

# **History, Herstory, Hairstory: A History and Analysis of Body and Pubic Hair Removal in the United States**

Emma Trisolini

## **Introduction**

The removal of body hair, emphatically pubic hair, has become a widespread and expected societal practice in the United States. This is due (in part) to changing media representations and acceptance of body hair on both men and women. This essay explores the changing nature of the removal of body hair in the United States from historical, feminist, health, and critical perspectives. I analyze relevant literature as well as online and magazine articles, blog posts, and images. I interviewed females and males of varying ages, races, gender identities and sexual orientations to gather contemporary and pertinent information about how a diverse range of people feel about pubic hair removal today.

Cultural expectations about women in particular removing their body hair changed drastically in the United States in the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as clothing styles changed to reveal more skin (the legs and underarms in particular) and advertisements began to promote not hair removal products in general but competing products, effectively engraining the supposed regularity of body hair removal in the mind of the American consumer. In the early 1990s, the Brazilian wax phenomenon spread throughout the United States and by the early 2000s, celebrities were openly praising the practice. The advent of the Internet also provided young people easy access to advertisements, articles, pictures, and pornography that promoted the norm of hairlessness.

In an era of feminism and constant striving toward gender equality (working for comprehensive healthcare access, the Lilly Ledbetter act to guarantee equal pay for men and

women, working towards positive and realistic media representation of women), many feminists refute the norm of body hair removal (particularly of the pubic area) because of the historical basis for the removal of pubic hair: to please men. Another feminist critique of pubic hair removal is that pubic hair and other body hair on women is a sign of adulthood, of maturity; the presentation of the adult self as childlike in a sexual manner to men (or other women) promotes a culture of ephebophilia—sexual attraction to pre-pubescent bodies—among men (and women) in the United States. This widespread acceptance of ephebophilia has played a part in the advanced sexual maturation of young girls, as seen through behavior, decreasing age of sexual debut, and adherence to images of the genitals portrayed in mainstream pornography. These young girls are then led to believe that they should retain aspects of their childhood into adulthood, such as a seemingly prepubescent body.

Although it is a topic relevant to everyone in the United States, pubic hair is a subject rarely talked about. This research provides a comprehensive history of perceptions of body hair and body hair removal as well as a critique of the practice of removing body hair (and pubic hair in particular) and of promoting a culture of acceptable ephebophilia in the United States through analysis of literature, popular culture references and norms, and personal interviews.

## **Background**

The history of pubic and body hair removal goes back to ancient Greece and Rome, if not earlier, and was mostly done for either religious or health reasons (Dault 2011:15). Art throughout history has also depicted women without pubic hair, contributing to the acceptance of the norm in the United States today. The history of body hair removal in the United States began with advertising. Between 1915 and 1945, advertisements began to appear in popular women's

magazines that encouraged women to remove their underarm hair to accommodate for new styles of sleeveless dresses (Basow 1991:84). By the 1930s, the advertisements had changed from instructing women to shave their underarms and began to focus instead on particular hair removal products, signaling the cultural acceptance and expectation of the removal of underarm hair for women. The early twentieth century was the start of the “WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] vision of a tasteless, colorless, odorless, sweatless [and, I would add, hairless] world” that would come to be expected of all white women and that would extend into other racial beauty ideals (p. 84). It was the beginning of the expectation of women remaining “clean, neat, attractive, and ‘modern’” in order to please their husbands (p. 85). This included the removal of leg hair as well, as “leggy chorus girls” showed hairless “limbs” in the 1920s. There were also economic and political factors that shaped the public opinion about the removal of body hair: as Dault (2011) notes, in the mid-1940s, many women removed their leg hair because of the shortage of silk stockings during World War II (p. 16).

Here exists a gap in the history of body hair removal; there is a lack of literature addressing cultural norms or stigmas between the beginning of body hair depilation and the 1990s-2000s when the removal of pubic hair became a common phenomenon. By the early 2000s, the removal of pubic hair was becoming a widespread and widely accepted (and expected) practice. The advent of the Internet and easy access to pornography coupled with media representations of women and celebrities speaking openly about their pubic hair depilation practices were great influences at the turn of the century. Bondy (2010) mentions the ease with which women can compare their bodies to other women’s bodies via pornography, “affording the youth of today an up-close-and-personal, if distorted, view of the adult female body” that “idealizes” pre-pubescent hairlessness (p. 27). Hairless pubic areas were talked about openly on

television; many authors of relevant literature cite a 2000 episode of *Sex and the City* in which Carrie receives a Brazilian wax. At first she is uncomfortable with feeling “bald” but then says that she feels “like walking sex” and engages in sex with a man who says he likes “what she’s got going on down there” (Coles 2000). This popular culture reference to pubic hair depilation in order to please men and to feel more sexually attractive or confident was just the beginning of the hairless norm/ideal becoming prolific. Labre (2002) describes how the Brazilian wax came to the U.S. and gained mass acclaim through celebrities such as Kirstie Alley, Gwyneth Paltrow, Naomi Campbell and Vanessa Williams talking openly about their hair removal practices (pgs. 119; 129).

Women’s practices of and men’s expectations for removing pubic hair is linked to media portrayals of women as hairless. I reviewed archives of *Playboy* from 1973, 1983, 1994, 2003, and 2006 to see what I could observe about the changing trends in media that is explicitly sexual and aimed at an audience who will be receptive to the images depicted. The shift every decade or so in the portrayal of what amount or style of pubic hair is “sexy” (by *Playboy*’s standards) is drastic. In the seventies and eighties, an all-natural look is shown, although in the eighties there seems to have been some trimming done around the bikini lines (Playboy 2013). In the nineties, the models have definitely groomed and are shown with a thick “landing strip.” In 2003, there is a smaller “landing strip,” and by 2006, there is virtually no hair on the model.

Now that United States society/culture has reached a point of accepted and expected body hair removal, I will look into the whys and hows of these practices, the effects and outcomes, and the ways in which women and men fight back against cultural norms and expectations using body hair as activism.

**Removal of body hair as infantilization/subjugation**

In addition to being used as a means to please men, body hair removal has another means of subjugating women. As women become more socially powerful and have the ability to work in high-power, high-profile careers, they have also been expected to present themselves as conspicuously more childlike. Body hair, Bondy (2010) notes, indicates “physical and sexual maturity, and hence strength” (p. 26). Increased body hair is a secondary sex characteristic of both women and men, but only men are allowed to market their sexual maturity in the public sphere. Women, who “rivaled men’s exclusive hold on social and economic power,” are expected to “make their bodies appear childlike, rendering them seemingly less adult and less powerful” when they work in public spaces (p. 26).

Not only are high-profile, adult, working women expected to maintain a body free of “superfluous” hair (Basow 1991:84), but young women are expected to preserve the look of pre-pubescent genitals. Adult femininity and sexuality are equated with a lack of body hair. This is problematic for a myriad of reasons. The equation of “hairlessness and sexiness...is entirely artificial, as sexual maturity is signaled by the presence, not absence, of pubic hair” (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008:896). Ephebophilia, sexual attraction to prepubescent individuals, is growing in social acceptability. Women’s choice to remove their pubic hair does not necessarily mean that actual attraction to pre-teens is on the rise, but that the doors are opened to sexual desire towards childlike features. A woman who had gotten a Brazilian wax said that she felt “like a 12-year-old, but a naughty, Lolita kind of 12-year-old” (Labre 2002:120). One man’s encounter with his girlfriend who had gotten a Brazilian wax excited him because of “the whole little girl eroticism of it... it was like tasting forbidden fruit” (p. 120). Some men and women alike accept

the infantilizing practice without a second thought because of the way that the removal of body hair is depicted in mainstream media today.

The expectation of young women to remove their body/pubescent hair provides them with yet another reason to be insecure about their bodies, turning from “obsessing about the size of their breasts... to the next ‘problem,’ the beautification of the vagina” (Labre 2002:118). They receive unrealistic images of how they think their bodies should look when they compare their bodies to those of porn stars and swimsuit models that they see on the Internet. *New Moon* magazine, a body-positive magazine published by girls, for girls ages 8 and up, printed an article in 2003 about body changes that occur during puberty that focused on body hair. The article describes different age-appropriate ways to remove armpit and leg hair, and ends with the reminder to “remember that many girls and women all over the world do absolutely nothing with their body hair. It’s there for a reason, if only for decoration or to show the world that you’re an adult” (Edmonds 2003:41). If only all young women could receive such positive messages about their body hair and changing bodies during puberty. Instead, young women feel pressure to remove body hair not only from the media, but also from peers of both sexes.

Women often choose to remove their pubic hair and other body hair in order to please men. When men engage in sexual acts with women who shave all of their pubic hair or have Brazilian waxes, they can achieve adolescent dreams of sexual experiences with preadolescent female bodies while still engaging in adult sexual behavior. “Think porn star. Think pain. But also think fanatic devotion” Valhouli (1999) quotes when recounting her first ever Brazilian wax. “I didn’t think I’d get into the bald eagle look until my girlfriend surprised me with it,” said one man, who said that his girlfriend’s lack of pubic hair made sex better and made her more attractive. Both women and men see the removal of pubic hair as a means to please their sexual

partners or to be pleased as a partner. The removal of women's pubic hair supports "women's submissiveness, inferiority, and dependence on men" by rendering women childlike and passive whether or not they enjoy the practice of body hair removal (Labre 2002:126).

Ephhebophilia is a growing issue and the removal of body hair (particularly pubic hair) contributes to women's continued oppression because of the ways in which the media posits hair removal in relation to pleasing someone other than herself. One interviewee noted that she thought "heterosexual women feel like they have to shave and remove their hair in order to be in a sexual relationship" (personal communication 11/16/13).

### **"Vajazzling" to vaginal surgery: pubic hair trends and attractiveness**

It is common knowledge that trends in amounts of pubic hair have varied over the last forty or so years. Yet some trends in genital aesthetics have little to do with hair and more with general appearance of the genitals. Some trends involve bleaching the vagina, getting temporary airbrush tattoos on the mons pubis, and "vajazzling" (sticking adhesive jewels or decals to the shaved mons pubis—made popular, like the Brazilian wax, by celebrities who describe their experiences with the practice) (Dault 2011:23-4). All have potential health risks and all have to do with the way women see their genitals and the way they want others to see them. Perhaps the most striking example of genital alterations is labiaplasty. Labiaplasty is a relatively new surgery that involves reducing the size of the labia (either the labia majora, labia minora, or both) (Lamm 2008). A male doctor who performs labiaplasties said that many women procure the procedure because their labia "hang out or are too meaty." This classification is inherently hegemonic; "meaty" is an adjective regularly used to describe a muscular, attractive man, but

when the word is applied to women's genitals it invokes images of something sexually undesirable.

Women and men don't just have to look at pornography to be indoctrinated into a belief system that tells them that their genitals should look different than how they do naturally. Two mainstream advertisements, one from the U.S. and one from India, propagate the ideas of shaving pubic hair and bleaching the vagina (Themagency 2009; Cleanand Dry 2012). An advertisement for a Quattro "for women bikini razor" designed specifically for trimming and shaving pubic hair is a song that uses "mowing the lawn" as a euphemism for trimming pubic hair. "Some bushes are really big, some gardens are really small/whatever shape your topiary, it's easy to trim them all... Never feel untidy, just spruce up your Aphrodite," sing three women as they prance around pushing pink lawn mowers and posing behind bushes of different carefully-landscaped shapes (Themagency 2009). The Indian ad for a vaginal bleach called "Clean and Dry Intimate Wash" depicts a man and a woman having their morning coffee. In the beginning of the ad, the man is ignoring the woman, who looks sad and disappointed. After showing a clip of her in the shower and an animated graphic of a dark (hairless) pubic area becoming lighter after the product is applied, the couple is able to interact, smiling and touching one another (Cleanand Dry 2012). Clearly, the expectation of women to have "perfect" genitals has infiltrated mainstream media, as these ads are broadcasted on television.

The history of pubic hair removal trends is unclear and convoluted, with many different reasons behind women's choices: sexual aesthetic, a sense of increased sexuality, social pressures from other women, and real or presumed social pressures from men and sexual partners.

**Who removes their body/pubic hair**

Most of the literature on the removal of body hair focuses mainly on Caucasian women, simply by virtue of their willingness and ability to participate in studies about personal depilation choices. For example, Basow's (1991) work culled women from the National Women's Studies Association and the American Psychological Association to participate in her study, so she had a sample of primarily Caucasian, feminist, educated women who were more likely to identify as homosexual; however, her work was a pioneer in the academic study of the removal of body hair among women, so I will continue to cite it and ask that the reader keep the demographics of the participants of the study in mind.

Basow (1991) conducted one of the first studies in the United States on body hair removal. She found that reasons such as "femininity and sexual attractiveness" and social norms were important factors in why women first began to remove their body hair (p. 88). She also found that a strong feminist identification and a lesbian sexual orientation were correlated with women being less likely to remove their leg and underarm hair than women who identified as "low to moderate" feminists and with a bisexual or heterosexual orientation (p. 90). Basow concludes that the less likely a woman is to be interested in attracting men and the more feminist-identified a woman is, the less likely she is to remove her body hair (p. 86).

Tiggemann and Hodgson's 2008 study sought to highlight the motivations behind young Australian women's choices to remove their body hair. Because this study was conducted more recently than Basow's, it includes analysis of the removal of pubic hair as well as leg and underarm hair. Tiggemann and Hodgson found that 96% of the 235 women that they questioned "regularly remove[d] their leg and underarm hair" (p. 889). 60% also removed at least some of their pubic hair, and 48% regularly removed most or all of their pubic hair. Tiggemann and

Hodgson were able to draw a direct correlation with women removing their pubic hair and watching particular television shows, including *Sex and the City*, which has been cited elsewhere as contributing to women's propensity to remove their pubic hair (p. 896).

Men receive much less attention regarding body and pubic hair removal than women do, but it is still a topic relevant to many men. Gay men have historically been more likely to remove their body and pubic hair than straight men; however, "hair removal is becoming increasingly popular for young men of all sexual orientations" (Dault 2011:47). At the same time, one young gay-identified man I interviewed said that he had observed a decrease in body and pubic hair removal among the gay population in recent years (personal communication 11/17/13). This is similar to the opinion expressed by Albo (2006), who rejects the practice of gay men removing pubic hair. Cleverly titled, *Feeling Creative? There's a Place for Fancy Topiary—But That Place is Not Your Groin*, Albo describes the topic of pubic hair removal as "a cosmetic version of the gay debate" and encourages gay men to embrace their "organic hotness" that exists whether they are "naturally hairy or smooth or patchy," just as they have embraced their own sexuality, although it falls outside of the perceived societal norm (p. 52).

The straight male community is also included in the hair debate. According to Bondy (2010), "manscaping is a hot trend" that has moved beyond the realm of athletes and gay men (p. 27). Some men shave for comfort, some because they believe that it makes their "junk look bigger" (personal communication 11/17/13). Whether or not men choose to shave, though, is a much less hotly contested topic than whether women do. Bondy (2010) aptly notes that men who choose to keep their body hair "are not faced with the same stigma as women who refuse to succumb to societal pressures to shave" (p. 27). This takes us back to the notion that men are

allowed to demonstrate their adult sexuality, while women are encouraged to maintain a pre-pubescent look.

### **Health risks**

There are certainly health risks associated with removing pubic hair. Shaving in particular can cause “microabrasions, contact dermatitis, and skin disruption” that can make it easier to transmit viruses “including HIV, hepatitis, herpes simplex and human papilloma” (Dault 2011:40). Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) also note that pubic hair serves as a “biological... safety net to protect the vulva from bacterial infections” (p. 891). Dr. Emily Gibson notes that doctors are aware that shaving a body part before surgery actually increases the risk of infection (Gibson 2012). The same goes for the pubic area. Gibson mentions other bacterial pathogens, namely group A streptococcus, staphylococcus aureus, MRSA and cellulitis, can fester happily in “the warm moist environment of the genitals.”

### **Lack of literature**

I have noticed that there is a gap in the literature about body hair depilation about *why* people actually started to remove their pubic hair. Leg and underarm hair removal was explained by changing fashion and advertisements in the early- to mid- 1900s. Even in looking at archives of *Playboy*, there is a blatant shift in aesthetic without an explanation as to why the shift occurred. This is an area in which further research should be conducted to trace the history of why the aesthetic and acceptability of pubic hair has changed.

**The positives**

Much of the literature on the removal of pubic hair positions it in a decidedly negative light. Whether from a feminist or a health standpoint, most of the information I have found makes the removal of pubic hair sound infantilizing, degrading, and subjugating. However, some feminist arguments claim that removal of pubic hair is a woman's choice. Some women who I interviewed said that they shaved for comfort. Some great feminist art has come out of experimenting with pubic hair.

**Feminist perspective: body/pubic hair as activism**

In this day and age, when the cultural norm is complete depilation of most body hair, growing visible body hair can be an act of resistance to the culture that imbues women with the "need" to remove body hair. Dault (2011) notes that "*not* removing [body hair] is commonly seen as an act of defiance or a political gesture rather than a viable choice" (p. 8). At a small college like Goucher, that is a relatively easy choice to make. One student who I interviewed said that she thought people who "don't care and don't [remove their pubic hair] either legitimately don't give a shit or are doing it as an act of protest" (personal communication 11/16/13). A professor at a large southwestern university invited her students to participate in a project for ten weeks out of a semester: to stop shaving their legs and underarms and assess the reactions they got from others and how they felt about the project themselves (Fahs 2011). Some women faced heterosexism, homophobia, and disgust from others (including family members, coworkers, and sexual partners) about their body hair. Many of the women said that they felt empowered and that growing their body hair felt like an act of rebellion (p. 12).

**Interview findings**

It is a common conception in literature on the subject and in interviews I conducted that women feel the need to remove their pubic hair to please men. However, some men that I interviewed agreed that they didn't care whether or not a woman had pubic hair. One said that he preferred pubic hair to the stubble that gets in the way when a woman does remove her hair (personal communication 11/17/13). Women I interviewed also concluded that many of their sexual partners don't care about the state of their pubic hair; the general consensus was that as long as it was "maintained," "trimmed," or "groomed," it was acceptable and did not deter from sexual experiences (personal communication 11/16/13; 11/17/13).

As I continue to work on this project, I will conduct more interviews that I will analyze in more depth. I have also worked interview findings into the rest of the paper.

**Conclusion**

The history of body hair removal in the United States is long, complicated, oppressive, and laden with various theoretical frameworks in its analysis. The amount of power that the media has over our perceptions of our bodies, how they should look, and the lengths to which we should go to alter them to fit convoluted beauty ideals was prevalent throughout this research. Exploring various points of view, historical analyses, studies and surveys of different populations throughout different countries and years opened my eyes to the different conceptions of body hair that we all hold.

When I initially thought of this topic, I knew it was something that I was interested in talking about, but I thought that I was the only one. Pubic hair is a topic that everyone thinks about, but nobody talks about. I was surprised and delighted by the amount of positive feedback

I received from conducting interviews or sharing with peers (and professors and Goucher staff!) what I was researching. People want an outlet and a safe space to talk about things that might be uncomfortable but that everyone thinks about. Sex has become a culturally acceptable discussion topic, but pubic hair is still not talked about. I am very pleased to have been able to take on such a big topic and bring the conversation about pubic hair into the open.

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