

"Negotiating the hairless ideal in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Choice, awareness, complicity, and resistance in women's accounts of body hair removal"

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Abstract

Hair removal amongst Western women is ubiquitous, and research continues to highlight the ongoing conformity of almost all women with hair removal practices. Often women are presented as either cultural dupes, following the expectations of the Western hairless ideal without question, or highly engaged participants in the rigours of beauty work, using it for their own agentic purposes. This paper seeks to explore the various ways that younger women (18-35) made sense of their own and others' hair removal practices. We report on a thematic analysis of data generated from an online (mostly) qualitative survey with 299 female-identified respondents. Four themes were constructed from these data: (1) women should do what they want with their body hair, (2) removing hair is socially shaped, (3) begrudging complicity, and (4) resistance to hair removal norms takes a particular kind of woman. We discuss the ways in which women described their practices and thinking where they seemed simultaneously complicit with and resistant to idealised notions of feminine embodiment.

Keywords

'Beautifying' practices, young women, embodiment, qualitative survey, thematic analysis

Identifying hair removal as a persistently normative and mundane pressure for women is not a new premise. Research since the 1970s has demonstrated that leg and underarm hair removal is ubiquitous in the West (e.g., Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Fahs, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Hershman, 1974; Herzig, 2015; Terry & Braun, 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, 2004). It is hair's presence on the female body that has become worthy of comment, rather than its absence. Indeed, recent movements among younger women to retain underarm or leg hair have received out of proportion publicity (e.g., Agence France-Presse, 2016). These occasions suggest that inflexibility of social norms around female hair removal is never more evident than when broken – reactions to these 'violations,' especially on the 'public' bodies of actresses or models, tend to be patterned and can be extreme (e.g., media scrutiny of Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé, Drew Barrymore, Tatiana Maslany). Lola Kirke indicated that her visible underarm hair at the 2017 Golden Globes had resulted in *death threats*. Further, these women are *easily recalled* as flouting convention, especially when their hairy underarms have been visible in public.

Basow (1991) coined the term 'hairless ideal' describing this phenomenon, an ideal that seems to be solidifying and expanding over time (e.g., Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013; Herbenick, Hensel, Smith, Schick, Reece, Sanders, Fortenberry, 2013; Herzig, 2015; Terry & Braun, 2013). The hairless ideal is part of a broader and larger dictate that women's bodies are unacceptable in their natural state, and must be altered (Kwan & Trautner, 2009), with depilation being the most common form of alteration. In this way, the 'natural' is framed as 'unnatural' and vice versa. This is reinforced by the invisibility of hair removal practices – it is effects, rather than processes, of women's hair removal that are seen in public space (Rice, 2009). In this context, hair on women's bodies is associated with affects such as disgust (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) and shame (Fahs, 2012; Rice, 2009), rather than the indifference, ambivalence, or indeed the *flexibility* of choice (cisgender) men now seem to have with their body hair and its removal (Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016). Women's bodies must always and everywhere be hairless; men's bodies can be hairy (within limits), or not, natural, trimmed, or fully depilated. Despite evidence of 'smooth' male bodies being increasingly idealised, (some) male body hair is still reportedly acceptable, even desirable – men have 'options' (see Terry & Braun, 2016).

For women, decisions to depilate or not have been described as unequally weighted (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), with 'hairiness' risking social castigation and sanctions (Fahs, 2013). Beauty work, the practices women engage in to achieve approximation to the feminine ideal, is often constructed as essential to womanhood; women begin engaging in the disciplines of plucking, shaving, and alteration from a young age (Bordo, 1993; Herzig, 2015; Lorber & Moore, 2007). Women's bodies are affected, influenced, modified, developed, and mediated by sociocultural norms and representations (Braun et al., 2013), and "through routine, habitual activity, [women's] bodies learn... which gestures are forbidden and which are required" (Bordo 1993, p. 6). Attractiveness, more than any other feature for women, is associated with intelligence, competence, and even increases likelihood of acquittal from serious crimes (Kwan & Trautner, 2009).

This feminine ideal, while continuing to be defined narrowly, varies over time and context. What *has not* changed in the last several decades is the absence of body hair as a core component of that ideal (Herzig, 2015). As a result, women seeking to embody their understanding of the ideal are homogenised, reducing diversity in embodied self-expression, and certainly hair (non)removal practices – for instance, to small differences in pubic 'hairstyles' (e.g., landing strips, shapes, or bare) (Li & Braun, 2016), or a need to keep minor rebellions hidden (e.g., wearing long trousers or stockings to hide unshaven legs). Suggesting that almost all women in Western high-income countries are complicit in reproducing these norms has some credibility, with Western research indicating that ~99% of women remove hair at some point (Herzig, 2015; Stone, Graham, & Baysal,

2017; Terry & Braun, 2013). This has primarily been underarm and leg hair removal, which have been well-established as (modern) practices for nearly a century, since the safety razor's introduction in 1915 (Herzig, 2009; Herzig, 2015). In Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ), hair removal data give 97% for the lower leg and 96% for the underarms (Terry & Braun, 2013). The relatively recent 'surge' in pubic hair removal illustrates increasing hair removal expectation – with very high percentages of (particularly younger) women engaging in at least some pubic hair removal (Herbenick et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2017; Terry & Braun, 2013). Stone et al. (2017) reported that 83% of a sample of US college-aged women removed most or all of their pubic hair. Similarly, Terry and Braun's (2013) A/NZ study reported 86% of their female sample had removed pubic hair in their lifetime (69% reported 'current' removal).

Despite high levels of conformity to the hairless ideal among Western women, it is still often presented as a free choice (Braun et al., 2013; Li & Braun, 2016). Research indicates that women often report little impact of social pressures limiting their agency – seeing other women's choices as constrained, but rarely their own (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). Further, the costs of hair removal continue to have little impact on women's choices. These costs are not only financial, but are evidenced in the increase in hair removal related injuries over time, particularly to the groin area, and rising viral infections such as *molluscum contagiosum* (Williamson, 2015). Despite these contradictions, choice, and taking individual responsibility for those choices, remains the dominant explanatory framework for the beauty practices women engage in (Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). This fits within a wider neoliberal discourse, where individuals, rather than social contexts or forces, are constructed as responsible for the practices, experiences and outcomes of their lives, via the choices they make (Gill & Donaghue, 2013). Layered over this, is what has been described as a postfeminist sensibility (McRobbie, 2004), where women are positioned as fully agentic, via earlier feminist successes. Via these mechanisms, young women can be understood as engaged in an entrepreneurial, inner-directed, self-competition of continual 'improvement' (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017; McRobbie, 2015).

In explaining hair removal (and other embodied feminising practices), women tend to be constructed in one of two ways: (1) as passive cultural dupes, embodying and enacting the expectations of a dominating society, or (2) as highly agentic, engaged *participants* in the rigours of beauty work, using it for their own purposes and to achieve particular ends (see Crann, Jenkins, Money, & O'Doherty, 2017; Gill & Donaghue, 2013 for more detail of these constructions). These sorts of portrayals elide the opportunity for simultaneous compliance with and resistance to social norms, accounts that encapsulate a nuanced and contradictory subjectivity. It is this complex, contradictory, solidified, *and* contestable meaning-making around women's hair removal that we demonstrate in this paper. We analyse women's accounts in an attempt to make sense of the apparent intensification of the 'hairless ideal' expected of women, despite many other gains in women's rights, which should, ostensibly, offer women *more* 'freedom of choice.' Our specific objectives were to (a) understand the ways in which young women (18–35 years) within A/NZ constructed the cultural salience of their own and other women's body hair and hair removal practices, and (b) to identify patterns within these constructions that enable and constrain certain ways of being for women.

Method

This paper analyses qualitative data generated through an online survey on the topic of body hair views and practices (see also Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016). The 'Body Hair and its Removal and Alteration' (BHRA) survey contained a number of qualitative questions related specifically to women's hair practices in the A/NZ context. Our approach to research design has been described as a 'Big Q' approach to qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017) – in contrast to a 'small q' orientation, where research concerns (e.g., reliability, avoiding bias, inter-rater reliability, generalisability) stem from alignment with a 'scientific' (post)positivist-empiricist quantitative orientation.

A total of 1000 men and women provided some data or began the survey; excluding those solely providing demographic information and/or who did not meet the selection criteria for participation resulted in 584 completed surveys. Of these, roughly equal numbers identified as female (50.4%) or male (48.8%); three identified as other. We analyse data from the 299 respondents who identified as female. The mean age of the female sample was 24 (SD: 5.44) and the mean time spent living in New Zealand was 21 years (SD: 7.73). Ethnically, 75% identified as Pākehāⁱ/New Zealand European/Other 'white,' 11% as Asian (or of Asian ancestry), 5.5% as Māori (or of Māori ancestry), 3% as Pasifika (or of Pasifika ancestry), <1% as Middle Eastern. (Note that participants could identify with more than one ethnicity.) Heterosexually-identified participants made up 79.9% of the sample; gay-identified 10.3%; bisexual-identified 6.7%; other-identified 2.7%; lesbian-identified 0.3%. In terms of relationship status, 40% were single; 27% partnered; 20% married; 5% 'in a relationship'; 3% engaged; 2% de factoⁱⁱ; 1% other. All geographic regions in A/NZ were represented.

The survey was a mixed, but qualitative dominated, design (see Terry & Braun, 2017), with questions and structure developed from the second author's previous hair removal research survey tool, and surveys made available by other hair researchers (Basow, 1991; Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). The survey was subjected to peer review by a group of expert hair researchers and underwent piloting ($N = 65$), followed by refinement. The final survey contained 92 questions, distributed across four sections: (1) Demographic information (18 questions), (2) Body Hair and Men (19 questions), (3) Body Hair and Women (19 questions), and (4) Your Own Body Hair and Practices (36 questions). The questions that generated the *majority* of data in the current analysis included: "How do you feel about your body hair in general?", "Do you think it's socially acceptable for women *not* to remove body hair?" "What do you think of women removing body hair?", "What would you think if you saw a woman with hairy legs?", and "Do your current body hair alteration/removal practices fit with how you like your body to look?" Data for this paper were extracted from across approximately 25 questions.

We recruited participants using a variety of methods: advertising via posters (in cafes, bars and on university campuses); a Facebook page for the project; a national media press-release; and word of mouth and snowballing using the researchers' personal networks, which included using 'recruiters'ⁱⁱⁱ to promote the study. Recruitment materials noted that participants could enter a draw following survey completion to win a NZ\$200 voucher; only a minority of those who completed the survey entered the draw. The survey was delivered online through SurveyMonkey™. No identifying information was collected, and the survey was encrypted. The project received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

This paper reports our analysis of data about female hair removal by female participants (see also, Terry & Braun, 2013). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006; Terry et al., 2017) method for thematic analysis, focusing on both semantic (i.e., closer to participants' language) and latent (i.e., informed by underlying concepts) features of the data. Analysis was situated within a critical realist ontology, which allows exploration of the meanings, experiences, and material implications of body hair and body hair removal practices, while recognising the mediating power of language, ideology and social context in producing these, and the impossibility of ever accessing decontextualized or incontrovertible truth (Willig, 2013). Using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, we developed codes and themes from the data content. In practice, this meant familiarisation of the survey responses through reading and re-reading, then recursive coding of the data, where codes were returned to and revised. Examples of semantic codes included: 'it's about choice,' 'body hair as disgusting,' and 'smooth skin looks 'nicer;'' examples of latent codes included: 'liberal tolerance,' 'neoliberal responsibility bind,' and 'privileged bodies.' Codes were then clustered together into candidate themes, to give some indication of their prevalence, and test their value in giving an overall account of the data, and whether patterns described were evident across most or all of the dataset (see Terry et al., 2017). The coding process was led by the first author, following initial coding by the third author. Theme construction was iterative and consultative, with the first and

second authors meeting regularly throughout this process to discuss the findings, and to help test the interpretations developed. Each theme cohered around a central organising concept, the key idea that underpins the thematic explanation of the data (Terry et al., 2017). The excerpts presented in the analysis are reproduced ‘as written’ (e.g., spelling or grammar errors have not been changed); excerpts are not necessarily the full responses provided, but have been selected to illustrate the theme under discussion.

Results and Discussion

We generated four salient themes related to accounts of women’s body hair within the dataset: (1) women should do what they want with their body hair, (2) the imperative to remove hair is socially shaped, (3) a begrudging complicity with social norms, and (4) resistance to hair removal norms takes a particular kind of woman. The first two themes were the most prevalent, with the third and fourth themes less common, but still strongly evident across the data set. The overall ‘story’ of the dataset was captured within these four themes.

“Women should do what they want with their body hair” – Choice as an interpretative lens

The first theme we generated was built upon repeated references to women’s hair removal as a product of their free will. These responses were often deployed as if there were a number of possible expressions of female embodiment within society, with complete hair removal simply being one option among many:

“Each to their own - I don't care what other people do” (P237, 25, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

“Women should do what they want with their body hair. It's their body, not mine” (P225, 21, Fijian/Irish, pansexual, partnered)

“Whatever makes them happy” (P146, 24, Pākehā, bisexual, partnered)

Responses such as these capture both a liberal tolerant individualism (I have no right to an opinion on what someone else does) and the notion of free individual choice based on ‘preference’ or ‘happiness’. Underpinning this is the idea of individuals as choosing agents, fully responsible for their own choices. Such framings construct depilation as a practice outside formal social organisation, situating it instead as the product of an internal disposition toward hair removal.

The phrases “each to their own,” “personal preference,” or “it’s up to them” were common throughout the survey responses. P237’s positioning of herself as indifferent to the body work of other women (“I don’t care”) captured the explanatory power of choice – as if she (and others) could make decisions about their body practices without influencing, or being influenced. Given the strong associations between women’s retention of body hair and the affective response of disgust both in Western societies (see, for instance, Fahs, 2014; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004), and more specifically within our dataset, P237’s affective location seems unusual, and contradictory. Yet we argue it demonstrates the power of choice as an ‘interpretative lens’ within Western societies, especially in relation to women’s (normative) body practices (Braun et al., 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). What seemed evident in almost all of the women’s responses is that they began (in a relatively *a priori* fashion) as implicitly, and often explicitly, answerable to choice as a sense-making framework. It seemed that whatever their answer, and seemingly irrespective of question, the notion that body hair removal or retention is a free choice had to be negotiated.

The interpretative lens of choice had a strong presence across the dataset, through which even the more socially-oriented accounts were viewed. Many participants wrote responses that identified the normative status of body hair removal within society, but were still shaped by the language of individual choice or ‘personal preference’:

“I feel it [hair removal] is normal and varies greatly from woman to woman based on personal preference” (P490, 28, Caucasian, heterosexual, married)

“Body hair on women is completely their choice - however leg hair and facial hair (some women have slight upper lip hair that is visible) is *sometimes socially unacceptable*” (P110, 18, Pākehā, heterosexual, partnered. Italics ours)

Despite some variation in hair removal at particular body sites (the pubic region, for instance, is still marked by (some) variability, see Butler, Smith, Collazo, Caltabiano, & Herbenick, 2015; Terry & Braun, 2013), normative pressures to remove visible female body hair are persistent and pervasive (see Fahs, 2013; Herbenick et al., 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Although accounts like P490’s suggest individual choice trumps normative expectation, the remarkable consistency with which women remove body hair – both in terms of location and amount of hair removal – suggests normative pressures work to produce ‘preference’ and practice. Knowing that one’s choices match those of others might seem to offer a confidence that one has made the correct decision or taken up the correct subject position within neoliberal discourse. This confidence might promote a sense of desirability, or at minimum, a lack of self-consciousness for women. Negative alternatives (e.g., a lack of self-confidence) might be constructed as a simple consequence of poor choices within this rubric.

Although many participants simply presented this (somewhat) paradoxical juxtaposition of ideas about why women remove body hair without any explanation, others worked to manage an apparent tension between choice and social acceptability, couching their answers in terms of an idealised version of female attractiveness. This would often be repackaged as the ‘proper alternative.’ That is, in a sea of possible choices, this is the only one a woman would choose if she were invested in being conventionally attractive. For instance, when asked why women might remove their hair, P502 responded:

“Tend to look nicer without, but it should be a personal choice that woman could feel confident about keeping body hair or removing body hair as they choose” (P502, 21, New Zealand European, asexual, single).

We highlight two assumptions that underpin this response: (1) the absence of hair on a woman’s body “looks nicer” than its presence, and (2) that there is an imperative for women to be confident. Being ‘true to yourself’ is an important Western value, and this quote seems to capture the importance of this notion in projecting confidence, no matter what ‘choice’ is made. Hidden behind the imperative to be confident are the “interactional sanctions” described by Toerien and Wilkinson (2004: 85), which ensure ‘confidence’ is more straightforward when following socially mandated norms (see also Basow, 1991; Fahs, 2013). Some women did identify this problematic within their responses, implicitly acknowledging “society’s” constraints on individual choice. For instance,

“Women should have a choice whether or not they have body hair and society should not pressure women to remove it” (P362, 18, Chinese, heterosexual, single)

Free choice permeated the survey responses – as an explanation and an ideal to comply with – acting as an interpretative lens through which contemporary sense-making around bodies and selves is constructed by individuals (Stuart & Donaghue, 2014; Braun, 2009). However, despite the pervasiveness of the choice lens and its sociocultural power, it was not the only, nor the most compelling, story within our data. Indeed, large numbers of women responded in ways that suggested active engagement with their body hair practices and the normative pressures that produce them (Bordo, 1993), often critiquing the social influence on theirs and others’ practices.

“We have been entirely socialised to think this way, of course.” – Awareness of social influence

The second theme examines women’s articulated awareness of the influencing power of social norms. Rather than the stereotypical cultural dupe, accepting hair removal as unquestionable, or treating social norms as defining *other* women’s choices rather than their own (as per Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), many of our participants accounted for body hair and hair removal, *including* their own, in ways that were critical, thoughtful, and emphasised the social in the formation of their

practices and preferences. Social influence as a thematic operated strongly in many respondent's accounts – seemingly irrespective of their age.

For example, non-removal of hair for women was presented by participants as hard to comprehend. When asked to explain, participant's answers continually emphasised the *socially produced* notions of normative feminine embodiment:

It's strange to think about body hair on women because it is so socially ingrained that women are only supposed to have hair on their head (P8, 18, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

I know that body hair is a natural thing. Yet I have been conditioned by society's norms to think of it as not a good thing to show (P39, 23, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

Such responses were expressed by participants across all demographics, and seemed to be persuasive. Ideas about 'attractiveness' for instance, were constructed as socially learned and socially produced rather than natural:

It just doesn't look good. We have been entirely socialised to think this way of course (P210, 35, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

We grow up and quickly learn that excess hair, or hair in the wrong places is undesirable. (P353, 20, Pākehā, bisexual, single).

The pronoun "we" was used repeatedly in these sorts of formations, indicating participant positioning of women as a group being subject to these 'forces.' Participants commonly used lay psychology concepts like "learning" or "socialisation" to explain how social norms became embedded as personal preference, especially with regard to the imperative of looking 'nice.' Some provided detailed illustrations of the socialisation process, referring to family members or friends as providing examples to follow as a normal part of the growing up to which P353 refers. The following account offers an exemplar:

"Um, I'd like to say the same things I have just said about men... but sadly, there is much more pressure on women. I remember watching my mum shave her legs or wax, and I couldn't wait to do it to. Or put on make-up like my mum! I think women who don't shave their underarms or legs are brave. And it shouldn't be that way... natural should be normal, but today, it's not :(at least I am aware of the social pressures and reasons I feel the way I do" (P474, 25, Pākehā, heterosexual, married)

Unlike choice responses, which tended to be brief, participants identifying a social influence on taste – personally and more widely – tended to write longer, more explanatory answers, which also displayed some self-questioning. This suggests that social pressures do not occupy an equivalent taken-for-granted position as choice within cultural discourse. Even articulating social influence as a determinant of practice, let alone fully critiquing what it results in, seems to be somewhat counter-normative.

Men and body hair regularly appeared as a contrast case (quite possibly because we also asked about men in the survey – (Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016) to illustrate the extent of social pressure and social norms women experience around body hair. For example:

"I think women have quite stringent "rules" with regards to body hair. There are definite ramifications in terms of how society/friends perceive you based upon your hair removal routine. It says a lot about you culturally and is definitely more loaded with cultural messages in contrast to male hair removal" (P554, 24, European, heterosexual, single).

Social influence was often described in terms that rendered it monolithic and continuous or 'driving' in its effects on decision making:

Like myself, they are conforming to the social pressures to look attractive and well kept. Because of the social pressures, it is now the norm for women to appear to be hair free. (P174, 33, NZ European, heterosexual, married).

I think that the beauty ideals that women try to live up have a much stronger driving force for women than for men, and most of those beauty ideals include being hairless (P359, 21, Russian, heterosexual, in a relationship).

Although diametrically opposed to the 'individual choice' interpretative lens, both arguments displayed an all-encompassing, powerful determinism in how an individual woman would respond to the question of body hair; both effectively reiterated the hairless norm as norm, and explained a lack of any individual resistance. For many women, the survey itself provoked them to think beyond their immediate experience:

To answer this question I had to google search women with hairy legs and armpits, because I'm not sure I've ever seen them in real life (apart from a bit of stubble). And I have to say, the pictures and videos I found looked very strangely masculine and made me uncomfortable. So although in theory I love women being free to do what they want, my immediate reaction is distaste. Oh, with the exception of in films set in the past. Seeing women's armpit hair in that context (i.e. usually in sex scenes) seems kind of cute and intimate, and not distasteful (P561, 27, Pākehā/NZ European, pansexual, partnered).

This extract evokes the ubiquity of 'hairless' female bodies, but also the space created to potentially re-think an unquestioned aesthetic and practice. This suggests that recent public attempts by women, and especially younger women, challenging the status quo by displaying body hair (e.g., see the Armpit Museum on Instagram) may do more than simply display body hair. They work as interventions in a public aesthetic dominated by absence, and have the power to disrupt or at least shift this slightly, fitting with feminism's analysis that the personal is, and remains, political (Jackson & Scott, 2004; Li & Braun, 2016). Increasing examples of women's body hair visible in public spaces offer the sense that not removing hair is part of a collective, rather than individual, act.

One participant described some of the minor variations in the hairless ideal within her recent lifetime, and the effects they produced for women generally. These differing historical expectations highlighted fracture points for her to challenge some of the 'newer' components of hair removal (such as full pubic hair removal):

I think it is stupid that we are all doing it, and because of that have set up a certain ideal of hairless beauty. I think though that societal pressure and norms are so great that most women will just conform. Women remove body hair to appear attractive and feminine. Because everyone does it I now subconsciously think hairy legs and armpits are unattractive. I think personally arm hair removal is excessive, although I know some people who do it as they are very subconscious about particularly dark or thick arm hair. Pubic hair is obviously controversial. I think pubic hair outside the underwear line is unattractive. However still do not like the idea that Brazilian wax is almost becoming an expectation (P149, 29, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

The image here is not simply a faceless monolithic 'society' pressuring women, but an interaction between a "so great" social pressure, and a continual cycle of hair removal activities by women, (re)producing negativity toward body hair, entrenching and perpetuating hair removal. The norms described inhabit something deeper than conscious 'choice' for women, a subconscious process, where the habits of practice (her own and other women's) produce and allow for only certain ways of thinking about hair. But P149's account is nuanced, with less widespread, less embedded (and thus presumably less normalised) body hair removal such as arm hair, seemingly accessible for critique (e.g., "I think personally arm hair removal is excessive"). Her account highlights the ways hair removal on different sites of the body can be subject to different expectations, as they are

historically and culturally contingent, with awareness of this offering readier ways in to critique – for instance, the Brazilian wax has been controversial since its arrival (Herzig, 2009; Peixoto Labre, 2002) and despite widespread adoption of removal of most of all pubic hair, critique of this practice remains part of public discourse in a way we see as quite different to hair removal on other body sites (including the ‘bikini line’ (e.g., Krantz, 2017)). In the next theme, we explore the intersections of different discourses in producing what we saw as a mixture of complicity and resistance resulting in a seeming *begrudging* complicity.

“I realise that I am conforming to a misguided idea of what is normal and I resent that.” – Begrudging complicity

Here we illustrate the intersection of the social expectations addressed in the previous theme and women’s descriptions of personal practices (theirs and others). Women typically wrote of being complicit with social ideals, often implying they did so under a form of duress. For a small proportion of the women surveyed, complicity manifested as simple conformity, evidenced by a common response of disgust to body hair, or other vitriolic statements (Braun et al., 2013; Fahs, 2012) – such as “gross,” “yuck,” or “I’d kick sand on them” (the latter directed at a woman with hair outside her bikini line). But in the majority of accounts, complicity was more complicated.

Many women articulated concern about ‘standing out’ that defined their engagement in hair removal, written about explicitly by some and implicitly by others. As discussed in the introduction, presence of body hair is far more noteworthy than its absence; many women commenting on this, prized invisibility from a critical, noticing gaze:

“Generally I realise that I am conforming to a misguided idea of what is normal and I resent that but at the same time I don’t want to stand out, and appear less attractive. It is such a pain and ongoing saga to remove hair, and at times I haven’t bothered, but have received many negative comments” (P567, 32, Pākehā, heterosexual, single).

“I am not brave enough to have people look at me because my legs are hairy. I try to blend in as much as possible and let my individuality out when I am in safe environments with my friends and family rather than in public” (P129, 33, Pākehā, heterosexual, married).

These two accounts evoke wider society as unsafe for most women to express embodied “individuality” outside of tightly prescribed norms, identifying the sanctions (e.g., comments) that can and do occur (see also, Fahs, 2012). Avoiding these negative sanctions seemed to be at the heart of many women’s engagement in depilation – a way to escape the ‘hassle’ of dealing with, and experiencing, one particular mode (or space) for hostility in their everyday lives (see also, Fahs, 2011).

A number of women wrote about various ways they might ‘get away’ with not attending to body hair, while still remaining complicit with the overall notion of the hairless ideal. This would often be related to who could or could not see their body hair, and was often seasonal (“It’s winter... pants time!” (P42)) or occasional – especially with regard to pubic hair management (“going to the beach” (P296), “going on a date” (P377)). A difference between vellum (fine, light) hair and terminal (dark, coarse) hair was often deployed as an example of the ‘flexibilities’ across women, with a sense that women with light or limited ‘natural’ hair were simply lucky:

“Unobtrusive hair is fine, but very dark and/or thick hair catches the eye. I guess I have quite light hair, so I haven’t thought much about the chance of having thick dark hair on your back or chest. I’d like to think that generally, barring hormonal issues, women don’t have as much body hair on their chest, back, abdomen as men and therefore they don’t need to do anything about it” (P316, 25, Pākehā, bisexual, single).

The flexibilities women described (e.g., wearing stockings over unshaved legs) certainly lacked the breadth of options available to men. The new(er) imperatives on men to ‘groom’ (e.g., Terry and

Braun, 2016, Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005), lack the strictness associated with women, which is much tighter and less forgiving. For men, there still seem to be a range of acceptable practices (including no removal) – with the possible exception of the back (Boroughs et al., 2005; Terry & Braun, 2016). The return of the beard to men’s fashion choices, or moustache growing for Movember^{iv} in A/NZ, Australia, the UK, and the US, are good examples of how much less systematically consequential men’s hair practices are.

However, many participants *did* write of (limited) options available to women, as long as they were willing to deal with the social consequences of their practices:

“Generally I think women can do what they like, and nothing is right or wrong. Generally though for myself, body hair is ok as long as it is only in certain areas and not too dark or thick. I would like not to care and just let it grow, and have done so in the past, but at the end of the day I care about what others think” (P279, 28, NZ European heterosexual, married).

Again, constructing liberal tolerance as an ideal was deployed, and one P279 wished to embody. Occupying this position, while still feeling potential judgment from others, was extremely common in the data, as was “caring what others think.” Consequently, a set of ‘defaults’ or “certain areas” where hair removal was essential were listed by participants. P279 in another response described removal from lower leg, armpits, and face as her ‘essentials’.

We do not interpret this as simply bowing to social pressure. As Bordo (1993) has previously argued, complicity and participation in these tasks can bring with it pleasure – as one brings her body closer to the ideal, even in small ways. For some of our participants, the rewards of complicity overshadowed any interest in reducing the amount of hair removal they engaged in, even as they recognised its problematics. For instance, one woman wrote about the visceral pleasure she gained removing hair, even while ‘wishing’ for the freedom not to depilate:

“I think many things about women's body hair. I would love it if it was socially acceptable for women to be hairy all over, but at the same time I like the look and feel of certain parts of my body after the hair has been removed or trimmed, so I don't think that all women who groom their body hair are doing it simply because of social conditioning” (P162, 29, Indian, heterosexual, single).

These sorts of complex responses, the thinking of “many things,” suggest hair removal is not always as taken for granted, or as automatic, as can often be suggested. Participants often expressed complicity, resistance, and frustration in two or three sentence responses to one question – suggesting a particularly mixed subjectivity. However, there was emphasis that there were not *enough* examples of alternatives to make resistance viable, making complicity (and its rewards) the apparently easier option. Several respondents noted along the lines of: “watch TV for 30 minutes. How many ads did you see telling women to shave, wax, trim, adjust, and shape their hair?” (P225, 21, Fijian/Irish, pansexual, partnered). Consequently, when women, like P162, mused about alternatives, it was often framed in terms of ‘wishing’ or ‘hoping’ for an alternative to the status quo, rather than it already existing or being possible. Participant 99 provided another exemplar of this sort of account:

“I wish it was more socially acceptable for women to have some body hair, and not have to be completely hairless all the time” (P99, 25, NZ European, heterosexual, single).

These liminal moments, where what could or might be, intermingling with the pressures of existing social expectations, seemed to be loaded with hints of agentic possibility. A small number of participants identified examples of women who helped them rethink the hairless ideal. Although visibility and access to these (rare) examples did not change their own behaviour, they seemed to provide the discursive space to consider a world without the strict social norms of hair removal:

“My feelings about this are changing. While I do try to make the effort to shave my legs and armpits, I am not bothered if I see women who don't. In fact, I find it a bit of a relief, I would love it if societal norms changed and we were allowed to keep all of our hair without being labelled unattractive in any way” (P499, 28, Pākehā, heterosexual, partnered).

Seeing or imagining alternative embodiments seemed to generate a distinct affective register for some participants. Instead of the disgust often associated with visible hair on female (and increasingly male) bodies (see, for instance, Fahs, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2016; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), the overwhelming sense constructed by P499 is one of wistful relief and desire. Such accounts suggest that increasing the availability of visible body hair diversity has potential for real effect in women's lives. In the final section, we discuss the sorts of discursive spaces our participants identified that enabled them to think about resistance to hair removal norms, and the types of subjectivities these spaces make available.

“It takes a certain kind of woman to pull it off” – Resisting the hairless ideal

Rather than wishing or hoping for change, some women provided descriptions of women (real or imagined) who did not (or did not always) depilate - including themselves. Only a small minority of participants described personal acts of ‘significant resistance’ (stopping shaving altogether), whilst, a larger number described acts of ‘minor resistance’ (“pants time!”). However, the bulk of responses referred to a hypothetical woman, with some participants providing descriptions of a ‘type’ they could imagine not depilating, often in quite positive terms. For instance:

“It takes a certain kind of woman to pull it off - you have to be very confident, or un-self-conscious, but I admire the ones who can” (P56, gay, 30, Pākehā, single)

I feel quite envious when I see "hairy women" with armpit hair and unshaved legs - I wish all women could feel as uninhibited and let natural run riot (P564, 29, Pākehā, unsure, married).

These accounts imply that most women are not being “brave enough” (P129) to challenge normative body hair practices, with writers positioning themselves (and others) as ‘ordinary.’ Resistance by women to social pressure was framed in an individualising fashion, defined by internal characteristics. Women unengaged in hair removal were positioned as exceptional, worthy of admiration (even envy), but emulation was rendered almost impossible, rhetorically. Again, personal choice acted as an interpretative lens, but here, rather than unfettered free choosing among ‘many’ options, it is a choice made in the face of powerful social pressures.

A few women wrote more detail about imagining resisting the hairless ideal and what it would enable:

“Sometimes I wonder what a day in the life of a hairy woman is like... not to feel self-conscious about stubble, in-grows, not to spend moments and dollars in the pursuit of a smooth body. Outside of my personal view for myself, when I see a woman with body hair, I admire her self-determining choice” (P584, 35, Pākehā, heterosexual, married).

Some participants identified social and cultural networks acting in a protective manner, presenting these environments as giving some scope to re-think or question the constraints of (Western) cultural expectations. However, wider, rather than local, social pressures still dominated, even with the ‘buffering’ provided by these social and cultural networks. One woman commented that she felt:

Sad, because it is severely socially regulated for many women, and can be problematic even for those of us who don't move in such strict circles (P186, 27, Pākehā, heterosexual, partnered).

Another noted that her ability to be acceptably “natural” when visiting Tonga was not something that carried over when she returned to Aotearoa:

I do not mind being natural when I'm in the islands, as it is normal there, though times have slightly changed due to the western influence. When I'm here in New Zealand though, I do not

feel comfortable being natural as I do not believe it is accepted here and you may be looked down upon (P498, 19, Tongan/New Zealander, heterosexual, single).

Fahs (2012) found that contemporary Latina women felt *more* pressure to engage in depilation than white women. There was no evidence of this phenomenon among the women of colour in our survey, instead what was often presented was cultural space to critique Western hair removal norms in various ways.

For the few women who identified themselves as having 'given up' hair removal, the decision to do so was often described in similar terms to a religious conversion – a dramatic individual revelation that resulted in almost instantaneous behaviour change:

"I realised that the social norm dictating hair removal was entirely arbitrary (other cultures don't require it for beauty) and trivial and meant that I was spending time and money on something unimportant. I decided that any man who judged my attractiveness on having hairless legs was not someone I wanted to attract" (P173, 33, Pākehā, heterosexual, married).

Women's worth continues to be defined by appearance (Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015; Kwan & Trautner, 2009), so taking up this position of resistance might indeed be what some participants described as "brave." Participant 173 described her willingness to limit her romantic options to meet set of values, positioning her lack of hair removal as tied to individual integrity and authenticity – a choice in the face of social pressure. Resistance to 'trivial' constructions of conventional beauty is thus presented as a matter of internal strength or a particular type of confidence. Within these sorts of accounts, the sense that these women were 'doing extraordinary' was apparent, as were the individualised rather than collective justifications for their decisions.

For the vast majority of women who wrote about resistance to hair removal norms though, a mixed subjectivity with regard to their own and others' practices was far more common:

On myself, I loathe [hair]. I resent it, it makes me feel less feminine, and adds a lot of hassle and angst to my grooming routine. It is first and only thing about my body that I would change, if I could. When I see hair on other women I feel relieved that I'm not the only one, sympathetic that they're hairy too, and not nearly as repulsed as I am by my own hair. I feel it is always acceptable to see body hair on women, in all areas, but I am not brave enough to leave mine alone. I admire women who are (P506, 29, Pākehā, heterosexual, engaged).

These sorts of responses suggest the cultural conditions for possibility allow for some variation from strict norms, but only for a few women. Constructing these women as somehow extraordinary, resistance is positioned as outside of everyday likelihood or expectation and therefore not required, and for people not to be judged for their complicity. Resisting these norms was described as a worthy goal by a number of participants – as long as those taking these steps were other women. The difficulty of resistance was also described by some women who had given up hair removal, emphasising the way it limited their choices (especially of sexual partners). However, what seems important is the way certain social groups (friendship circles, broader cultural groupings) appeared to offer space to reconfigure thinking about practices, and the necessary support to enhance resistance to these social norms.

Conclusions

This paper has reported four themes regarding women's hair removal, generated from women responding to an online qualitative survey. We have found that online surveys can act as methodological interruptions into the sense-making tools women used to justify hair removal practices (e.g., asking women to imagine their thoughts if they saw a woman with hairy legs). The data from this survey provided a rich snapshot of the rhetorical and discursive resources available to women and the various ways these were deployed – especially when they had to deal with unexpected questions or articulate something normally taken for granted.

Our *findings* resonate with other research that suggests contemporary Western society views differences in body practices between males and females, and among groups of women, as a result of personal and 'free' choice (Braun et al., 2013; Li & Braun, 2016; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012). Individualistic cultural norms encourage individuals to be independent of influence from others, society or social norms in their decision-making processes or choices. As Braun (2009) has argued "choice is integral to our so-called 'post-feminist' era" (p. 236), operating as a bottom line argument that can dissolve critique of certain practices. We have examined the ways in which women deployed choice within their justifications for women's hair removal, but also the ways in which it is diffused within the three other themes we generated. Our reading of these data suggests that framing most women's behaviours and actions as (only) about individual choices, does not allow much in the way of political momentum (see also, Li & Braun, 2016). Certainly anti-feminist arguments rely on choice rhetoric to justify such things as a continuing wage gap between men and women, women as the default for primary child care, and sexual coercion (Gill, 2016) – with responsibility for the 'wrong' choice falling on women in the forms of censure and negative characterisations (Fahs, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011).

What seems apparent from our data is that resistance to the homogenising effects of hair removal practices is still very difficult. Although there continue to be rewards for individuals who depilate, efforts among our participants seemed directed at appearing 'ordinary' – with those 'standing out' due to non-removal being understood as exceptional (either negatively or positively). The implications of this are important. Extant research has identified that increasing the hairless ideal's boundaries to include the pubic region, for instance, is already having an effect on body image (Stone et al., 2017). Bolstering alternatives to hair removal norms is seemingly fundamental to making any difference in shifting the ongoing centrality of women's appearance to their identities. Given the expectations of confidence for women within these data, rupture points and collective acts of resistance (especially given the breadth of online, especially social, media), may provide resources for women to engage in non-normative choices concerning their body hair. Certainly, providing opportunities for younger women to be exposed to alternative accounts such as the ones we have encountered in our dataset (likely via social media), may provide fissures and ruptures in the otherwise homogenising pressures Western society can place on women's embodiment.

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Notes

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- ⁱ Pākehā is a Te Reo Māori (Māori language) term for those of European descent. It is contested by some; not all white New Zealanders identify with it, as can be seen by some participants’ use of terms such as ‘NZ European,’ or the (ostensibly) ethnically unmarked ‘Kiwi’ or ‘New Zealander.’
- ⁱⁱ In A/NZ, this term refers to relationships that have the effective legal status of ‘common law’ marriage.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals with wide social networks, known to the researchers, who received a small koha (gift) as appreciation for their recruiting efforts.
- ^{iv} <https://nz.movember.com/>