

# Perilous Patches and Pitstaches: Imagined Versus Lived Experiences of Women's Body Hair Growth

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## Abstract

Although some research has examined men and women's general attitudes toward women growing body hair, little research has engaged in a side-by-side examination of women's imagined experiences of growing body hair with an experiential component of growing their own body hair. In the first of two studies, I asked a diverse community sample of women aged 18 to 59 to assess their impressions of women who grew body hair and to imagine their own, and others', reactions to their hypothetical body hair growth. For the second study, I utilized response papers from 62 women from diverse backgrounds in an undergraduate women's studies course, who grew their body hair for an assignment. Results showed overwhelming negativity toward women growing body hair in both studies, but they differed in perceptions of social control and individual agency. Women in Study 1, who merely imagined body hair growth, described it more nonchalantly and individualistically, citing personal choice and rarely acknowledging social pressures placed upon women even disgusted by other women's body hair. Women in Study 2 regularly discussed unanticipated social pressures and norms, rarely discussed personal choice, and reported a constellation of difficulties, including homophobia, family and partner anger, and internalized disgust and "dirtiness." These results on a seemingly "trivial" subject nuance the "rhetoric of choice" debate within feminist theories of the body while also illustrating a vivid experiential assignment that delves into women's personal values, relationships, and social norms. Implications for assessing and changing attitudes about women's bodies—particularly "abject" or "othered" bodies—are discussed.

## Keywords

physical attractiveness, body image, social norms, choice behavior, social behavior, sex role attitudes

Women's bodies have often served as contested terrain in battles over agency, control, power, and identity. The rhetoric of "individual choice" often appears in debates—feminist or otherwise—about how to critically examine body alterations and modifications including plastic surgery (Davis, 1995; Eriksen & Goering, 2011; Kirkland & Tong, 1996), reconstructive breast surgery following mastectomies (Cromvoets, 2006; Gagné & McGaughey, 2002), labiaplasties and vaginal rejuvenation (Braun, 2009), genital grooming and genital self-image (Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010), fashion and "technologies of sexiness" (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; Hakim, 2010), and tattoos (Thompson, 2011). Similarly, ideas about, and critical interrogations of, the "disgusting," "mismanaged," or "unkempt" body often appear in the feminist literatures (what Joan Chrisler calls "leaks, lumps, and lines," see Chrisler, 2011). Alongside discussions of the menstruating body (Hyde, Nee, Howlett, Butler, & Drennan, 2011; Mandziuk, 2010), the "leaky" breastfeeding body (Hausman, 2004; Shildrick, 1997; Warren & Brewis, 2004), and the childbearing body (Carter, 2010; Draper, 2003; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004), conflicts about body hair have become increasingly

relevant (Basow & Braman, 1998; Fahs, 2011b; Kenyon & Tiggemann, 1998; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Additionally, theories of modern sexism posit that women often ignore or minimize the extent to which practices constrain and influence women in contemporary society (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Does removing body hair represent a decision made by individuals who *choose* to do so, or does it reflect larger cultural mandates that require the compliance and obedience of women and their bodies? Can women who have never grown body hair accurately imagine the personal and social consequences of having a hairy body, or must they experience the growth of body hair to understand the kinds of social penalties they might encounter with such "transgressions"? Do different groups of women face different outcomes for body

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hair, or is the norm of depilation so pervasive that few women remain exempt from the demands for hairlessness?

Here I utilize two studies to examine the different processes that occur when women imagine body hair growth and/or evaluate other imagined women with body hair (Study 1) compared with the experiential, pedagogical, and lived experiences of women who have (temporarily) grown their body hair for a class assignment (Study 2). In doing so, my studies assess the vastly different themes and narratives that emerge when women think about body hair hypothetically versus experience their body hair as corporeal, hairy, and potentially transgressive subjects. Ultimately, the differences between the results of these studies point to gaps between how we might *imagine* being marked as “other” and how it feels to *live* as “other.” Further, my study highlights the invisibility of omnipresent sexism directed toward those who violate practices to “maintain” the female body.

### *Normalization of Women’s Body Hair Removal*

The pervasiveness and normalization of body hair removal in the Western world—particularly the United States—suggest that body hair removal has transitioned from an optional form of body modification to a relatively universal expectation placed upon women. Recent studies suggest that between 91% (Kenyon & Tiggemann, 1998) and 97% (Lewis & Tiggemann, 2004) of Australian women shaved their legs, 93% of Australian women shaved their underarms (Kenyon & Tiggemann, 1998), and over 99% of women in the United Kingdom have removed body hair at some point in their lives (Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). A variety of other countries (e.g., England, Egypt, Greece, France, Uganda, Italy, and Turkey) reported that over 80% of women remove their body hair starting at puberty (Cooper, 1971; Kenyon & Tiggemann, 1998; Toerien et al., 2005). Pubic hair removal—a practice that largely stopped in the late 19th century but restarted in the 1980s (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009)—has also shown a dramatic increase in recent years, with younger and partnered women in the United States removing pubic hair at a growing rate (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010) and pornography and popular culture idealizing hairless and prepubescent female genitals (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011). Moreover, one recent U.S. study found that although men and women both removed pubic hair, women reported greater frequency of pubic hair removal and described removing pubic hair to achieve “sexiness,” cleanliness, and to feel normative (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Women in New Zealand reported removing pubic hair as an issue of choice, privacy, physical attractiveness, cleanliness, and to enhance sexuality (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). Although older age, feminist identity, and lesbian identity predicted decreased likelihood of body hair removal (Basow, 1991; Toerien et al., 2005), these numbers show body hair removal and pubic hair “grooming” as strikingly commonplace, since the 1960s and

1970s bohemian counterculture no longer has much influence on women’s body hair practices.

Whenever a body norm becomes this pervasive, questions arise about the reasons for its compulsory status. Deborah Aronin’s forthcoming documentary, *Pitstache*, from which the title of my article is derived, addresses the compulsory aspects of underarm hair removal. Across all social identity groups, hairless female bodies have entered the cultural imagination as a compulsory ideal, in part generated by mass media and marketing campaigns that feature Brazilian waxes, eyebrow waxes, permanent hair removal, and body hair removal creams as positive choices for body modification, particularly within industrialized countries (Hodgson & Tiggemann, 2008; Whelehan, 2000). As early as the 1930s, advertising campaigns in the United States featuring flapper girls, photo spreads, and a newfound obsession with physical beauty launched body hair depilation as a widespread social norm (Hope, 1982). Today, both mainstream films and advertisements, as well as pornography, generally promote women’s hairlessness as an absolute default (e.g., pornography featuring hair on women’s genitals only exists now as a “fetish market,” see Dault, 2011), as women shoulder greater economic and social burdens of making their bodies “acceptable” via body alterations than do men (Duesterhaus, Grauerholz, Weichsel, & Guittar, 2011). The notion that women’s hairiness equals dirtiness or even abomination has a firm grip on the contemporary cultural imagination about women’s body hair.

### *Women’s Management of Body Hair Expectations*

These findings on body hair removal signify the extent to which women, including feminists and those who typically rebel against social norms, internalize mechanisms of social control placed upon the body. Women “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) both to manage their own (dis)comfort with their bodies and to manage others’ anxieties and expectations about their bodies (Gimlin, 2007; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Reilly & Rudd, 2009), particularly along racial lines (Patton, 2006; Sa’ar & Gooldin, 2009) and sexuality lines (Fahs, 2011b; Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2011; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Women learn to pass as heterosexual to escape workplace discrimination, violence, and negative judgments from others (Anderson & Holliday, 2004; Button, 2004; Rosenfeld, 2009), restrict their eating (van den Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010), hide or pathologize their menstruation (Stubbs & Costos, 2004; Zita, 1988), straighten and lighten their hair and skin (Byrd & Solomon, 2005), medicate their sadness and anger (Kegan Gardiner, 1995; Zita, 1998), and minimize sexual violence (Fahs, 2011a). They also disguise and conceal their “natural” bodies by “maintaining” their bodies in a way that conforms to social norms. These trends deserve serious empirical and theoretical analysis, for “by refusing to trivialize women’s ‘beauty’ practices, then, we question the narrow definition of ‘acceptable’ feminine embodiment, which maintains—at

the most ‘mundane,’ and, hence, insidious level—the message that a woman’s body is unacceptable if left unaltered” (Toerien et al., 2005, p. 405).

Clearly, those who resist body hair depilation face social stigma and negative social penalties, particularly because women who refused to shave felt negatively evaluated by others as “dirty” or “gross” (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, 2004). Similarly, the U.S. women rated other women who retained their body hair as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women (Basow & Braman, 1998), just as they described hairy women as less friendly, moral, and relaxed, but more aggressive, unsociable, and dominant compared to women who shaved their body hair (Basow & Willis, 2001). Women comply with body hair removal norms in order to achieve femininity and overall attractiveness as well as to feel cleaner, more feminine, more confident about themselves, and more attractive (Hodgson & Tiggemann, 2008). Some women admitted to liking the soft and silky feeling of shaved legs, whereas others enjoyed the way hairlessness made them feel sexually attractive for men (Hodgson & Tiggemann, 2008). In fact, partnered women reported more consistent pubic hair removal than nonpartnered women in both U.S. and Australian studies (Herbenick et al., 2010; Hodgson & Tiggemann, 2008).

Such compliance with social expectations of hairlessness has not come without a cost for women, as women with negative attitudes toward body hair reported more body disgust (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), stronger feelings that their bodies were unacceptable and unattractive in their natural state (Chapkis, 1986), and more compliance with other restrictive body norms like dieting and cosmetic surgery (Hodgson & Tiggemann, 2008). Conversely, *not* removing body hair also produced a variety of negative outcomes for women. Lesbian and bisexual women often feared that growing body hair would further “out” them; some queer women even worried that having visible body hair would provoke hate crimes against them for not complying with compulsory heterosexuality (Fahs, 2011a; Rich, 1980). Compared to White women, women of color and lower socioeconomic status (SES) in the United States described more negative reactions from family members and friends when they resisted removing body hair, as they negotiated narratives of “respectability” on top of the already racist and classist judgments of others (Fahs & Delgado, 2011).

### The Present Study

Clearly, body hair practices highlight sexist, racist, classist, and heterosexist assumptions about women and their bodies because hairiness connotes manly or masculine qualities, whereas hairlessness connotes womanly or feminine qualities (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). These dichotomies also elicit ideas about the connections between hair and power between different gendered ideals (Basow, 1991; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Thus, even when men also remove body hair

(as 63% did in a recent U.S. study; see Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005), they do this without nearly the same social penalties (Dixon, Halliwell, East, Wignarajah, & Anderson, 2003), particularly from their partners (Fahs, 2013). Women’s hair removal has signified a variety of sexist assumptions about women, including their submission, tameness, differentness from men, and the fundamental unacceptability of women’s “natural” state (Basow, 1991). Women who resist body hair removal negotiate stereotypes that they “cannot get a man,” do not care about their bodies, or want to purposefully repel others (Fahs, 2011b). Taken together, body hair signifies an intersection of explicitly communicated cultural norms about the body, taken-for-granted assumptions about women’s hairlessness, and the dangerous power of a relatively invisible social norm.

Consequently, my two studies ask three central research questions. (a) Because women’s hairlessness represents an invisible yet compulsory social norm, how do women think about, talk about, and experience violations of that norm? (b) What narrative differences appear when women *imagine* growing their body hair compared with those who actually *grow* their body hair? (c) Finally, how do women conceptualize freedom, agency, and choice when imagining and experiencing body hair norm violations?

## Study I: Imagined Experiences

### Method

#### Participants

In Study 1, I utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34$ , standard deviation = 13.35) recruited in 2011 from a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as from the “volunteers” section of the local online section of Craigslist. Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women aged 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. Participants were screened only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other prescreening questions were asked. Given that previous research has shown race, class, and sexual identity differences in women’s experiences of body hair (Fahs & Delgado, 2011), a purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity; sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled, and a diverse range of ages was represented (11 women aged 18–31; 5 women aged 32–45; and 4 women aged 46–59). The sample included 11 White women and 9 women of color, including 3 African American women, 4 Mexican American women, and 2 Asian American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 12 heterosexual women, 7 bisexual women, and 2 lesbian women (though women’s

reported sexual behavior often indicated far more same-sex eroticism than these self-categorized labels suggest). All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed, and all received US\$20.00 compensation.

### *Materials and Procedure*

A separate transcriptionist transcribed each interview, although the author reviewed these transcriptions for accuracy and edited each one thoroughly. Identifying data were removed, and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

Participants were interviewed using a semistructured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours and during which they responded to 36 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about sexuality. The author—a White woman in her early 30s—personally interviewed all participants and did not disclose the presence or absence of body hair to participants. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, personal experiences with orgasm and other sexual events, negotiations of power with partner(s), and reflections on their bodies and body hair. Prior to the body hair questions, participants had reflected on their best and worst sexual experiences and their feelings about their bodies and their menstrual cycles. Several of the subsequent prompts addressed issues relevant to the present study on women's attitudes about body image and body hair. For example, women were asked four questions about women's body hair: (a) "Women describe different feelings about having body hair, particularly leg, armpit, and pubic hair. How have you negotiated your body hair and how do you feel about shaving or not shaving?" (b) "Have you ever not shaved during your life? If so, did you face any social punishments? If not, what would it be like to not shave? Is not shaving empowering or disempowering?" (c) "Do you feel that shaving is a choice or a requirement?" (d) "What do you think of women who do not shave their bodies?" These questions were scripted but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics because follow-up questions were free-flowing and conversational. Because the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss attitudes about body hair and what information they wanted to share.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis was considered the most effective and useful because it allowed for groupings of responses based on women's attitudes and feelings (e.g., all individual choices

are acceptable; hairy women as "dirty"). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersection between body hair and other components of women's sexual lives (e.g., body shame). To conduct the analysis, the author trained and worked with four advanced undergraduate coders (all women, with three majoring in women and gender studies and representing diverse racial backgrounds: one African American, two Latina, and one White). Collectively, we read the transcripts thoroughly and identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in participants' ways of discussing body hair (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In order to remain as close as possible to participants' own words and language, we chose to identify descriptive rather than interpretive thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We selected and generated eight themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. To further refine these themes, we identified similarities, differences, and general patterns. We then narrowed our themes and reached consensus on three main themes with several subthemes in order to minimize overlap between categories (though sentences and statements could be endorsed for multiple themes). The four independent coders and author each reread the transcripts and coded for presence/absence of the themes for each participant (interrater reliability = 80%). They discussed discrepancies in a group meeting and came to an agreement of the coding based on these discussions.

## **Results**

The community sample of women who imagined body hair growth and discussed their feelings about other women who did not shave described responses that clustered around three themes: (a) belief that body hair removal represented a trivial personal choice rather than a strong social requirement, (b) language of disgust toward other women's choices to grow body hair, and (c) refusal to voluntarily grow their body hair and justification for always removing body hair. As noted in the descriptions below, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that one participant's responses fit into multiple themes.

### *Theme 1: Personal Choice*

When I asked women directly whether they felt that shaving represented a choice or a requirement, 15 of 20 said frankly that body hair removal was a choice, 2 others said it was a requirement, and the remaining 3 said that it was both a choice and a requirement. Women overwhelmingly constructed body hair removal as something they, and others, chose to do, even though a few acknowledged the complexity of blending choices and requirements together. Most women unequivocally stated that body hair removal represented a choice for themselves, such as April (a 27-year-old Latina lesbian) who

said, “It’s a choice. I don’t feel like it’s a requirement. I just prefer to shave.” Dessa (a 19-year-old Latina heterosexual woman) said, similarly, “It’s a choice, yeah, a choice. I do it only out of my own preference.” Tania (a 25-year-old White heterosexual woman) reflected on the way body hair removal felt compulsory by saying, “I think it’s a choice that I make a requirement,” whereas Keisha (a 34-year-old African-American woman) said, only half-jokingly, “It’s a choice, but if it gets out of hand it *should* be a requirement to shave, especially if you have body odor. It should be required!”

Some women indicated that they wanted others to accept them without judgment, although they still found body hair disgusting and repulsive. Inga (a 24-year-old White bisexual woman) admitted that she felt body hair removal was a choice but still struggled with letting her hair grow: “I’d probably feel gross if I grew it out. It’s just one more thing I have to try to keep tidy and clean because I’m kind of OCD, and because society doesn’t feel it’s attractive and my girlfriend doesn’t feel it’s attractive.” Similarly, Kelly (a 23-year-old White heterosexual woman) firmly believed that body hair removal represented her personal choice, and even though she said she would not judge others, she acknowledged the disgust she felt toward body hair: “If I didn’t shave, I don’t think my boyfriend would like that but I don’t think I would either. People would be grossed out and he wouldn’t be comfortable with it.” When I asked her what she thought of other women who did not shave, she said, “I think it’s fine and great. Everyone deserves to live the way they want to live, but if I was their partner, I don’t know if I’d be comfortable.”

Although women conveyed that removing body hair seemed like a choice in our society—and saw themselves as individual agents who simply decided not to shave for aesthetic reasons—their language often conveyed judgments and negativity toward women who did not shave combined with statements about their acceptance of all bodies. When asked to imagine not removing body hair, Sylvia (a 23-year-old White heterosexual woman) described conflicts about the kinds of stereotypes it would evoke:

We would just look like we were in a 70s porno. I just don’t want to see pubes on my bar of soap or anything. That’s the only thing. I don’t really care. It’s not that big of a deal. I see my mom with hairy legs or armpits sometimes and I’m like, “What are you doing?” and she’s like, “I don’t care.” She says it doesn’t matter, that it’s her body and nobody else’s. It doesn’t bother me.

Shantele (a 30-year-old African American woman) said, frankly, “It’s their choice. I don’t have to touch you or anything so I don’t care.”

## Theme 2: Disgust

Although women mostly discussed depilation as a choice, they overwhelmingly considered not removing body hair an undesirable choice. Disgust toward other women appeared

frequently, particularly as women constructed body hair as “dirty” and “unclean.” Some women described distaste for hair that they projected onto other women, such as Cris (a 22-year-old White lesbian) who said, “I think women who don’t shave are a little gross. Because sometimes, like if people don’t shave their entire lives, that’s just a little too much to handle for me. I always shave. I don’t like hair. I shave everything.” Similarly, Abby (a 26-year-old White heterosexual woman) wanted to accept other women’s choices but ultimately found unshaved women disgusting:

I know there are people who choose not to shave. I wouldn’t want to subject other people to that. There’s kind of a stigma, maybe being unclean or something, and I think people would have those thoughts. I wonder what their partners think about it, whether they are “hippies.” I guess their partners don’t care.

Mei (a 22-year-old Asian American heterosexual woman) showed the vast contradictions in women’s narratives about depilation as she simultaneously described some disgust toward women who did not shave, combined with acceptance for not removing body hair, while also admitting that depilation caused her problems:

I had laser hair removal because I had really bad ingrown hairs from shaving and they would get pimply and pus-filled . . . I feel shaving is a requirement in this society and women should shave everything except for their heads. You don’t want to see women with hairs on their fingers or arms. It depends on which culture they’re in. I’m very open to whether you do or don’t shave, but some people I know really care.

Even when women claimed that they did not judge other women for not removing body hair, their statements often indicated otherwise. For example, Tania described a stereotype of hairy German women by saying:

I think it’s a personal preference. I think there’s that German stereotype that they don’t shave their armpits and it grosses people out. Typically, if you’ve got a lot of hair, it looks like a man and it’s not very attractive on women, but I don’t think I make total judgments on it. I might just stand ten feet away from them!

Leticia (a 41-year-old Latina bisexual woman) too said that women could choose not to shave but then added:

Hairy legs and hairy armpits look gross. I just think it’s gross. It signifies a woman being lazy and not taking care of herself. Maybe they’re not involved with someone, that’s just their culture, but it bothers me. Why doesn’t she just *shave*? You know what I mean?

## Theme 3: Refusal and Justification

Discussions of managing the unruly, “smelly,” and “dirty” body appeared frequently in women’s narratives about body

hair removal. Shantele admitted that she always needed to keep her body in control to manage her anxieties:

I never let it get out of control. When I don't shave I'm not aroused, I'm not turned on. I always do my armpits because of the smell. If I go a few days without shaving my armpits have a different smell so you have to use deodorant more often and that's not good. And then my legs, if it gets too long it starts to actually hurt, doesn't feel good, so then I'll shave that off too. It doesn't actually get long ever.

Tania worried that she would harm others by having body hair: "It's got a lot to do with cleanliness, and you know, there's nothing stuck down there. You can actually hurt the other person, or they get caught in your hair, and it just kind of makes a mess otherwise."

Justifying body hair removal based on attractiveness to men also appeared frequently in women's narratives. Sometimes this appeared more directly as women said they faced direct social penalties for not removing body hair. For example, Zhang (a 36-year-old Asian American bisexual woman) noted that her boyfriend "gets upset when I don't shave because it turns him off and he will get cranky all day." More often, women described this tension more subtly, such as April who conflated the notion of personal choice and (heterosexual) social norms when "confining" her body hair to please her male partner: "I think women are expected to shave but it's still my choice. I could stop shaving if I wanted but my boyfriend wouldn't like it. It makes me feel more comfortable anyway."

As another fusion of personal choice rhetoric with pleasing men, Rhoda (a 57-year-old White heterosexual woman) who said earlier in the interview that she "cleaned up" her pubic area but generally thought shaving a bore, described contradictions of both shaving for men and shaving for herself: "When I don't have a man around, I don't shave. I think it's a personal choice. I feel better if I am shaved. I just think it looks better, feels better. Smooth feels better than stubbly." As another example of accommodating the male gaze, Angelica (a 32-year-old Latina heterosexual woman) also fused depilation to please men and removing body hair to please herself together: "I choose to do it because I don't feel sexy having sex otherwise. Most men like smoothness. I think that's feminine to me. I know in some countries women don't do all that, but to me it's feminine to be smooth and soft and clean. It's my choice."

Although women often removed body hair, they sometimes reported internal conflicts about the social and technical meanings assigned to hair. Jean (a 57-year-old White heterosexual woman) recalled that body hair norms had changed significantly in her lifetime:

When I was younger and first got out into the world it was free love and all that stuff. I didn't shave much and I didn't have to. Then I got into the corporate world and I started shaving. I didn't realize that hair was even bad until then, that it was unattractive, until the times changed. Now I have everything shaved.

Patricia (a 28-year-old African American woman) also described always removing her pubic hair despite having some conflicts about the function of pubic hair and others' treatment of her as a prepubescent girl:

I like the way I look shaved and I hate when it grows back. Even though they'll say keeping your hair keeps stuff from going down in there, at the time same it can cause moisture and I don't like that. You don't want to start smelling. It keeps you cool down there in the summer to not have hair. When I started having sex, I was 18 but I looked like I was 14 at the time because I didn't have any hair down there. So guys would be like, "Man, you know you really look like a little girl, like I'm robbing the cradle!" That was frustrating.

Finally, Jane (a 59-year-old White heterosexual woman) admitted that, though she admired women who resisted depilation, she could never do it herself:

If I wanted to make a statement, it's not going to be about body hair. I'm going to save my soapbox for something a little more important than about whether I shave or not. I think that women who don't shave are so comfortable in their own skin. They're not trying to be someone else. That's great if they can carry that off and they feel comfortable doing that. I just can't.

## Discussion

Notably, women in Study 1 framed body hair primarily within the realm of personal choice, citing it as something that women can or cannot choose to grow. Their narratives often ignored larger social critiques and stories about removing body hair as a social requirement or a mandatory social norm to avoid punishment. The fascinating contradiction between framing body hair as a relatively benign personal choice and then talking about hairy women with strong disgust and rejection reveals the way social norms may embed themselves silently and invisibly in women's lives. In other words, women may find themselves in a familiar quandary: "I feel like I can choose whatever I want but I still choose to conform." This opens up many new questions, particularly the notion of what would happen if women actually grew out their body hair and faced the social punishments for actually violating the norm rather than merely imagining such a violation. Study 2, then, reveals the experiential facets of growing body hair, giving a stark contrast to the relatively casual assessments portrayed in Study 1.

## Study 2: Lived Experiences

### Method

#### Participants

The findings from Study 2 emerged from a thematic analysis of a written class assignment undertaken by women enrolled in an elective upper division women's studies course at a

large public southwestern university. Of the 129 students enrolled in these classes, 79 participated in the assignment, including 17 men and 62 women. (Men in the class were asked to shave their underarms and legs, see Fahs, 2013). The sample for Study 2—the 62 participating women—included 23 (37%) women of color (primarily Latina and African American) and 39 White women. Nearly all participants were under the age 30 (only seven students were over age 30). Although I had previously analyzed data from the fall 2010 group ( $n = 13$ ; see Fahs, 2012), the spring 2011 ( $n = 22$ ) and fall 2011 ( $n = 27$ ) data were from distinct samples of students. I did not ask directly about students' sexual identities, but most students referred in their response papers to the gender of their current or past sexual partner(s) (e.g., “my boyfriend”) or specifically mentioned their sexual identity as part of their narratives. Roughly 40 (65%) described having exclusively male partners or suggested a heterosexual identity, whereas roughly 13 (21%) described having exclusively female partners or mentioned a lesbian identity, and 9 (14%) described both male and female partners and/or a bisexual identity. I did not collect information about social class, although this campus draws from a range of social classes and boasts a high percentage of first-generation and nontraditional students (e.g., married, with children, working full time, outside the traditional 18–22 age range).

### *Materials and Procedure*

During the fall 2010, spring 2011, and fall 2011 semesters, students were asked to participate in an extra credit assignment that asked them to grow out their body hair (underarm and leg hair) for a period of 10 weeks. Students kept weekly logs of their personal reactions to their body hair, others' reactions to their hair, changes in their own or others' behavior, and thoughts about how changes in body hair affected them. They turned in their logs (averaging five pages in a more “free-flowing” diary format) and a reflection paper (averaging two to three pages in a more formal analysis of the entire assignment) about these issues at the end of the assigned 10 weeks. Participation was optional; students were given a small number of points (the equivalent of 1% of their overall grade) for successful completion of the assignment. If students terminated the assignment early, they were given one point for turning in a paper about their experiences along with their partially completed logs. No official “checks” were ever completed to confirm whether students were participating; students simply informed the professor (and often their classmates) of their participation and kept track of their feelings and reactions throughout the semester.

Although I did not solicit information from students about their current body hair removal habits, five students disclosed that they already did not depilate (they were excluded from the study and not included among the 62 participants); all other women engaged in at least semifrequent body hair removal prior to beginning this assignment. There were no

requirements about making the hair visible or discussing the assignment with others; students could choose if/when to disclose to others about this assignment (although most eagerly discussed it). All 62 women chose to sign the institutional review board consent forms, allowing their responses to be used for research purposes.

My recruitment likely self-selected for feminist-leaning students who had completed more readings on women's rights, body politics, and social constructions of gender than the general student population. These courses had a prerequisite of an introductory women's studies course; thus, most students had encountered (or internalized) feminist attitudes prior to beginning this assignment, although I did not directly measure feminist identity. Although this selection bias may limit my findings in important ways, especially because these two studies are not a perfect or direct comparison of each other both in sample characteristics and in type of responses, Study 2 also showcases the power of experiential learning to facilitate deeper levels of consciousness and awareness about gender (Kenway & Modra, 1992), even for those predisposed to feminism.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Four advanced undergraduate coders and I coded sentences in their written assignments using the same thematic analysis process as described for Study 1 (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which led to high interrater reliability (94%). They worked together as a group to resolve these discrepancies and agreed upon the coding. Study 2 generated themes to illuminate how experiences with growing body hair affected women's attitudes about themselves and their networks.

## **Results**

Women in Study 2, who actually grew their body hair discussed these experiences by relating their body hair experiences to the social and cultural expectations placed upon women. Many women reflected on how, although they initially framed body hair as a (sometimes insignificant or casual) personal choice prior to doing the assignment, they changed their views once they grew their body hair. Four themes (sometimes overlapping) appeared in women's discussions: (a) new perspectives on the social meanings of body hair, (b) encounters with homophobia and heterosexism, (c) anger from family members and partners about growing body hair, and (d) internalized feelings of being “disgusting” and “dirty.”

### *Theme 1: Social Meanings*

Because most students who undertook the assignment self-identified as feminist, many students initially felt that the assignment would be “no big deal” and that they had a vast array of personal choices about body hair. At the end of the semester, several women described new perspectives, changes

of heart, or more solidified consciousness about the relationship between body hair and social norms. Dee, a White heterosexual woman, reflected on how she wished she could feel more carefree about body hair:

It makes me realize the silly things that we worry about in our society, things that really shouldn't make a difference. I try not to let the media encourage me too much about what's acceptable and what is not but no matter how hard I try, I still find myself following these trends and not being able to get away from it.

Kelci (a White heterosexual woman), reflected on her conflicted feelings about the social meanings of her body hair:

I really did gain a lot from the project. I learned about people and what society has deemed as outcast behavior. I did kind of feel like an outcast when people freaked out about it, but at the same time I felt like a bad ass because I stuck it out and just kind of accepted my hair as a badge of honor . . . I love making other people step back and have a good look at real issues, issues that affect the way society has trained us all to believe that shaving is expected of women. I've been asking myself if I feel the need to conform too much to the expectations of society.

Nichole (a Latina bisexual woman) admitted that a dialectic between personal choice and social norms appeared often for her during the assignment:

When this assignment was first given to the class, I thought it was useless. I felt that shaving was entirely my own decision and that regardless of how society plays into my life, I was the one who willingly took razors to my legs and armpits . . . After completing this assignment, I have realized that having body hair has allowed me to see things through a deeper lens. If the males are content on putting the pressure on us, we should all rise above them and stick it to them—with our hairy legs and armpits.

### Theme 2: Heterosexism and Homophobia

Women's encounters with homophobia and heterosexism—something that appeared only subtly in Study 1—typically involved one of the two scenarios: either women encountered people who explicitly said that they would not “get a man” or “find a man” if they grew body hair (heterosexism), or they encountered negative comments that body hair had directly signaled a lesbian or nonheterosexual identity (homophobia). As an example of the former, Leila (a bisexual White woman) wrote about a Facebook interaction with a male acquaintance after she posted about growing body hair:

Him: Good thing you're single right now. GULP.

Me: That is so fucking insensitive and offensive.

Him: Why offensive? Mainly my thoughts were that any girl wanting to take part in that project would be tough. Most guys don't like their girls all hairy.

Me: Body hair is not gross, first of all. It's HAIR. I'm not covering myself with leeches or refusing to use toilet paper.

Him: It's part of a daily personal care routine, like saying don't take a shower for X days.

Me: Body hair doesn't smell. I'm still showering!

Him: I and the rest of the world have this viewpoint. It's an inconvenience for you and your boyfriend or any other couple.

As an example of direct homophobia, Noelle (a White bisexual woman) described her boss's negative reaction to her body hair: “My supervisor made some lesbian jokes. He knows I am pretty vocal about feminism and gay rights, so he makes lots of jokes about my body hair, saying, ‘Are you trying to tell me something?’” Or, as Hilary (a White lesbian) said after describing the homophobic statements she heard from others:

Never underestimate the difficulty of going against social norms. It is certainly not as easy as it seems, even for ‘radicals.’ It is not easy to be different in a world that masquerades behind the face of individuality, but in reality thrives off of the conformity and the predictable and sheepish nature of people.

### Theme 3: Anger From Others

Several women recounted “horror stories” of their partners and families reacting with anger, disgust, and outrage about the body hair assignment. In particular, women sometimes felt pressured to seek permission from partners (especially male partners), which elicited a variety of responses. For example, Marina (a White bisexual woman) recounted her boyfriend's adamant resistance to the assignment:

When I brought up the idea of doing the project, he was automatically opposed. First I got, “Ew, no. I won't let you do that.” Then I got a joking but upsetting “I will not engage in any sexual acts with you until you shave.” Obviously upset and hurt that my partner would put my shaved body on such a pedestal, I decided right away that I *would* be taking part in this project. After this verbal assault on my womanhood, he went on to say how “it was pointless” and “women can do whatever they want now because it is 2011.” Outraged again, I had a hard time deciding not to be a lesbian separatist and put my inner radical feminist back in her place to clarify the project. I explained that there was obviously an issue with women's body hair and that he had just qualified it in his mini panic attack over my wanting to stop shaving.

As another example of negative partner reactions, Liz (a White heterosexual woman) recalled that her boyfriend became angry and hostile when she first mentioned the assignment:

My boyfriend started yelling when I first told him, not at me but he was upset that my teacher was trying to interfere with my life in this way. He is really attracted to legs and that is a big part of our sex life. His anger made me cry.



Still, both women proceeded with the assignment and noted that it served a pivotal role in deciding whether to stay in a relationship with a man who would not accept their hairy bodies. By the end of the semester, Marina stayed with her boyfriend, whereas Liz had left the relationship.

Family reactions also revealed the powerful ways that parents and siblings monitored and controlled women's choices about their bodies. As found in previous research (Fahs & Delgado, 2011), women of color received particularly harsh judgments from their families when growing body hair. Lola, a Latina heterosexual woman, recalled how her mother found it "amusing" when the project was temporary, but when Lola threatened to do it forever, her mother became enraged: "Her voice changed from content and happy to shocked and appalled. She told how underarm hair is 'for men only' and how it makes girls look 'sloppy' and how she 'did not raise a sloppy daughter.'" Rosa (also a Latina heterosexual woman) had a similar encounter with her mother who fused concerns about respectability with ideas about compulsory heterosexuality:

She was absolutely opposed to the fact that I haven't shaved. She said it was gross, dirty, and not right. She asked if I had a problem or if I was too broke to buy more razors. She told my grandmother that I was letting myself go after my recent four-year relationship had ended, that I'd never find a boyfriend now.

As an unexpected twist on family rejection, Michelle (also Latina and heterosexual) noted that her daughters (both "tweens") also conveyed these same messages of respectability: "My eldest daughter said it was gross of me not to shave for that long. She rubs my hairy legs. I heard her calling her sister names and referred to her as being disgusting like my legs."

#### **Theme 4: Internalized Feelings**

Many women struggled with feeling disgusting, dirty, and sexually unattractive, even when others did not provide that direct feedback. Anika (a White heterosexual woman) who admitted that she would readily take a pill to stop all hair growth on her body, recalled feeling preoccupied with how "gross" she felt:

My legs looked ugly and fat with their hair on. I constantly thought about my gross hair, especially at the gym. Every time I was taking a shower, every time I changed my clothes, it was always on my mind. I couldn't believe how much time I spent thinking about my hair. It was insane!

Rosa, too, felt disgusted by her armpit hair such that the mere disclosure of having it upset her: "I will never ever show anyone my pit hair. I really don't want anyone else to ever know that I ever had pit hair. Ever."

Some women also reflected on how they wanted to feel more confident about growing body hair but nevertheless caught themselves with feelings of doubt, anxiety, and self-directed disgust. Rux (a biracial bisexual woman) admitted that she wanted to feel freer than she did:

I feel like women are trained to oppress themselves, that we're brainwashed to a point that even when we question, there is still something inside us which recoils from that questioning. That's the way I felt. Even though I knew what I was doing was supposed to be freeing, and it was to a point, mostly I felt embarrassed and ill-defined.

Lola wrote about her conflicted anxieties at the start of the assignment:

I'll admit that I was sure to shave entirely before I started this assignment. Halfway through the process of my meticulous shaving of my body, I remember thinking how pathetic I felt. It was as if I was preparing for battle and that my hairlessness before the war would help give me an advantage for my courageous task of overcoming my judgmental enemies.

Cat (a White bisexual woman) also expressed similar conflicts, noting that she fluctuated between feeling attractive and unattractive with body hair, even while ultimately seeing it as rebellious:

Since I am not heterosexual and somewhat actively looking for a girlfriend, will my hair growth appeal or repulse another? Today I saw some women walk by and every single one of them had their legs shaved. My initial reaction was, 'Eww.' That kinda took me by surprised and I laughed a bit. Kinda cool that I had that reaction.

As a final example, Leila did some soul searching after some particularly difficult encounters with coworkers:

It's hard. My coworker told me I was "brave" and she said she'd never have the courage to do that. People act like I'm standing up to Hitler! Another guy said that I should tell the teacher to go fuck herself. I'm still deciding what I want my form of resistance to be. To what extent am I going to "play by the rules"? Will I pretend to be a good member of society while actually revolting against it? My body hair remains a work in progress.

## **Discussion**

Women in Study 2, who faced the challenges of actually growing their body hair, had new perspectives about the meaning of body hair, particularly the compulsory aspects of needing to remove it. Women faced heterosexism and homophobia as well as anger from family members and partners about growing body hair, and they internalized feelings of "disgust" and "dirtiness" about themselves. In contrast to

Study 1, the women in Study 2 discussed their violation of body hair norms as having severe consequences for them. In addition to the affective responses it provoked in others, it clearly challenged their own comfort with, and agency around, their bodily choices. In particular, it made visible the intersections between social identities like sexual identity, race, and class while also provoking them to assess their own comfort with pushing back against social norms about women's bodies.

## General Discussion

As a women and gender studies' professor, I often encounter conversations and debates within classrooms, at professional conferences, and among friends that center around the "rhetoric of choice" (and the imagined lessening of sexism and heterosexism in modern society). How do we critically analyze the choices other women make about their bodies while also holding ourselves accountable for our own choices? To what extent should feminist psychology open up space for *more* choices, and to what extent should it critically interrogate the illusion of existing choices? Which body modifications reflect women's agency, and which represent women's compliance with oppressive institutions (or maybe both)? My studies extend two literatures, the literature on body hair, which has rarely taken an experiential approach, and the existing literature on choice, which has also taken mostly a theoretical and rhetorical approach to examining choice (Hakim, 2010; Jagose, 2010; Komter, 1989; Pitts, 1999) about the body by advancing a more concrete examination of choice based on women's experiences.

My studies were designed to interrogate the notable differences in women's narratives about body hair when they thought intellectually and imaginatively about choice from a more abstract perspective ("How do you feel about body hair when you have not actually grown out body hair?") compared with the perspectives that emerge from the lived experiences of women growing body hair ("How do you feel about body hair after having temporarily grown out your own body hair?"). Such a contrast makes a case for the kinds of differences found when examining the rhetoric of choice from an abstract versus lived experience and from outside and within academic settings dedicated to critical thinking and feminist interrogation.

The ultimate strengths of my studies lie in their unique comparative consideration of imagined versus lived experiences of the body because most existing research on body hair has focused on attitudes about hairy (or shaved) bodies rather than on women's lived experiences of body hair (Basow & Willis, 2001; Basow & Braman, 1998; Kenyon & Tiggemann, 1998; Lewis & Tiggemann, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). By using qualitative research to assess the "messiness" of how women imagine the range of bodily choices available to them—both with and without actually testing the social penalties they face for deviating from social norms—

we can better understand the challenges present in merely imagining issues of embodiment from afar (particularly in the classroom). A hypothetical consideration of a "deviant" body works quite differently than a tangible and literal enactment of "deviance."

Notably, my two studies differed in many ways. Study 1 utilized a community sample from a wider variety of ages, SESs, and educational backgrounds. Most women in Study 1 did not have a college degree, and nearly all women in Study 1 had never explored gender and social identities in an academic setting. In contrast, women in Study 2 not only had the privilege of a nearly completed college education (along with upward mobility), but they also had more experiences interrogating and thinking about their bodies, sexualities, and social identities. Although these groups did not serve up a neat and identical comparison (and are better as a sort of side-by-side description), they did explore the privileges and pitfalls of experiential learning and direct confrontations of power. Women in Study 1 had the ability to stay distant from the ways that body hair provokes reactions in others—they may never have seen their own body hair or truly considered not removing their body hair—whereas women in Study 2 spoke about their body hair after directly and personally confronting their own, and others', reactions to changes in their body hair. Ultimately, my set of two studies makes a case that, to more fully understand the body as constricted and shaped by social and political norms, experiential learning (however flawed) is a valuable component of a feminist education. In other words, the ability not only to imagine the body as shaped by social forces but also to test these limits and experiment with them in a tangible way can complicate and trouble women's notions of their own bodily freedoms. In doing so, it can reshape their understanding of gender, power, and societal norms. Women imagine much more expansive freedoms when only dealing theoretically with the notion of bodily control—a finding feminist classrooms must take seriously when nurturing meaningful debates about the rhetoric of choice. Effective consciousness-raising, it seems, may require both classrooms and bodily experiences.

Interestingly, many contradictions appeared in the present data, particularly surrounding the dialectic between personal choice and social requirements about women's bodies. Although women in Study 1 almost all constructed the removal of body hair as a personal choice, they admitted to feeling judgmental of other women's hairiness and/or committed to remaining entirely shaven at all times. Still, they imagined those judgments as having little bearing on their own depilation practices. This contradiction between describing body hair removal as a personal choice and then outlining the ways that they (or other women) are disgusting for growing body hair did not seem clearly visible to women in Study 1. The value of engaging in qualitative research with women about their body narratives seems paramount in deconstructing and unpacking these contradictions. Women may say they feel free, but then restrict the freedom of others or themselves—all

without noting this irony and logical contradiction. Similarly, women in Study 2 often wanted to feel free and liberated while growing body hair, only to note that they still felt ridiculous, constricted, hypocritical, or outright disgusting. Neither group of women could truly reconcile the dynamics between personal choice and social expectation, although each group had a distinctly different way of describing, narrating, and making sense of these conflicts.

Still, my studies have flaws that future research could better address and build upon. These samples cannot serve as direct comparisons because they differ in context (community vs. student samples), demographics (diverse ages vs. young age), mode of describing their experiences (spoken ideas vs. written responses), and educational background (little or no feminist education vs. taking an upper-division women and gender studies course). My set of studies is not intended to test experimentally the “intervention” of growing body hair; rather, this sequence looks at differences in how women narrate body hair when they imagine versus live as hairy subjects. Future research could perhaps assess women’s attitudes about body hair more directly prior to engaging in the assignment, although this approach would limit the sample only to undergraduates and would preclude a broader community sample. Additionally, the questions for Study 1 also came from a larger study of sexuality that may have biased participants’ answers or made them more likely to reflect on the sexual aspects of body hair rather than other social aspects of body hair. Future research could target only body hair as the sole subject of research questions.

### Practice Implications

These findings have several implications for those working with young women, as the role of experiential learning forms a central role in our understanding of oppression and social identity. Most notably, instructors, therapists, activists, and policy makers who work on body image and body politics should strive to move beyond merely *imagining* the body as “Othered” (or processing fears of fatness, old age, hairiness, and so on) and instead focus on *lived* experiences with the so-called disgusting body. For example, therapists could focus on concrete ways for women to engage with their bodies and use their bodies to understand their psychological complaints. As a therapist, I have often worked with clients not only to focus on their body’s feelings (e.g., deep breathing, locating sites of pain and trauma, menstrual cycle changes, and so on) but also to use the body as a method of teaching (e.g., asking a photographer patient with negative body image issues to photograph the parts of herself she finds “disgusting” and to then work to better accept herself).

The terror people often feel about embodying an even-more-abject body—perhaps gaining or losing too much weight, developing age spots or lines, losing their youthful or more active bodies, outing themselves as bisexual or lesbian in public spaces, becoming “different” somehow—can

perhaps be better understood and explored via more benign experiences with body hair. For instructors, body hair signifies a temporary excursion into a body deemed “disgusting,” all while allowing students to explore the perils and dangers of abjection. For activists, body hair can serve as an in-your-face gendered revolt that calls forth notions of “proper femininity”; using body hair to challenge notions of acceptable bodies has deep ties to other silenced and shamed bodily events, particularly menstruation, childbirth, and aging. In short, body hair is a “gateway drug” into topics that carry loftier and more serious consequences for women, and it thus can start conversations that may be otherwise too painful or risky to engage in.

### Broader Reflections

A major goal of conducting the body hair assignment—something I have written about in previous studies (Fahs, 2011b, 2012, 2013)—is to help women’s studies students more fully and potently engage with the reality of living as “Other.” If they can explore the meanings surrounding body hair—a relatively benign bodily experience—then they can potentially better understand the realities of embodying more permanent aspects of lower status, “abject” bodies. The potential for learning about dimensions of living in a fat body, queer body, black or brown body, or disabled body appears tangibly in women’s descriptions of becoming hairy (often for the first time in their adult lives). Classroom discussions about the exercise have shown the power of this assignment to both transform reluctant students and highly confident (or even radical) students into having a more critical eye about the invisible power of social control over women’s bodies. Using the body as a direct site of consciousness-raising gives feminist educators a unique opportunity to push students toward examining privilege, power, compliance, and resistance. Women in Study 2 had the opportunity not only to try this assignment as individuals but also to process it together with classmates, ultimately leading to community knowledge-making, conflict, and understanding.

Women in Study 1—perhaps revealing more generalizable and less biased information from those without explicitly feminist educations or the luxury of feminist communities—showcase women’s views about body hair when disconnected from larger social and pedagogical discourses about gender, power, and identity. In this way, they reveal the strange discursive fusions of removing body hair to please others compared with removing body hair to please oneself. These concepts are difficult to separate and think clearly about without the experiential component introduced in Study 2. Women in Study 1 may never have confronted their own social biases about the body, so their explorations about this topic feel more uncertain and fresh. That said, *both* groups of women expressed overwhelming negativity toward body hair, often seeing those who grow body hair as inherently disgusting and dirty. Although some women in Study 2 described body hair

growth as rambunctious and rebellious, their “perilous patches” still carried cultural markers of deviance. Most clearly, the distance between Study 1 and Study 2, as well as the overlapping moments in these studies, reveals tensions between feminist education and the realities of a patriarchal world.

I sometimes hear at conferences, from colleagues, or even from research subjects (Jane) and students that women have “better things to worry about” than the relatively silly and trivial topic of body hair. To counter this, I would argue the opposite: body hair represents an avenue into tougher and more painful discussions about gender, bodies, power, social control, invisibility of patriarchy, the fusions between heterosexism and sexism (seen vividly in men’s and family members’ reactions to women’s body hair), and overlaps among classism, racism, ageism, homophobia, and sexism. In the classroom, body hair opens doors to rich discussions about intersectionality (e.g., “My mother tells me I’m a ‘dirty Mexican’ when I have leg hair”), privilege (“My hair is blond, yours is black, so we’re already dealing with different things at stake”), misogyny (“My boyfriend said I need his permission to grow my body hair”), power (“How can I be a radical if I can’t even grow body hair?”), and the internalization of oppression (“Even though no one says anything, I feel disgusting when I have armpit hair”). Conversations about body hair hold up a mirror to otherwise unseen aspects of gender and sexuality, making the seemingly benign (“fluffy tufts,” “fuzzy patches”) suddenly endowed with the power to unsettle and transform.

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