her own with various body hair removal products.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is Jessica, whose Jewish heritage means that her female family members have dark and coarse body hair, and therefore engage in extensive conversations about their hair and how they go about removing it: “I’ve spoken about it with my grandmother a lot because the women in our family are just hairy.”

These racial and ethnic expectations around body hair directly impact how women are confronted with conversations about body hair and body hair removal – or how they must figure it out on their own, without guidance or support.

Looking Ahead

One of the most notable findings was brought to light by a question that I posed to the participants at the end of each interview. This question was posed more or less as follows: “In your opinion, what’s the future of body hair removal? Will it always exist or are we moving towards becoming more accepting of female body hair?” [Appendix C] Although the individual

responses brought up various nuances, not a single participant said she could imagine a world in which women do not remove their body hair.

However, many interviewees expressed their hope that society is beginning – slowly but surely – to progress towards more acceptance of body hair. Lizzie reflected on seeing an ad for a razor company in which women were featured having underarm and pubic hair. The ad encouraged women to use razors in a way that works for them. This is a radical notion, especially in the media, and might be the start of a societal recognition that women do, in fact, have body hair, despite media portrayals of the contrary. And although it is a small minority, more and more women are opting out of shaving altogether.

A lot of the interviewees alluded to a generational shift, in which people in every new generation are becoming more accepting of women's body hair. Jessica said that she hopes "our daughters care a little bit less about shaving." Ava talked about "raising my kids [...] to respect body hair and just know it's a natural part and not force them to shave." In response to this final question, many of the interviewees seemed almost wistful, trying to imagine a world in which they did not have to spend time, money, energy and stress on body hair removal.

And yet, despite this wish for a future of no body hair removal, none of them expressed the desire to buck society's expectations and stop shaving. Brooke applauded women who do not shave, but couldn't imagine being one of them. "Not me, but kudos to y'all I guess," she joked. Only Krystal stood out as a kind of revolutionary, declaring that she would happily stop shaving... as long as she wasn't alone in doing so: "And if we were to [stop shaving] and have a boycott of shaving, first off we'd be saving hella money and time and blood, everything we'd be saving, so why not?" Although Krystal was the most vocal, this idea is one that was reflected in almost every single one of the interviews. All of the participants said they understand the burdens that body hair removal creates for them, but can't imagine defying societal expectations and letting their body hair grow and become visible.

In many ways, it comes down to women's desire to conform. Fiona summarized this idea: "Nobody wants to be different, in a sense. And it's almost like, yeah I could go my whole life without shaving to make a point, but for me, there's no – this is bad – but for me what's the point of doing it? Like I would be happier and more comfortable if I adopted whatever mindset the people around me are." Although she prefaced this thought with how "bad" it sounds, this was also the perspective of every single one of the other interviewees in this study. They told me that they remove their body hair because they don't want to stand out or be different. It's so much easier to buy all of the shaving products, take extra time in the shower, occasionally cut yourself shaving, and pay money to get waxed or get laser than to be viewed as dirty, undesirable, or outside of societal norms.

Conclusion

Body hair and body hair removal are subjects of taboo. Rarely do women, among themselves or with men, discuss such issues in depth outside of offhand remarks that they "need to shave." Many of the women who I interviewed were talking about these topics for the first time, having felt uncomfortable with their mothers, other family members, or friends. The importance of discussing body hair and body hair removal cannot be understated. In talking about these subjects, women are able to open up about their ideas surrounding femininity, self-confidence, how they view their bodies, sexual preferences, and so much more.

Based on the responses to my final question on the future of body hair removal, it does not appear as though we as a society are moving toward a time when women do not feel pressure

to remove their body hair. It would be unrealistic, in my opinion, to hope for a world in which body hair removal no longer exists. The notion that less body hair is equivalent to more desirability is deeply entrenched in our society. However, by opening up spaces in which women can talk about body hair and all of the baggage that comes along with it, we can start to peel away at the cognitive dissonance that so many encounter.

If we begin to recognize that the removal of body hair is inherently tied to misogyny, racism, classism, and so much more, we can start to break out of the societal pressure we all face. Although many women, including myself, will continue to shave, wax, laser, and use whatever other methods to remove body hair, that does not mean we can slowly make our way toward progress. Instead of striving toward something unattainable, we can take small steps to give women more of a choice in how they approach their body hair. Our goal should be to accept and welcome women who wish to break free from societal norms and stop removing their body hair. Our goal should be to celebrate our differences and not shy away from those who have the courage to be different. Our goal should be to include everyone, men and women, in conversations about body hair and body hair removal. Our goal should be to educate future generations that the presence or absence of body hair on a woman means nothing about her hygiene or her character. Hair is simply hair, and it does not need to have any sort of meaning, nor does it say anything about a woman: who she is, how she acts, what she does or doesn't do with her body.

References

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Appendix A

Recruitment Script

I will be texting participants to ask them if they are interested in participating in my research. I will text them the following message:

“Hi! I’m working on an interview research project that I want to publish in a journal about body hair and body hair removal. I want to interview friends about their experiences with shaving, body hair, etc. and was wondering if you might be interested in being interviewed? It would probably be around a 30 minute interview, I’ll be recording it and will show you the questions and walk you through the process beforehand! You’ll be kept anonymous in the actual research paper. Let me know if you’re interested at all!”

Appendix B

Information Sheet

What is this study?

This is an interview-based research study/project focused on body hair and body hair removal. I will be interviewing participants on a voluntary basis (ie: if you do not feel comfortable participating, you do not have to do so). I will then be taking what I learn from interviewing and writing a research article, to be published in undergraduate research journals later this year.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how college-aged female-identifying students feel about body hair – their own, their peers', their family members' – and how they have been taught to conceptualize body hair removal. I wish to examine the ways in which young women view body hair and how it affects their self-confidence and self-worth. I also hope to discover how they think other people in society view women's body hair and methods of body hair removal.

What will happen during this study?

Participants will be initially asked to participate in the interview project via text. If they consent, they will coordinate a time for the interview to take place with me. We will meet in a quiet, private space where I will present them with this very information sheet. After reading through the sheet, they will again give their consent to being interviewed, after which I will begin recording. The interview will occur, and then afterwards, I will listen to these recordings and pull quotes from them while I write my final research paper.

What's the time commitment?

The interview itself should take around 30 minutes, but can go shorter or longer depending on how willing and comfortable the participant is to answer and elaborate on questions asked. After the interview is completed, there will be no further time commitment required of participants.

How will my information be shared?

The interview will be recorded using the voice recording app on my phone. After recording the interviews on my personal phone, I will transfer them to a secure Box folder and delete them from my personal phone. After the paper is written, I will then permanently delete them from the Box folder. In terms of how I will use the content from the interview, I plan to aggregate my findings and make broader generalizations about how college-aged women view body hair and body hair removal. I will not identify the names of any participants, although I may choose to reveal certain information (such as sexual preferences and/or race/religion/identity) in my argument, but this information will not reveal the identity of any of the interviewees.

If I have any questions, who should I contact?

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx: (973) 908-0249, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Elizabeth Covington: elizabeth.covington@vanderbilt.edu

Vanderbilt IRB: (615) 322-2918

Appendix C

Interview Guide

I will start off the interview by walking the participant through an overview of the process. I will present them with the information sheet and ask if they have any questions about the sheet. If they are comfortable with the sheet, I will ensure that they are comfortable proceeding with the interview, including the beginning of the recording. I will then begin to record the conversation and present participants with these questions, not necessarily in this order or with all of these questions being asked. I will let the conversation flow and ask questions based on what participants have to say. I will also periodically check in with participants to ensure they are comfortable, and remind them that they do not have to answer a question if they do not want to do so, and can ask me to stop recording at any time.

Interview Questions:

1. When did you first become aware of your body hair? Why?
2. How do you feel about your body hair? And/other people's body hair?
3. What's your relationship with shaving?
 - a. When did you first start shaving? Do you remember if there was a specific reason why?
4. What about waxing?
 - a. When did you first start waxing? Do you remember if there was a specific reason why?
5. How do you think your identity (race/ethnicity/religion/sexuality/gender/etc.) has influenced your relationship with body hair?
 - a. Ask specific questions about specific identity factors (don't loop them all into one question)
6. Have you ever had someone comment on your body hair? Or been around someone commenting on another woman's body hair? What happened?
7. Have you ever had a romantic partner react to your body hair? If so, what happened? How did it affect you?
8. Do you view body hair differently in different relationship contexts? Ie: in a long-term relationship versus casual sex?
9. In your experience, have men and women in your life had differing perceptions and beliefs about body hair? How so?
10. What are your thoughts on the relationship between body hair and beauty?
11. One thing I've learned in my Sex and Society class is that body hair was actually stigmatized and deemed "animalistic" by white European colonizers, in an effort to affirm the superiority of their European white women over African women. What do you think of this information?
12. Have you ever had a conversation about body hair with friends or family?
13. In your opinion, what's the future of body hair removal? Will it always exist or are we moving towards becoming more accepting of female body hair?
14. Anything else you'd like to add?

After the interview, I will cease recording and ask the participants if they have any questions about the process, or if there is anything that they said in the interview that they would like to be exempt from my research.