



Genital panics: Constructing the vagina in women's qualitative narratives about pubic hair, menstrual sex, and vaginal self-image



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ABSTRACT

An emerging body of research targets women's relationship to their genitals, particularly as pubic hair removal and the promotion of female genital surgeries increase in popularity and visibility. This study asked women to discuss their subjective feelings about three related but distinct genital attitudes: pubic hair grooming, sex during menstruation, and genital/vaginal self-image. Specifically, this study applied thematic analysis to qualitative interviews with a community sample of 20 women (mean age = 34, $SD = 13.35$) from diverse ages, races, and sexual identity backgrounds to illuminate seven themes in women's narratives about their vaginas: (1) "dirty" or "gross"; (2) needing maintenance; (3) unknown or frustrating; (4) unnatural; (5) comparative; (6) ambivalent; (7) affirmative. Overwhelmingly, women used strong emotional language when discussing their genitals, often evoking descriptions of anxiety, excess, and need for control. Fusions between sexuality and body image, and connections between "genital panics" and internalized racism, sexism, and homophobia, also appeared.

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Introduction

This study examined the question of how women feel about their vulvas and vaginas¹ by interrogating three distinct but related aspects of women's own "genital panics": pubic hair, sex during menstruation, and genital self-image. Though an increasing amount of studies have started to examine aspects of women's attitudes toward their genitals, particularly related to female genital surgeries (Braun & Tiefer, 2009), pubic hair grooming (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010), and even aspects of pregnant embodiment and genital attitudes (Nash, 2013), few studies have combined these three dimensions of women's genital attitudes into a comprehensive account. In short, we know very little about women's overall vaginal attitudes, particularly the affective and emotional facets of their feelings and beliefs about their genitals, leaving a notable gap in the existing literatures that this study seeks to address. As such, this study examined

qualitative narratives from twenty women with diverse backgrounds (including age, race, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities) to narrate their genital attitudes about pubic hair, menstrual sex, and genital self-image, revealing highly gendered, strongly emotional, and wholly paradoxical aspects of "genital panics" in their own lives.

With traditional gender roles still dictating that women remain passive and pleasant to others, engage in other-directed behavior, and construct beauty as their way of gaining value (Kwan & Trautner, 2009), some scholars have argued that the "gender revolution" has stalled (England, 2010). Overwhelmingly, feminist theorists, media scholars, and social scientists have found that women overwhelmingly report normative body discontent (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988). In fact, most women dislike their bodies and construct them as "works in progress" (Silberstein et al., 1988; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), with negative body image appearing as a normative aspect of women's lives (Mellor, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, McCabe, & Ricciardelli, 2010; Pruis & Janowsky, 2010). While partner evaluation can sometimes buffer or exacerbate women's body image problems (Pole, Crowther, & Schell, 2004; Weaver & Byers, 2013), even when women have supportive partners, they still struggle to feel positively toward their bodies (Wiederman, 2000). Also, with the rise of commodity culture and widespread uses of fracturing women's bodies into a series of parts—whether showcasing their "dismembered" legs on television, asking women to care

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¹ The word "vagina" in this study often refers more accurately to the "vulva" or "genitals," as the vagina is technically the passage between a woman's external genitals and her cervix. That said, most participants refer to their vagina, vulva, and pubic mound as their "vagina," so this study follows suit to avoid confusion.

about the size of their butts, or focusing on the shape and quality of breasts in advertisements—women have overwhelmingly learned to internalize notions of their bodies as not entirely whole (Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999). Consequently, women's feelings about their genitals often exist within a context that teaches women to see their bodies as a disconnected series of parts with "problem areas" to work on (Aubrey, 2010; Kilbourne, 1999), ultimately leading to poor outcomes for women (Wiederman, 2000).

This negativity has, not surprisingly, extended into how women feel about their vaginas, vulvas, and genitals, as women reported persistent negative identifications about the vagina (Berman & Windecker, 2008; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). Virginia Braun and Sue Wilkinson identified seven common aspects of vaginal negativity found in popular culture and in writings about women's bodies, including the vagina as: inferior to the penis; absence; passive receptacle for the penis; sexually inadequate; disgusting; vulnerable and abused; and dangerous. Struck by the vast contradictions inherent in portrayals of women's vaginas, they noted, "The vagina is, among other things, the toothed and dangerous vagina dentata; the (symbolic) absence of a penis; the core of womanhood; and a symbol of reproduction (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001, p.17). Paradoxically, the media sends messages that women should not discuss (or celebrate) their vaginas while also conveying an obsession with women's sexuality" (Braun, 1999; Ensler, 1998).

Pubic Hair

In recent years, a growing body of work has examined negativity toward women's body hair, directing a particularly critical eye toward women's notions of "personal choice" about their body hair grooming behavior (Fahs, 2012, 2013; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013). While some research has interrogated women's pubic hair "grooming" behaviors—that is, the choice to remove, or trim, pubic hair, or to leave it "natural" and fully grown (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010; Riddell et al., 2010)—few studies have interrogated women's attitudes and feelings about their pubic hair. Pubic hair removal has been primarily studied as a *behavior* rather than as a series of beliefs or feelings about the genitals, though one autoethnography (Paxton, 2013) and one blog, "The Last Triangle," has looked more closely at personal experiences and reflections about pubic hair (Dault, 2011).

Women's 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 U.S. women removing pubic hair at a growing rate and removing it more and more often (Herbenick et al., 2010; Herbenick, Hensel, Smith, Schick, & Reece, 2013). One study found that 50% of women removed pubic hair along their bikini line, and 30% removed all of their pubic hair (Riddell et al., 2010). Further, one recent study found that pubic hair removal was "extremely common," and that it correlated with being white, young, under or "normal" weight, and having five or more lifetime sexual partners (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013).

While both men and women experience some pressure to groom or trim their pubic hair, women reported particularly strong pressure to remove their pubic hair and far less flexibility around the choice to remove their body hair (Terry & Braun, 2013). When assessing the perceived acceptability of body hair, for example, one recent study of New Zealanders found that 11% of participants endorsed the acceptability of body hair for women, while 81% endorsed body hair for men, indicating that women's hair removal was more compulsory than men's hair removal (Terry & Braun, 2013). When asked why women removed their pubic hair, they did so to achieve "sexiness," cleanliness, and to feel "normal," particularly while wearing a bathing suit (Fahs & Delgado, 2011;

Riddell et al., 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Another study found that assertions of choice, privacy, physical attractiveness, cleanliness, and sexual impact mattered most for why people removed their pubic hair (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). Adolescent girls reported feeling that they had "too much" pubic hair most of the time and that their families and friends pressured them to remove their pubic hair, particularly if they were sexually active (Bercaw-Pratt, Santos, Sanchez, Ayensu-Coker, Nebgen, & Dietrich, 2012). Further, pubic hair removal was associated with women's use of vaginal hygiene products, applying genital cream, and having a casual sex partner (Herbenick et al., 2013). Notably, women who removed pubic hair also reported more self-surveillance and self-objectification than women who did not remove pubic hair (Smolak & Murnen, 2011).

Pornography and popular culture idealize hairlessness and prepubescent female genitals (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011), with most mainstream pornographic films and images depicting hairless genitals as the "industry standard" for genital beauty (Cokal, 2007). The quest for the "perfect vagina" can symbolize a new "biopolitics" where pornography and internalized sexism fuse together (Rodrigues, 2012). One study of 647 *Playboy Magazine* centerfolds found that hairless, undefined genitalia resembling those of a prepubescent female appeared in the vast majority of *Playboy* photographs published recently (Schick et al., 2011). Notably, the quest toward hairlessness mimic sometimes led to dangerous results, as one study found that pubic hair removal facilitated some sexually transmitted infections (Desruelles, Cunningham, & Dubois, 2013).

Sex During Menstruation

In addition to facing messages that they should contain and control their "excessive" sexual bodies—as evidenced in the existing literature on pubic hair—women also face messages that portray menstruation as distressing, shameful, disabling, taboo-ridden, and in need of management (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1998; Kissling, 2006). Whether through the barrage of negative portrayals in film and television (Rosewarne, 2012), or through advertisements that encourage women to hide their "unclean" menstrual blood (Berg & Coutts, 1994; Davidson, 2012) or medicate away their troublesome periods altogether (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, & Wares, 2006; Rose, Chrisler, & Couture, 2008), women routinely encounter menstrual negativity in their lives.

The few studies that have directly addressed the topic of menstrual sex (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Fahs, 2011) showcased women's conflicts about trying to feel "sexy" while confronting their taboo menstrual cycles. One study of college students found that less than half of the women engaged in menstrual sex, over 80% of women described polarized feelings about menstrual sex, with one-third saying they would never do it, while another third engaged in it regularly without restrictions (Allen & Goldberg, 2009). Another study that used a community sample found that heterosexual women felt more negatively toward menstrual sex than did lesbians or bisexual women (even in comparison to bisexual women with male partners), while women of color described more negativity toward menstrual sex than did white women (Fahs, 2011). Women who felt negative emotions toward menstrual sex discussed their discomfort and physical labor to clean 'messes,' overt partner discomfort, negative self-perception, and emotional labor to manage their partners' disgust, while positive feelings centered on physical and emotional pleasure and rebelling against anti-menstrual attitudes (Fahs, 2011).

Other studies have also found links between menstruation, sexuality, and body image, as comfort with menstruation correlated with more comfort with sexuality, less disgust toward one's body (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003), less risk taking, as well as more body comfort, sexual assertiveness, and sexual experience

(Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005). Further, women who engaged in menstrual sex reported more partner support than those who avoided menstrual sex (Hensel, Fortenberry, & Orr, 2007). Across all age and racial groups, women had sex far more often while *not* menstruating than while menstruating (Hensel, Fortenberry, Harezlak, Anderson, & Orr, 2004), though researchers disagree about whether this relates to sociocultural contextual reasons (e.g., disgust toward menstruation) (Leiblum, 2002) or evolutionary/hormonal causes (Mass, Hölldorfer, Moll, Bauer, & Wolf, 2009).

Vaginal Self-image

Body image research has largely focused on women's attitudes about beauty, weight, and skin color, often leaving out direct questions about genital/vaginal self-image (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). This omission is problematic, as research shows that many women struggle with negative vaginal self-image (Berman, Berman, Miles, Pollets, & Powell, 2003; Herbenick et al., 2010). College women with poorer vaginal self-image more often report more self-consciousness during sex, lower sexual self-esteem, lower sexual satisfaction, lower motivation to avoid risky sexual behavior (Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010), while adult women with poor vaginal self-image reported lower sexual desire overall (Berman et al., 2003). Women generally reported more negative feelings toward their genitals in comparison to men, with most women expressing either frankly negative or "moderately positive" genital perceptions (Reinholtz & Muehlenhard, 1995). Consequently, researchers have started to develop scales like the Female Genital Self Image Scale (FGSIS) (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, Dodge, & Fortenberry, 2011), and the Genital Appearance Satisfaction (GAS) Scale (Bramwell & Morland, 2009) to measure the relationship between genital self-image and body satisfaction, particularly as links between genital self-image and self-esteem appeared (Bramwell & Morland, 2009).

Some researchers have expressed concern that the increasing publicity around having a "designer vagina"—that is, perfectly symmetrical inner labia, a "tight" vagina, and attractive and hairless outer labia—have led women to feel increasingly insecure about their vulvas and vaginas (Braun & Tiefer, 2009; Rodrigues, 2012). With the increasing publicity for female genital cosmetic surgeries (FGCS), cultural notions of a "good" or "acceptable" vagina have become ever more narrow (Herzig, 2009; Tiefer, 2008). Doctors have described more and more women entering medical settings reporting "abnormal" genitals and wanting treatment for these "abnormalities," something that could be combatted with better training for practitioners who address body image and sexual normality concerns (Liao, 2003). Sex therapy has also begun to address vaginal negativity through positively reframing feelings about the vagina and engaging in vaginal art (Garbi, 1997), while some artists and playwrights have worked to construct the vagina as pretty and attractive (Ensler, 1998; Frueh, 2003). Feminist activists have also worked to fight back against depictions of "good vaginas" as hairless, girlish, symmetrical, and fake, pointing to female genital diversity as a key component of body acceptance (Braun & Tiefer, 2009; Ensler, 1998; Liebert, Leve, & Hui, 2011).

Research Questions

Given the notable lack of research that interrogates women's subjective attitudes about their genitals—particularly the emotional aspects of their relationships to their vaginas—as well as the clear indicators that race, gender, and sexual identity are understudied with regard to genital attitudes, this study asked several research questions to guide the study. First, how are conversations about vaginas related to conversations about pubic

hair, menstruation, and sexual practices? How do these subjective experiences connect to vaginal negativity, body shame, and partner rejection? Finally, how do women's narratives about their vaginas reflect, or reject, the paradoxes they experienced in their sexual lives, particularly tensions between liberation and oppression from gender inequalities?

Method

Participants

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 34, $SD = 13.35$) recruited in 2011 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist (for a study about the benefits of using Craigslist to recruit participants, see Worthen, 2013). Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women ages 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 pre-screening questions were asked. No women were excluded based on any other criteria (e.g., sexual abuse, relationship statuses) as I only asked about gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (55% ages 18–31; 25% ages 32–45; and 20% ages 46–59). The sample included 55% white women and 45% women of color, including three African-American women, four Mexican-American women, and two Asian-American (Vietnamese and Chinese) women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% heterosexual women, 30% bisexual women, and 10% 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 USD\$20.00 compensation. 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, though these did not seem to singularly influence genital attitudes.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5–2 h, where they responded to 36 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. This study and the specific questionnaire were approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by the author (white female in her mid-30s) in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses, just as all data was analyzed by the author later on. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, and their ideas about body image. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on vaginal attitudes. For example, women were asked one main question about body hair ("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?") with three follow up questions about hair

removal. Women were also asked about their experiences with menstrual sex: “Women describe different feelings about having sex while menstruating. How have you negotiated this and how do you feel about sex while menstruating?” with two follow up questions about type of sex and partner attitudes about menstrual sex. For postmenopausal women, they were asked to retrospectively discuss their experiences with menstrual sex; no participants struggled to do so. Participants were also asked a question about body image (“Many women report that their feelings about their own bodies greatly affect their experience of sex. How do you feel your body image affects your sexual experiences?”) with two follow up questions about comfort with nudity and how participants felt about their vaginas. These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialog about related topics, as follow-up questions were free-flowing and conversational. As the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss their genital attitudes and what information they wanted to share.

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from poststructuralist feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to remain as close as possible to participants’ own words and language, I chose to identify descriptive rather than interpretive thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This type of analysis, which closely mimicked Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach, allowed for groupings of responses based on women’s attitudes and feelings (e.g., the vagina as “dirty”; the vagina as affirmation). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the differences and intersection between these three aspects of genital attitudes (pubic hair, menstrual sex, and genital self-image). To conduct the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and I then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, I reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing genital attitudes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, I compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns.

After this initial reading, I also utilized four independent readers to repeat this same process. These readers were all women, ages 21–29, from diverse racial backgrounds: one African-American, two Latina, one White). In the course of a meeting together, we refined and reworked the themes until we arrived at a mutually agreed upon list of seven themes, paying particular attention to new or revised themes these additional readers found and ultimately arriving at consensus about which themes to use.

Results

Though the questions analyzed for this study addressed different aspects of women’s genital attitudes—ranging from the seemingly behavioral (removing or not removing pubic hair) to more attitudinal (feelings about their vulvas)—this study emphasized overlaps between how women discussed their attitudes about their vaginas. From these responses, seven themes were generated. As noted in the descriptions below, some participants’ responses overlapped between themes in that one participant’s responses fit into multiple themes. The seven themes constructed women’s vaginas/vulvas/genitals as: (1) “dirty” or “gross”; (2) needing maintenance; (3) unknown or frustrating; (4) unnatural;

(5) comparative; (6) ambivalent; and (7) affirmative. (Note that the titles of the themes below utilize the word “vagina” to reflect how participants described their genitals, though at times women more often meant “vulva” or “genitals” more broadly.)

Theme 1: The Vagina as “Dirty” or “Gross”

Women’s descriptions of their vaginas as “dirty” or “gross” came up often in discussions with women, whether during sexual activity where a partner would see their vagina, or during private bathing rituals, or when assessing the function, shape, and size of their vagina. While discussions of the vagina as “dirty” or “gross” came up in women’s discussions of pubic hair and their genital self-image occasionally, it most often arose in response to questions about menstrual sex. Strong emotional language about women’s genitals was a commonplace occurrence when discussing sex during menstruation, as all but four women had strong feelings about the subject. For example, Patricia, a 28-year-old African American heterosexual woman, portrayed her vagina as dangerous and potentially infectious during that time: “My vagina is nasty then. It’s a way of your body cleaning itself out. So, if you’re on your cycle, it’s like you have some kind of virus coming out of there. I’m almost sure. I don’t really know though. I don’t really want anyone going down there. It’s not safe to eat someone’s blood because people have Hepatitis A or B or something.” This common assumption—that the vagina was somehow “detoxifying” during menstruation—clearly influenced some women’s ideas about the purpose of menstruation and possibilities for menstrual sex.

Two women reflected on their same-sex relationships and the difficulty of navigating sex during both of their menstrual cycles in light of feeling “dirty.” Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian, described her revulsion toward menstrual sex with her female partner: “It’s just dirty. It’s just—*leave me alone* for seven days and don’t touch me! And forget about me touching her. I just don’t want to get my hands or my mouth on anything like that. It’s blood. I don’t want any part of that.” Inga, a 24-year-old white bisexual woman, using less intense language, also felt self-conscious about menstrual sex: “I don’t like it. I feel really gross and dirty. When my girlfriend is menstruating, she typically tells me not to touch her and it freaks her out if I want to. We both feel self-conscious about our vaginas then.”

Theme 2: The Vagina as Needing Maintenance

Two-thirds of the sample also described the need to perform routine surveillance and maintenance of their vaginas, lest they become unruly, overly hairy, too smelly, or otherwise out of control. Shantele, a 30-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, described her fears about her “unclean” vagina based on a negative experience with a former male partner: “I’ve dated a guy where he almost had OCD about my vagina, like on the verge of a problem. He wanted me to shower before sex and after he’d actually wash me up and make sure my vagina was clean again. That’s become a routine for me ever since. I feel like I can’t have sex without washing my vagina before and after.” This mirrored several other women’s concerns that their vagina could not ever be clean enough, regardless of the maintenance behaviors women invested into their bodies.

The need for ongoing maintenance also appeared often in women’s pubic hair narratives, as six women described feeling pressured to maintain their genitals as constantly “groomed” and shaven. Jean, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, described a transition from the feminist inspired attitudes of the 1970s free love days to her recent beliefs that corporate culture requires well-maintained pubic hair: “When I was younger and first out into the world, it was the free love and all that stuff and it was okay to be natural, but now, since I got into the corporate world, I always

have to shave because it would be painted unattractive if I didn't shave my pubic hair." (How her corporate context would *know* about the status of her pubic hair was not discussed.) Similarly, Tania, a 25-year-old white heterosexual woman, internalized constant pressure to keep her genitals shaven, evoking language of cleanliness, labor, and even the potential to *injure* others with her pubic hair: "I need to shave down there all the time. It's *always* clean shaven. I think it's got a lot to do with cleanliness and, you know, there's nothing stuck down there. When it's shaved, you can't hurt the other person or have them get caught in your hair and it just kind of makes a mess with hair." Her perception of the potentially undesirable and even injurious effects of pubic hair revealed the deep seated ways that women disliked their potentially unruly vaginas.

Theme 3: The Vagina as Unknown or Frustrating

Women also sometimes described their vaginas as inherently unknown or frustrating, as five felt alienated from what their vaginas looked like and frustrated when their vaginas did not "work properly." Rhoda, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, talked about not knowing much about her own vagina even after birthing several children: "I don't feel I personally have an odor but I still think it *must* be smelly and odor-ridden down there anyway. I've never even looked at my vagina. I mean, just from what I can see from this angle, I don't think it would be pretty. I've had babies and I refused to look down there when they were coming out of me." Her clear language of disgust toward her body also maps onto Theme 1 as well, just as it reflects the desire to avoid or otherwise forego more knowledge about her genitals.

When discussing pubic hair, Sylvia, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, also talked about feeling like she had no idea what pubic hair would even look like on her. Describing her fear of pubic hair, she said, "I don't want to look like I'm in a 70s porno! I don't want to see pubes on my bar of soap or anything. I've shaved since age 14 so I don't even know what my pubes would look like and I don't want to know." As a fusion between intentional ignorance about her vagina and feeling frustrated by it, Tania described her troublesome quest for her g-spot: "I have a hard time finding my g-spot and I feel frustrated with my vagina sometimes because I can't orgasm during sex. I don't know why my vagina is this way. It becomes a frustration that leads to maybe less self-confidence or a kind of lower self-image when I'm having sex or giving my vagina to someone else to have sex with. When I can't have an orgasm, I feel mad at my vagina. And when it stinks, I'm mad at it." The language here of *giving* her vagina over, of dispossessing herself of the agency to possess it, and of being angry and disgusted with her vagina reveals the strong emotions women often expressed about their vaginas, including alienation, fear, and frustration.

Theme 4: The Vagina as Unnatural

Eight women also felt that their vaginas were ugly or unnatural when discussing pubic hair, menstrual sex, and vaginal self-image. Shantele described her refusal to "sext" with men because she felt that her vagina, and other women's vaginas, looked ugly and weird: "I don't think my vagina is pretty. I say that a lot. A guy would ask, 'Can you send me a picture of your vagina?' And I would say, 'It's ugly and weird. Why would I want to send you a picture of *that*?' I don't like the way they look. And there is a smell." Similar language was evoked by Angelica, a 32-year-old Latina, when discussing her resistance to menstrual sex as unnatural and frankly disgusting: "I will not have sex on my period at all. I have to wait until I'm totally done. If I wipe myself and there's still a little spotting, I won't do it. It's unnatural. To me it's like shitting and peeing, like cleaning your system out. It's just something I lump up with shitting and peeing

so it's not normal to have sex associated with those things." Jane, a 59-year-old white heterosexual woman, also framed menstrual sex as unnatural because it did not facilitate conception: "I don't like sex during my period. It's sort of like your body's message that this is probably a time to rest, and, who knows, it may even go back anthropologically, that the reason you have sex is to procreate and you can't procreate during your period."

The language of unnaturalness was, ironically, also used in relation to discussions of growing pubic hair. Abby, a 26-year-old white heterosexual woman, talked about her feelings that men witnessing her full grown pubic hair would result in stigma and shame: "I wouldn't want to subject other people to an unshaven vagina. It's not natural. There's kind of a stigma of it being unclean or something and I think people would have those thoughts. I think every girl worries about stupid boys saying something about their hair. I use cleansers all the time, shave all the time. I don't want my husband to ever see hair there." This internalization of the shaving norms was so normalized here that *shaving* seemed like the only natural option.

Theme 5: The Vagina as Comparative

Although women consistently expressed that conversations about vaginas should be avoided, a repeated theme in women's discussions about their vaginas revolved around comparisons to other women's genitals, as women often felt inadequate and that they compared unfavorably to others. This came up most often when discussing vaginal self-image, as three women, particularly women of color, reflected on their own vaginas as racially and aesthetically inadequate. Dessa, a 19-year-old Latina heterosexual woman, talked about how, even when she felt positively toward her vagina, the negativity she encountered from men—clearly tied up with sexism and racism—made her doubt these positive feelings: "I think I have a really good outlook on my vagina. I think I have a nice vagina. I think men talk negatively about vaginas though and it makes me second guess that. I have a guy friend who talks about different kinds of vaginas based on race, telling me about Asian ones and Black ones and which he prefers. That made me wonder how my Mexican vagina compares." These "typologies" into good and bad vaginas revealed the difficulties women faced when trying to embrace their bodies in light of competing racialized messages they heard; notably, white women never mentioned race as a factor when comparing their vaginas to other women's vaginas.

Other women frankly admitted to feeling that their vagina was inadequate and subpar, especially those who compared their genitals to those in pornography. Leticia, a 41-year-old Latina bisexual woman, compared her vagina unfavorable in comparison to pornographic images and only felt positively when her vagina helped men's sexual sensations: "I think mine's ugly. Vaginas are just ugly. I've seen women in pornos and their vaginas are real pretty and I think mine's ugly. The only part I like is the inner part, the part that pleases the man." Similarly, Angelica framed her vagina as inadequate based both on its (racialized) color and on its apparent inadequacy compared to porn stars: "After I had my daughter my vagina felt twice its size. It was just *huge*, crazy huge. One of my labia is bigger than the other and I don't know how to explain it but it goes over the side. I've seen other vaginas in pornos where they seem so perfect and mine's just lopsided and dark, like a darker color down there."

Theme 6: The Vagina as Ambivalent

Five women discussed their ambivalence toward their vaginas, as they felt neither positively nor negatively toward their genitals. Mei, a 22-year-old Asian-American heterosexual woman, described

occasionally feeling puzzled or distantly amused by her vagina: “It’s just there. It’s another organ in my body. I wouldn’t say I have any emotional attachments to it or any thoughts at all about it. Maybe if I lose the functions I will feel like I really should have valued it but as of now, it’s just another part of my body. When I looked at it once, I thought, ‘I don’t remember it being so dark.’ Other than that, I thought, ‘How do I not get infections with so much hair around?’” Even with claims of disinterest about her vagina, her narratives still had undertones of negativity toward her “darkness” and hairiness.

Sometimes, ambivalence toward the vagina manifested as a change in attitude from previous negative attitudes to something more neutral. April, a 27-year-old Latina lesbian, admitted that her mother had subtly influenced her vaginal self-image but that she was fighting back: “Over the years I’ve become more comfortable with it. Before, I wasn’t. Even though my mother was really open about sexuality and she never said anything to me that made me feel bad, I guess maybe it’s just a cultural thing, but I felt gross, like you shouldn’t look at yourself or touch yourself. It’s not a positive environment down there. Now I guess I’m in the middle about it.” Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian-American bisexual woman, described similarly ambivalent feelings toward her pubic hair, noting that her boyfriend’s feelings were much stronger than her own: “If I forget to shave my vagina, my boyfriend will get upset. It turns him off so I do it and then I feel carefree or at least I know I won’t upset him.” In these examples, women’s relationship to other people’s strong emotions about their vaginas overshadowed their own ambivalent feelings.

Theme 7: The Vagina as Affirmative

Though in the substantial minority in the sample, five women described at least some positive and affirmative feelings about their vaginas, particularly as they fought back against negative stereotypes about the vagina. Kelly, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman who worked as a teacher, talked about helping girls at her school fight back against negativity directed toward the vagina: “I hate it when people say jokes about smelly vaginas. It’s inconsiderate and rude. I don’t like it. Especially because I’m working at a school right now and kids are saying things and making fun of others. I hate that. It’s so embarrassing for girls. I try to stand up for them when people are being rude about that. . .I’ve been to a lot of *Vagina Monologues* and I’ve also taken classes on sexuality and learning that it’s ok to explore and get more comfortable with my body. I feel really comfortable with my body right now.” This mix between rebellion against negative stereotypes, advocacy for other girls, and exposure to vagina-affirming art like the *Vagina Monologues* helped Kelly feel more positively about her own body.

In stark contrast to the messages they received in the culture at large, four women described feeling positively about menstrual sex and having pubic hair. Keisha, a 34-year-old African-American bisexual woman, embraced menstrual sex and pubic hair and rejected partners who devalued her vagina: “When I’m menstruating, I’m at my horniest. I just put a towel down and it’s ok. I feel so sexy then. I’m wetter and men tend to like it more too. I like my vagina and if it bothers you or my hair gets in the way or my blood bugs you, then go ahead and leave.” This “take it or leave it” attitude also appeared for Hannah, a 57-year-old white bisexual woman, where she portrayed her vagina as a source of power: “I have no tolerance for men insulting vaginas. All bodies have smells and odors. Their balls smell quite a bit I think! I read somewhere that men joke about vaginas because they’re threatened by the power of the vagina. Maybe that’s because we are the origin for all life, and what they’ve got just can’t compare.”

Discussion

When I initially asked these questions, I had wondered how closely participants’ responses would mirror the pop cultural themes mentioned in Braun and Wilkinson (2001). Ultimately, while I found some overlaps, particularly the vagina as disgusting and the vagina as somehow sexually inadequate, several new findings emerged as well. While women did not construct their own vaginas as vulnerable and abused, or as largely absent or passive, they chose instead to describe them as needing maintenance and feeling frustrating, unknown, ambivalent, or even affirmative. Further, a “meta theme” seemed to emerge that ran through each of the seven themes: men’s appraisals of vaginas as central to women’s feelings about their own vaginas.

When examining the results of this study as a whole, women overwhelmingly used strong emotional language when discussing their genitals, often evoking descriptions of anxiety, excess, frustration, and the need for control (see Themes 1, 3, 4, and 5). Negativity about women’s vaginas extended into multiple arenas—discussions of pubic hair, menstrual sex, and genital self-image—and infused their understandings of both body image and sexuality. Whether articulating that their vaginas felt “dirty” or “gross,” or expressing anger at their sexual functioning, or seeing their pubic hair as potentially injurious or troublesome for partners, women generally saw their vaginas as problematic and emotionally charged. Further, when looking at the qualities of how their vaginas “measured up” to others—whether when looking at pornography, hearing about their male partners assessing their vagina in comparison to other women, or internalizing the notion that their vagina was failing or lacking in some way—it was clear that women’s body image extended far beyond the usual suspects of weight, fatness, breast size, and skin type. Instead, the vagina became a site of abjection, a target for their anxieties about both sexuality and self-image. The fact that these “genital panics” had multiple dimensions—and touched upon hair, menstruation, sexual functioning, the appearance of the labia, smelliness, and (highly racialized) notions of “darkness”—made it all the more clear that the vagina signifies immense emotional and cultural baggage for women.

The notable infusion of internalized sexism and internalized racism into women’s narratives about their vaginas also seemed important when looking at these data, as genital self-image research has largely ignored issues of race when asking women to assess vaginal self-image while body image researchers have examined race in other areas (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2012; Kronenfeld, Reba-Harrelson, Van Halle, Reyes, & Bulik, 2010; Makkar & Strube, 1995). The repeated themes of feeling “too dark,” or seeing one’s own vagina as inadequate in comparison to an internalized white ideal, presented a vivid portrait of how sexism and racism informed women’s understandings of their bodies. The fact that these comparisons may also exist in women’s *partners’* thoughts and feelings only seemed to intensify the already problematic qualities of these racialized descriptors. These results suggest that body image researchers and even clinical practitioners interested in race, class, and gender may want to work more closely with women’s emotions about their vaginas as sites of distress and oppression. This study suggests that therapists and counselors working on body image should not neglect the vagina as a site of distress, affirmation, and/or (potentially) strong emotion, as vaginal self-image could be an important addition to body image work already undertaken in therapy. A few of these narratives also pointed to the potential internalization of anti-vagina messages for lesbian and bisexual women as well, a finding I see as surprising in light of previous research on menstrual sex and sexual identity (Fahs, 2011).

While positive feelings toward women’s vaginas also appeared in these narratives—providing some hope that women can effectively combat the cultural and social context that devalues and

degrades the vagina—these positive feelings still often coexisted with ambivalence, partner negativity, and stories of “overcoming” others’ negativity toward women’s genitals. Whether via mothers’ criticisms, partners’ comparisons, or pornography’s narrow definitions of acceptable bodies, women faced an uphill battle to seeing their vaginas as sites of affirmation. In particular, male partners’ often-negative evaluations seemed like a major component in women’s internalization of vaginal negativity, a finding with notable implications for practitioners and researchers alike. Notions of the “unnatural” aspects of the vagina seemed particularly curious, as some women considered pubic hair as fundamentally unnatural, while the shaved, hairless, and pre-pubescent vagina felt more intuitive and “normal” to them. This tension represented yet another area that some participants could combat—for example, Hannah seeing her vagina as a site of jealousy for men—while others fell fully into the trap of seeing their vaginas as problematic and dirty.

Even though several participants described positive experience with menstrual sex, negativity toward menstrual sex still outweighed women’s positive assessments. The repeated theme of constructing menstrual blood as an expulsion of waste (with Angelica even likening it to “shitting and peeing”) also painted a vivid picture of women’s understandings of their bodies and their vaginas. The construction of shedding menstrual blood and tissue in order to “clean” out their bodies again situated women’s bodies as *inherently* dirty, with menstruation as a rare time that women could “rid” themselves of their “toxic” menstrual blood. This portrayal of women’s bodies as a site of contamination in need of control, maintenance, and the flushing of excessive waste, has roots in a long history of seeing women’s bodies as sites of pollution (Douglas, 2002). That this pollution narrative has been internalized as true for some women only further cements links between vaginal negativity and the belief in women’s bodies as disgusting and revolting.

This study also suggests that seemingly benign aspects of the body—particularly pubic hair and menstrual cycles—contain notable implications for social identities and social inequalities. Much of my previous work has argued that body hair is far from a silly, insignificant, or trivial topic, but rather, reveals much about the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic contexts in which women construct their body image and sense of self (Fahs, 2012, 2013, 2014; Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Similarly, how women feel about their vaginas, and the vividness of patriarchy and misogyny that showed up in women’s narratives about their genitals, reveals much about the struggles women face to make peace with their bodies. From descriptions of women refusing to look at their vaginas to the hyper-competitive comparisons to porn star vaginas to routines that require constant washing and rewashing of the “always dirty” site of the vagina, these participants outlined just how much work we still have in the area of improving women’s vaginal self-image.

Limitations and Future Directions

By using qualitative methods that elicited subjective narratives from women, this study discovered new themes that previous studies had overlooked or obscured. That said, certain research decisions may have affected the results of this study, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured only some, but certainly not all, of the facets of women’s feelings and attitudes about their vaginas. Each of these three subjects—pubic hair, menstrual sex, and vaginal self-image—deserves more specific further interrogation, just as additional qualitative research could provide further insights into how women conceptualize their vaginas in a variety of contexts. Research about women’s partnered sexuality and its impact on vaginal self-image could prove useful, as would a larger scale study on women of color discussing their vaginal

self-image. A larger sample size would also make it easier to confirm the ways that genital self-images are patterned along racial lines or even geographical location (as this study sampled only urban and suburban women). Qualitative work, by its nature, often cannot address social identity patterns and is thus limited by its more complex and detailed analysis of a smaller number of individuals. Intersectional work that examines vaginal self-image in relation to race, class, gender, and sexual identity could also prove especially interesting, just as a better accounting for the impacts of sexual abuse could serve as an important future direction. Further, research into potentially protective aspects that combat vaginal negativity—including, perhaps, women’s relationships with their mothers, partners, and friends; openness about sexuality; experiences with childbirth; vagina affirming sex education; and connections activism about vaginas and menstruation—could also prove useful in assessing both the ways that women can fight back and the places in our culture that affirm and support women’s positive vaginal self-image.

Researchers and practitioners could also work together to develop more comprehensive models of body image that include vaginal self-image as a key component of body image. Because this study found so much vaginal negativity that attached to racialized themes, working to improve women’s comfort with their own (and all women’s) vaginas could impact not only their internalized sexism but also their internalized racism. Media scholars and activists should also continue to combat vaginal negativity, including rebelling against jokes about vaginas, products that “manage” and “contain” the “unruly” vagina, the portrayal of vaginas as inherently obscene or unspeakable, and the depiction of vaginas as an absence or an overall lack in comparison to men’s genitals. After all, body image results from a fusion of family, media, educational, medical, peer, and partner influences, not to mention sociocultural context, indicating that each of these areas must conspire to combat vaginal negativity collectively.

Ultimately, cultural representations of vaginas directly influence how women experience and see their own vaginas, a finding that warrants particularly consideration from practitioners, feminist activists, and sexual health experts (Braun, 1999; Braun & Tiefer, 2009; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). How women feel about their vaginas impacts many aspects of their lives, from whether they seek out gynecological exams (DeMaria, Hollub, Herbenick, 2011) to how they feel about their sexual interactions with their partners (Weaver & Byers, 2013; Wiederman, 2000). Women’s feelings of anger, frustration, disgust, revulsion, ambivalence, anxiety, and affirmation do not (and cannot) exist without a context. As Braun and Wilkinson (2001) wrote, “If women’s understandings of the vagina are developed in relation to their socio-cultural and historical context, then representations of the vagina exist as cultural resources that women (and men) can use for making sense of the vagina and their experiences of it. Likewise, these representations can be resisted, and potentially challenged. From this theoretical viewpoint, representations are not simply ‘ideas,’ but have material impact on people’s lives, with implications for women’s sexual and reproductive health” (p.18). How this impact is seen, felt, or experienced—and how it transforms women’s understandings of their sexuality, health, and body image—makes “genital panics” all the more salient and important as a social and political problem.

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