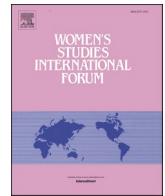



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## The smooth skin every woman wants!: A historical look at changing trends in advertisements for U.S. women's shaving and body hair removal products (1920s–2020s)<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, I performed a qualitative longitudinal thematic analysis of 264 advertisements for women's body hair removal products (e.g., razors, depilation creams) spanning the last 100 years from the 1920s to the 2020s. Patterns of continuity and the changes in the imagery, symbolism, and written texts in these advertisements were examined. Results suggest shifting historical patterns that coalesce around: 1) the body parts focused on in the advertisements, with shifts from the underarms to the legs to pubic hair over time; 2) the messages to women about cleanliness, hygiene, and attractiveness, with a move from more overt descriptions of abjection to more subtle messages about sexuality and empowerment; 3) remarkable consistency of the virtues of whiteness, with notable lack of diversity about race, size, age, disability, and skin color; 4) changing norms of sexism, from treating women's body hair as a tainting (1920s–1950s) to seeing women as frivolous (1960s and 1970s) to overtly sexualizing women (1980s and 1990s) to selling neoliberal empowerment (2000s and beyond); and 5) limited forms of progress, particularly around expanding women's roles (e.g., athletes, working mothers). Implications for the tension between overt and more subtle forms of patriarchal control of women's bodies, the creation and maintenance of a ubiquitous body norm, and critiques of sexual objectification and neoliberal framing of power and empowerment are included.

### Introduction

Women's body hair removal has become a ubiquitous part of women's typical beauty routines, with a staggeringly high number of women engaging in regular removal of hair on their legs, underarms, and, at times, pubic hair (Li & Braun, 2017; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). Body hair removal has been characterized as a norm that has “extraordinary compliance,” with between 92 and 99 % of women in the Global North—including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and much of Western Europe—engaging in body hair removal (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien et al., 2005). Fifty percent of women in one recent study said that they typically removal all pubic hair (Butler et al., 2015). Nevertheless, little research has examined patterns and changes in how these products are marketed, to whom they are marketed, and the messages about gender and power embedded within those advertisements.

### The twentieth century history of body hair removal practices

Women's removal of body hair has shifted in relation to the cultural norms of the times, as the last 100 years have ushered in notable changes in how women feel about keeping or removing their body hair. Women's voluntary body hair removal gained popularity in the 1920s and quickly became so commonplace that, by the late 1950s, women's body hair removal had become a compulsory cultural practice (Fahs, 2022). Most women in the United States did not remove their body hair prior to World War 1 (Hope, 1982).

This shift happened quickly, as the Gillette razor company decided after World War 1 to shift from advertising razors only to men to instead expanding the market to women. Building on the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, which pushed many middle-class people away from communal bathing and introduced the private at-home bathroom as a new norm, women suddenly had a context for more self-conscious body inspection behavior (Fahs, 2022). These societal shifts meant that shaving moved

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from the barber shop to the bathroom, increased the frequency of hair removal, and moved to something that occurred in solitude rather than in communal settings (Fahs, 2022).

The 1910s and 1920s also brought about transformations in women's fashion and dress, as fashion photography started to include more images of celebrities without underarm hair while sheer-sleeved clothing exploded in popularity. The first advertisements encouraging women to remove body hair appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1915 calling for removal of "objectionable hair," while in 1917 *McCall's* ran similar campaigns targeting a wider range of social classes (Hope, 1982). By the mid-1920s, Sears began offering dresses with sheer sleeves, beauty books started mentioning underarm hair removal, and Gillette had begun the marketing for the first women's razor, the Milady Décolletée, pitched as a toilet accessory rather than a (highly masculine) razor with sharp blades (Fahs, 2022; Herzig, 2015; Hope, 1982).

The expansion of women's body hair removal grew rapidly between the 1930s and 1960s. By 1930, an article appeared in *Hygeia* labeling the removal of leg, arm, and underarm hair a "social convention," likening body hair removal to washing hair or manicuring nails (Rubinstein, 1930). With this came the campaign to teach women to feel self-conscious about all aspects of their hygiene, including bad breath, body odor, menstrual hygiene, and vaginal smell. By 1964, a full 98% of American women between ages 15–44 routinely shaved their legs (Herzig, 2015). This trend continued until the start of the women's movement in the late 1960s, when the black power movement and the women's movement argued that women's body hair was beautiful, natural, and should not be removed (Weitz, 2004).

The late 1970s and 1980s saw women's body hair removal equated with "proper" femininity, beauty, and professionalism. The mentality of "liberation through consumption" (Herzig, 2015) spiked, and hairlessness and consumerism became deeply intertwined. While some people, particularly feminists, lesbians, older women, and trans/nonbinary individuals, have resisted the hairlessness norm (Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Basow, 1991), hairy women have still been vilified as disgusting and gross both in cinema and in political contexts (e.g., treated as hairy beasts, talked about as threatening to men, see Lesnik-Oberstein, 2006, and Herzig, 2015). As Rebecca Herzig (2015) eloquently argued, "By examining that labor [of body hair management] more closely, we might better perceive the implicit values suffusing social life" (p. 5).

## Gender and advertising

One key mechanism for understanding the values that influence social life is the realm of advertising, particularly those advertisements that underlie attitudes about gender, race, class, age, weight, and ability. Jean Kilbourne (2000, 2012) has argued that advertisements are not merely artifacts of culture, but that they influence beliefs and attitudes about women, particularly as they depict women as powerless, used, and dominated. Building on this, scholars have critiqued the "sexualization of culture" and the "pornification of culture," both concepts that illuminate how the bodies of women and girls become hypersexualized, eroticized, and exploited through advertisements and mass media in general (Attwood, 2006; Barton, 2021). In particular, the sexualization of culture reinforces hierarchies along race, class, and gender lines, and works within a visual economy that puts forth ageist and heteronormative ideas about women's bodies (Gill, 2009).

Advertisements also frequently conflate empowerment with consumerism, particularly as women's bodies become framed as neoliberal objects. In particular, women learn that they can feel better about themselves through buying beauty products like razors, which then reinforces the idea that the products themselves are "empowering" (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Luck, 2016). Neoliberal logics posit that the individual should become her own "brand," maximize her own desirability, and benefit financially from doing so (Gill & Kanai, 2019). Neoliberalism also casts those who do not meet normative beauty standards as deviant subjects, something with particular relevance to

women of color, fat women, disabled women, and queer and trans people (Long, 2018). Body hair removal, then, has become a mechanism for women to supposedly feel beautiful, clean, compliant, powerful, and desirable, with advertisements pushing these narratives in full force.

Women's desire to remove their body hair was often connected to their media consumption habits. For example, women were more likely to remove pubic hair when they watched soap operas and read fashion magazines (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Similarly, watching shaving gel commercials led to negative body feelings for women (Mask et al., 2014). Feminist communication scholars have long lamented that solutions such as media literacy, body positivity, and sexual empowerment fall far short of the robust critiques of power needed to combat the kinds of sexism and misogyny that occur in contemporary media portrayals of women's bodies (Darwin & Miller, 2021; Gill, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012).

## Materials and methods

### The sample

In this study, I performed a qualitative thematic analysis on 264 advertisements for body hair removal products (e.g., razors, depilation creams) spanning the last 100 years from the 1920s to the 2020s in the United States. Advertisements were located primarily through Google searches for body hair removal advertisements and were then sorted into decades. Search terms included "advertisement" and "ad" along with "hair removal," "shaving," "razor," "depilation," "[company name]," and "body hair." Anything not related to women's body hair was eliminated. Brands included Gillette, Schick, Nair, Neet, Remington, Bic, Venus, Billie, Wisk, Mi-Rita, X-Bazin, Dot, Zip, and others. I looked for advertisements that targeted diverse age and identity backgrounds for U.S. readers (e.g., *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, etc.). Television commercials and advertisements that had moving images, as well as advertisements for waxing studios or beauty salons, were excluded from the analysis.

I grouped the decades into twenty year blocks in order to analyze the advertisements, resulting in 63 advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s, 47 from the 1940s and 1950s, 49 from the 1960s and 1970s, 54 from the 1980s and 1990s, and 51 from the 2000s and beyond.

In terms of research questions, I asked two primary research questions: First, what do body hair product advertisements suggest about the changing norms of U.S. women's body hair removal and the consequences of not removing body hair for women? Second, how do these advertisements reflect patterns of social identities like race, size, age, and skin color?

### Procedure

A feminist phenomenological form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed on the advertisements. This method allowed for an intricate description of the data while also maintaining the complexity and historical context of the advertisements. This type of analysis also maintained the qualitative complexity of the advertisements while grouping them into patterns, and it allowed for a longitudinal thematic analysis to be performed in order to compare and contrast patterns across each decade of the last 100 years. Patterns of the changes in the both the imagery and written texts in these advertisements were examined. For example, if an advertisement showed a disembodied pair of shaved legs, alongside a text that read "The smooth skin every woman wants," both of those details were included in the thematic analysis. These data were analyzed for patterned representations of women's bodies and the rhetoric of hairlessness, and were formed into themes that were reworked and refined.

This thematic analysis was also informed by feminist post-structuralist theories of language (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey, 1997), where "language is viewed not as merely 'reflecting' social practices, but

rather as constitutive and a social relation in itself" (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 299); thus, language produces meanings but also reflects meanings from the social practices it describes. This type of analysis argues that language and discourse shape the social world and construct a sense of available choices for women (e.g., compulsory body hair removal via different options for how to remove the hair). The data in this study were examined for the assumptions they made about body hair and its removal, and how these assumptions might shape readers' subjectivities regarding their body hair practices. Themes were derived from reviewing each of the images from each decade, determining the prominent thematic content from each grouping, and refining those into the most prominent themes for each time period. After familiarizing myself with the advertisements, I coded the material in an open and inductive manner. After generating the initial codes, I collapsed the most common codes into distinct themes.

## Results

### 1920s and 1930s

For advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s, four themes emerged from this period: 1) underarm hair emerging as gross or undesirable; 2) descriptions of body hair as overtly unfeminine; 3) assumptions that women who remove hair desire whiteness; and 4) overt revulsion from others if underarm hair is not removed.

In the 63 advertisements analyzed from this period, underarm hair was presented as newly gross or unsightly, with particularly language around it now being superfluous or excessive. For example, one 1921 advertisement for Neet wrote: "Safe Riddance to hateful hair! Not mere Fashion's whim, but Womankind's fine desire for utmost dainty cleanliness, demands the use of *Neet* to erase unsightly hair." Another 1920 advertisement for Neet depilatory cream appeared with a statement of bare underarms as in vogue alongside an attack on women's weak temperament: "Does the Short-sleeved Afternoon Present this Problem to You?...With the unquestioned acceptance of sleeveless frocks as the season's mode, and gowns which leave so *little* to the imagination, the fastidious woman, unable to overcome her instinctively feminine viewpoint of the incongruous blade, and fearful of the severe chemicals of old methods, is confronted with the awkward urgency of discovering an effective, yet *consistent* way to remove superfluous hair." A 1929 Neet ad boasted of the freedom women will feel from unwanted hair: "You feel freer than probably ever before in your life of annoying hair growth." These overt descriptions of underarm hair as being out-of-fashion, unsightly, or repulsive appeared frequently in these advertisements.

Depictions of women with body hair as unfeminine also permeated the text of the advertisements from this period. In addition to promoting mythologies about hair—that shaving hair makes it grow back thicker and courses, that hair creates more body odor—these advertisements also promoted clear links between womanhood and hairlessness. A two-page 1921 advertisement for Neet made bold claims about femininity and hair removal: "Nothing to fear! Even the trying frankness of bathing-dress never dismays the woman who uses Neet. Never any more will disfiguring hair-growth distress the woman of refinement." A 1920 advertisement for Neet boasted about the maintenance of femininity and upper-class tastes: "There is a new way to remove hair. A *scientifically correct*, superior toilet preparation, dainty, exquisite, harmless; that meets the most exacting requirements of women of refinement." Finally, a 1922 advertisement for Neet more aggressively equated femininity with removing underarm hair: "The smooth, white underarm—mark of refinement—aid to beauty—is here to stay. Not only because unsightly hair mars one appearance, but because it is intolerable from the standpoint of personal hygiene. Neet is the ally of the dainty woman. With this fragrant cream depilatory, she now quickly and safely removes all offensive and unwanted hair."

This period also showcased advertisements that equated femininity,

cleanliness, and *whiteness* specifically. A 1921 advertisement for Neet used explicitly racist language to equate their product with civility and a lack of racially-coded barbarism: "Savages use pincers. In Malaysia and Polynesia, they tear the hairs out by the roots. Agonizing! Yet American women have used waxy nostrums, smeared on their delicate skins, which drag out their hair by force. Barbarous ways; dangerous ways, but the only delightful way is Neet." As another example, a 1920 advertisement for Mi-Rita described the whitening outcome of using their product: "The skin reacts after the application, closing the pores and leaving the surface white, firm, and clean." A 1933 Marchand's advertisement equated blacker hair with fear: "Remember Excess Hair Looks Blacker When Wet...Men look at your legs and arms. How can they fail to see excess hair—made darker than ever, when you got in bathing? For the sake of appearance, daintiness—keep arms and legs attractive." Still another advertisement for Dot in 1921 emphasized the whiteness of its product: "The hair will be gone. The cream absorbs it. Note, too, the skin, bleached white. And not a trace of irritation."

As a final theme, descriptions of overt revulsion from others also permeated shaving advertisements from this period. An advertisement for ZIP from 1922 labeled hairy women as repulsive if others saw her body hair: "Women of America, wake up! I would like to tell my experience to sister sufferers, the agony and embarrassment I went through for ten years with a heavy growth of hair...I shunned society, hated to talk to anyone, even babies drew from me. But, thanks to ZIP, I no longer envy the lovely velvety skin of other women." A 1939 Neet ad featured a "Man's Eye View" of a pair of legs along with a warning about unsightly leg hair: "UNSIGHTLY HAIR SPOILS YOUR CHARM...Remove ugly hair as millions of women do." A 1921 Neet advertisement equated underarm hair with offensive foul odor: "Go Free! Free of vexing hair—free of that other torment too! How refined women do detest unwanted hair-growth! And how daintiness revolts at the unsavory distress of arm-pit perspiration!" A 1931 advertisement for Snow hair remover warned women of offending men with hairy legs: "Use it on the legs—where transparent hose, and the stockingless mode of summer days, call attention to any dark, streaky, unlovely hair. Such a growth is objectionable to the fastidious eye—it may disgust the one you wish most to attract." The implications for underarm and leg hair to offend, repel, shock, or repulse others, and clear messages about women's body hair as gross, consistently appeared in advertisements from this period.

### 1940s and 1950s

For advertisements from the 1940s and 1950s, three themes appeared in this period: 1) hyper-fixation on smoothness and smooth skin; 2) focus on singular body parts imagined as separate from the whole person, particularly for women's legs; 3) emphasis on body hair as tainting or contaminating.

A hyper-fixation on smoothness and smooth skin appeared in these advertisements. A 1957 advertisement for Lady Schick electric shavers touted the close shave and smooth skin benefits: "What does she want for Christmas? What every woman wants! All your love...and all the loveliness to keep your love...One side for legs for the smoothest possible shave—the other side for underarms for a shave so close, but so gentle she can use her deodorant immediately. Makes skin so soft and smooth—no one would ever guess she shaves." A Nair ad from the 1940s equated smooth skin with freedom from injury: "Nair removes hair close to the skin without danger of cuts and leave your skin soft, smooth, clean, and fragrant." A 1953 advertisement for Miss Swiss further fixated on smoothness: "Summer days—summer dates. Keeps legs and underarms *always* velvet smooth."

Advertisements from the 1940s and 1950s emphasized disembodied legs or arms without depicting the entire woman's body in them, reflecting a shift of depicting parts of women's bodies rather than the whole body. This shift would continue through to today. For example, a 1958 advertisement for The Remington Princess razor showed a pair of legs with the text, "No 'wrong side,' no rough side—either side shaves

hair out of sight without nick or scrape!" A 1940 advertisement for Nair depicted only two disembodied legs with feet wearing high heels along with the text: "Your legs—beneath those new stockings—take on a completely new glamour and allure."

These advertisements also focused on women's body hair as tainting, contaminating, or repulsive. A 1953 advertisement for Delilah equated hairiness with ugliness: "Don't let UNWANTED HAIR mar your beauty this Summer. Make sure of Petal-Smooth Loveliness...A good figure and a new-season swim suit don't always add up to loveliness—so often the picture is spoilt by unsightly hair." A 1944 advertisement for Adieu hair remover portrayed hairiness as reputationally-damaging and repulsive to love interests: "Don't let superfluous hair spoil your good times, ruin romance and cause others to whisper behind your back," later arguing that their product allowed women to "wear the flimsiest gowns, the scantiest bathing suits, the sheerest stockings—or no stockings at all!" A 1958 Lady Schick ad featured women's legs and feet in alligator skin shoes with the warning: "very fashionable on a lady's shoes this year. Not at all fashionable on a lady's legs." These claims of body hair as ruining or contaminating one's reputation put forth body hair removal as necessary for maintaining a good reputation.

### 1960s and 1970s

For advertisements from the 1960s and 1970s, three themes were found: 1) men relating to women through sexual innuendo; 2) depictions of women as inferior to men (e.g., stupid, frivolous, and crazy); 3) expanded market to adolescent girls and working women.

The tone of the sexism in advertisements from this period took on more sexual innuendo, as hairless women became the sexualized object and the product being sold. A 1962 Remington shaver advertisement urged men to buy their razor: "Better get your girl one before some other Santa does. Lady Remington." A 1963 Schick advertisement depicted a bare-legged woman with the text, "Lets her take it off like a lady without scrapes, cuts or nicks!" A 1969 advertisement for Lady Remington razors included in bold letters overtly sexualized descriptions of what women want for Christmas: "Give your wife an extra head for Christmas," alongside the text, "a lady has shaving problems you, as a man, never dreamed of. First there are her legs. Beautiful, perhaps. But tough." A 1970s Bic advertisement overtly equated hairlessness with having sex and featured in all bold letters the words, "BEDROOM LEGS" along with the text about "How to get them," "how to keep them," and "How to use them. You're kidding." The sense that women were overtly sexualized, manipulated men with their sexualized bodies, and were treated as consumable products appeared quite clearly in these advertisements.

Advertisements from this period also depicted women as inferior to men, portraying women instead as stupid, frivolous, weak, and crazy compared to men's intelligence and rationality. For example, 1967 Gillette advertisement for the "Scaredy-Kit" described women as terrified of shaving and in need of mitigation measures to tolerate it:

"When a boy starts shaving, he becomes a man. When a girl starts shaving, she becomes a nervous wreck, especially at the thought of a really close shave. And grown women are just as scared...The minute you put a blade into the Lady Gillette Razor, it becomes a razor for cowardly women. We designed it to give you a smaller shaving angle than a tough-bearded man needs...The razor also has a longer handle (To get a better grip on yourself while you shave.)"

A 1960s Lady Norelco advertisement overtly portrayed women as naïve and foolish: "This Christmas...dazzle your husband with logic!" along with the text, "This means you get a *closer* shave (You may not understand quite why, but *he* will.)...(So no more husbandly fuming while you're fussing.)" The notion that men were wiser than women in purchasing choices also appeared in a 1964 Lady Schick ad that read: "Before you know it, she'll come to you, murmuring her gratitude."

The 1960s and 1970s advertisements occasionally expanded the target market beyond "dainty" stay-at-home wives to include adolescent

girls (younger market) and women needing to shave for their jobs (first signs of the women-as-professionals market). A 1970 Remington Princess advertisement featured an adolescent girl shaving her legs for the first time along with the text, "We know of one pain you could live without. The blade." In another market expansion, a 1974 Gillette advertisement discussed that a working model needed their product in order to keep making money: "A model can't hide anything from the eye of the camera. That's why when she's not in front of a camera, she's preparing for when she is...For the money she makes, Sunny can't afford nicks and cuts on her legs." That said, no depictions of professional women or of more diverse racial or body-types were seen in these advertisements.

### 1980s and 1990s

For advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s, four themes typified this period: 1) hairless women as sexually confident and actively pursuing men; 2) hairless women as being pursued or dominated by men; 3) shift to women as the purchasers of hair removal products; 4) women as professionals or students only if paired with exposed bare legs and overt sexual confidence.

The 1980s and 1990s pushed forward narratives of body hair removal as explicitly about sexuality, particularly as the advertisements explicitly equated hairlessness with sexual confidence and, at times, actively pursuing men sexually. The conflation of feeling sexy and women initiating the sexual pursuit of men was ubiquitous in these advertisements. A 1986 Gillette advertisement depicted a woman with shaved legs extending her leg to touching a man's feet under a table with the text, "With legs that look and feel that terrific, there's no telling what you'll do." Another 1988 advertisement for Nair showed a woman in a skin tight red dress with white high heels along with the headline, "Put your sexy Nair legs in a sexy new Mustang," again doubling down on the idea that women feel sexy and confident (albeit also becoming themselves products) when hairless. And, in the first appearance of references to pubic hair removal, a 1985 Neet ad featured a close up of a woman's stomach and pubic area as she wore a leotard with the phrase: "Now wear practically nothing without showing anything. It's new!...It's uniquely formulated to sooth the most sensitive area."

The advertisements from this period also depicted men actively pursuing or dominating women sexually because of women's hairlessness. A 1983 Gillette advertisement for its Just Whistle razor featured a woman in a strapless swimsuit laying on a beach covered entirely by the shadow of a man standing over her along with the text, "If you want to get someone's attention, Just Whistle." A 1989 Gillette advertisement featured numerous women—under a beach umbrella, in the backyard on a chair, on her couch—with a man grabbing her hairless legs alongside the text, "The way a woman wants to feel." A 1990s Schick advertisement played on ideas about men seducing women sexually by writing: "Everything your mom hopes your prom date isn't...smooth, experienced, and close to your legs." This sexualization of men's sexual dominance over women showed how women were imagined as wanting sexualized and power-imbalanced masculinity.

This period also marked a dramatic shift in who was seen as the purchaser of hair removal products. While the previous decades depicted men as buying these products for women, the 1980s and 1990s depicted women as the purchasers of the products, including coupons for the products in the advertisements and talking about women as making financial decisions. For example, a 1980 Nair ad included a coupon for Nair and the text targeting women: "You'll pay 20c less and get Nair with 25% more baby oil." The language of the advertisements also featured the pronoun "you" instead of the pronoun "her," such as Gillette's 1998 advertisement, "Are you ready?... What's new in your world?" That said, women were also depicted wearing lingerie (Gillette Sensor advertisement from the 1990s), playing with babies (Norelco advertisement from the 1990s), and mostly being interested in beauty products and attractiveness (One Touch advertisement from the 1980s),

again showing the tension between women as financially in control and women portrayed in highly traditional gender roles.

While occasional depictions of women as workers or students appeared, these images only appeared if women had exposed bare legs and if they were overtly sexualized in settings where women typically were more conservatively dressed. For example, a 1983 Gillette advertisement for its Daisy razor showed a smiling woman at her school graduation with her robe open, legs showing, and the nonsensical text, "When you shave with Daily, you go a little crazy. Crazy like a fox." Another similar Gillette Daisy ad from the same year showed a woman police officer in short shorts dancing her way out of the precinct building with the same slogan. A 1986 Nair advertisement showed women in tight tank tops walking together along with the text, "They prefer this method to... tweezers, which are too slow for girls with exciting lives." A 1998 Gillette advertisement featured a highly sexualized woman in a white suit with a short white skirt and bare legs alongside the cautionary words: "You're on your way. You've got style and a winning attitude. But without soft, smooth legs, are you ready?" The notion that women potentially had other pursuits than men and sexual attractiveness was undermined by these portrayals of women as always sexy, always exposed, always frivolous, and incapable of success without mandatory hairlessness.

### *2000s through to today*

For advertisements from the 2000s and beyond, four themes emerged from this period: 1) Neoliberal empowerment-through-consumption messages; 2) Faux feminism and appropriation of resistance language; 3) Modest increases in diversity (e.g., race, hairiness, athleticism); and 4) References to pubic hair removal.

Strong neoliberal messages about the body as a personal brand, shopping as self-actualization, and the importance of feeling empowered through consumption, permeated the body hair removal advertisements from the 2000s and beyond. A 2018 Venus advertisement featured a mother running with a stroller carrying a child alongside the text, "Goddess of Trailblazing," apparently suggesting that she can have it all: motherhood, sex, athletic legs, and being active and empowered. A 2003 advertisement for Schick Intuition showed a woman kicking her leg out to shave with the caption, "Now you can kick the shaving cream can... permanently," again pointing to neoliberal themes of power and empowerment through buying choices.

Several advertisements also appropriated the language of gendered resistance by using faux feminist arguments that equated strength, autonomy, and agency with shaving products. A 2021 Schick advertisement showed a woman holding two razors held in a punching stance next to a masked robber with the text, "Schick Defense Ultra." A 2021 Schick advertisement played with the idea that women have permission to briefly not shave by saying, "Take a Shave-cation...A shave so smooth, you can skip a day or two. FREE YOUR SKIN." As a particularly insidious example, a 2018 Billie campaign showed a woman draped over a bed with shaved underarms alongside the caption, "However, Whenever, If Ever," suggesting that shaving is a choice (that women will nevertheless choose to make).

This time period also saw a broadening out into more body diversity within the advertisements, though the limitations of this were striking. For example, while the racial diversity increased sharply and more women of color appeared in the advertisements, no advertisements featured women with higher body weights or women not in their 20s. Only a few ads featured women with shorter haircuts rather than long flowing hair (Billie). Interestingly, one 2018 ad campaign by Billie featured women with leg hair in a pre-shaving state with the text, "Razors built for Womankind," while another Billie campaign showed women with trimmed underarm hair. Advertisements also included depictions of muscly women athletes, such as Schick's 2002 depiction of a competitive swimmer with the phrase, "150 daily laps. 150 kick turns. Never settling on a man's razor to do a woman's job," and Bic's 2020

advertisement featuring Katie Ledecky with the phrase, "Water Activated. Performance Obsessed."

Notably, the 2000s and 2010s were the first time period where cheeky, humorous, raunchy, or euphemistic references to pubic hair shaving appeared. A 2003 Gillette Satin Care advertisement referenced pubic hair removal without directly referencing women's genitals: "Don't just shave. Go gently in those gentle areas," with an image of a woman laying on a bed of feathers. A 2019 advertisement for Precision hair removal showed a completely smooth midriff and legs with the text: "The best bikini lines are the ones that don't exist." A 2022 Gillette advertisement featured a tattooed woman's legs with a razor near her pubic hair alongside the caption, "Designed for tricky areas," again not referencing anything anatomical but speaking in euphemistic ways about women's pubic hair.

### *Longitudinal analysis and discussion*

Looking at these results in a more longitudinal sense, these images suggest both remarkable consistency in certain aspects of sexism (e.g., women's bodies as inherently disgusting, women as objectified, whiteness as desirable) and shifting historical patterns that coalesce around a number of points. The findings raise questions about the degree to which U.S. advertisements fundamentally reinforce and further cement patriarchal ideas about women's bodies (Lamb & Peterson, 2012). First, the body parts focused on in the advertisements have shifted over time, from an almost exclusive focus on underarms during the 1920s and 1930s to the inclusion of legs in the subsequent decades; obtuse references to pubic hair have only appeared in the last 20 years. These modifications reveal not only the implications for how new norms are introduced, maintained, and promoted, but also how the direction of body hair removal is continuing to expand toward *more* body parts needing to be shaved or waxed, *more* strict standards for maintaining hairlessness, and similar patterns for introducing the idea of needing to maintain hairlessness in order to be fashionable, modern, and stylish.

As a second point to emphasize in these findings, the way that women were portrayed as object changed quite significantly over time. In the earlier decades, up until the 1950s, women were described as repulsive, smelly, and disgusting if they had body hair, with particular attention being paid to repelling potential romantic partners and avoiding "grossness." In the 1960s and 1970s a shift occurred into explicitly and aggressively sexualizing women, seeing them as sex objects, and equating their bodies with other consumer products. The sexism of this period, though not necessarily worse than previous decades, took on a tone of patriarchal control via sexualization. Women needed not only to be beautiful and sexy, but also to be sexually *available* to men. This shift then kicked into overdrive from the 1980s and beyond. Women were depicted as needing to shave *only* to attract men, to pursue men, to feel sexy, and to be seen as sexual; fears of cleanliness, smelliness, and grossness were subsumed beneath the broader umbrella of sexiness and sexuality. Tracking how the patriarchal control of women's bodies has shifted with each decade, but has nevertheless resulted in similar outcomes (e.g., women needing to buy things in order to manage their inherent *lack* of sexiness/attractiveness/appeal to others), is a critical feminist intervention in media studies.

As a third point in the longitudinal look at these findings, there was remarkable consistency in the depictions of hairlessness as a condition of *white* beauty norms, with a move from the more explicit ways of talking about this in the 1920s to the 1950s to the more subtle depictions of this later on. The overtly racist narratives of not being like the "barbaric" women of color in other countries, and the incessant description of smooth white skin as a desirable outcome was laid on heavily in the earlier years, though the insistence on whiteness, smoothness, and hairlessness as intertwined never disappeared. It was rare to see any women of color depicted in these advertisements until the 2000s, and even when they were depicted, the BIPOC models were mostly light-skinned, young, very thin, and shown alongside groups of white

women. When looking broadly at diversity in these advertisements, the outright exclusion of fatter (or even average-sized) women, any women over 30, disabled women, darker-skinned women of color, and small-breasted women pointed to confining and restrictive imagery around women's beauty norms as seen in the incredibly limited demographics included in these advertisements. That said, given that norms of body hair removal tend to reach such a diverse audience, this suggests that bodily and identity diversity in advertisements was not a necessary condition to "sell" women on the need for body hair removal; the thin, young, long-haired, heterosexual, white ideal was maintained as "aspirational" for women.

As a fourth observation, the staggering amount of sexism in these advertisements was consistent throughout the last 100 years, though it materialized in different ways. In the 1920s and 1930s, messages of women's bodies as disgusting and in need of "new" maintenance and beauty regimens appeared, while in the 1940s and 1950s women's body hair was shown as contaminating or tainting. In the 1960s and 1970s, women were described as far more ditzy, empty-headed, and frivolous than men, with ads showing how they needed special razors to tolerate their dread, fear, and incompetence related to shaving (and, apparently, operating in the world at all). The 1980s and 1990s promoted the idea that women should be sexually dominated by men and that shaving products would make women college graduates and police officers strip down and dance instead of focus on their more serious pursuits. More recent advertisements have appropriated feminist rhetoric of resistance (e.g., self-defense) to trivialize women and repackage empowerment as something to be marketed and sold back to them. In all, these advertisements capture the essence of the patriarchal mechanisms of each time period, showing how the insidious workings of patriarchy infect women's feelings about their bodies as disgusting, their brains as inferior, their need to be permanently and always sexualized, and their lack of real access to power.

As a final observation, these data also point to the ways in which hair itself seems to correlate with social and political power, a finding consistent with scholarly work on the histories of hair removal (Herzig, 2015). Hair has long associations with masculinity, virility, and power, while hairlessness has been historically associated with femininity, deference, and lack of power, including in religious and cultural contexts (Fahs, 2022). "Violations" of body hair also permeate well-established dichotomies between men and women, humans and animals, and thus serves as a threat to the status quo (Smelik, 2015). This study demonstrated some of the visual ways that these associations have played out, particularly as women gained power in certain periods (late 1960s and early 1970s) and then faced a serious regression of power later on (e.g., 1980s). Attention to the lasting links between hair and power are warranted here, and point to future studies that could occur both in the U.S. and in other cultural contexts.

Ultimately, this study showed how advertisements operate as a set of cultural artifacts, depicting the values of each period of time, messages about women and their bodies, and, notably, reactions to the increasing amount of power (particularly spending-power) women gained over the last century. These advertisements are at once funny and serious, frivolous and heavy, silly and scary. They track over time the intensification of the norm of body hair removal, its spread to different body parts of women, and the use of tactics that control and limit women's actual bodily freedoms and autonomy. In that way, this study features advertisements that serve as a historical marker of change, and as a warning sign for trends that extend into the future. Contrary to what so many popular and media depictions suggest, body hair has never been a trivial topic because it embodies the mundane practices of "doing gender." Body hair lies at the nexus of gender, power, bodily autonomy, neoliberalism, marketing, capitalism (Fahs, 2022). By better understanding the historical production of this body norm, people can better enact resistance to the dangerous archetypes of how women are depicted in the mainstream media.

## Credit authorship contribution statement

**Breanne Fahs:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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