

Male Stigmatization of Female Body Hair

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Body hair, also known as fur, is one defining characteristic of mammals. According to studies, it has clear biological purposes in the animal kingdom, such as “retention of heat, sexual dimorphism, attraction of mates, protection of skin and reflection (or absorption) of sunlight” (Bergman, 2004, p. 1). Despite these functions, contemporary culture encourages the idea of hair removal, something that is specifically significant for women, since they are pressured by society to have a hairless body. A survey conducted by the American Laser Centers in 2008 shows that an average woman spends from \$10,000 to \$23,000 to remove body hair over a lifetime (Vora, 2021). Considering the high rate of women that undergo body hair removal, it’s important to understand the reasons behind their choice and consider if a hairless body has an impact on how males perceive women for mating. In this paper, I will argue that men prefer women who remove their body hair and analyze the reasons behind their choice. Moreover, I’ll argue that historical and media perspectives play a key role in stigmatizing female body hair, thereby influencing the majority of men’s expectations when choosing a woman to pursue a relationship.

There’s evidence that heterosexual men find women’s secondary sexual characteristics, which are developed during puberty, attractive. Both breast-size and waist to hip ratio are examples of that. Men prefer women with medium and large breasts and express a preference for a firm breast shape (Havlíček et al., 2016). Women’s breasts can potentially work as an evolutionary trick, aiming to communicate a higher chance of reproductive and lactational success (Kościński et al., 2020). Waist to hip ratio also plays a key role. According to the psychologist Devandra Singh, men clearly show a preference for women with a low waist-to-hip ratio, which is directly related to better health (Buss, 1994). Before going through puberty, the time when individuals become sexually mature to reproduce, men and women have similar body

characteristics. With this concept, it is possible to affirm that secondary sexual characteristics are an indicator that women are now fertile, something that men have evolved to identify in order to maximize their chances of procreation. By being attracted to females that are sexually matured and present visible signs of fertility and reproductive success, men increase their chances of passing on their genes and perpetuating them in future generations. From an evolutionary perspective, the meaning of human life is to pass on our genes through procreation, and thus it is important to look for these signs. With this in mind, men tend to choose females who present the reproductive maturity indicators (Buss, 1994) that develop during puberty.

The growth of body hair is also a secondary sexual feature, and therefore it is possible to assume that it is seen by men as an attractive characteristic. Puberty usually begins for females around 8 to 14 years old and it is expected that they will develop “thicker leg hair and terminal hair in the pubic area and armpits” (L. Brannon, 2020). As males look for outside features that make it visible that women are now sexually mature, body hair can be seen as a direct indicator. Additionally, when females enter menopause, the time when women in their 40s and 50s permanently cease to menstruate, their growth of body hair is also impacted. According to research conducted in 2012, the amount of women’s body hair tends to increase until they reach the menopausal period of their lives, after which their body hair decreases (Blume-Peytavi et al., 2012). Considering that menopause signals the end of women’s fertility and inability to become pregnant, it is clear that body hair is a key indicator of women’s fertile years, being mainly visible between puberty and menopause.

When it comes to women’s attraction to males, there is evidence that they prefer the growth of body hair in men. Males grow terminal hair in more parts of their bodies, including “face, chest, back, legs, arms, hands and feet” (L. Brannon, 2020). As in females, the

development of male body hair is associated with puberty and is an indicator of sexual maturity. A study conducted by Dixson and Brooks (2013) explored “the role of facial hair in women’s perceptions of men’s attractiveness, health, masculinity and parenting abilities.” According to their research, a heavy stubble beard was rated by women as most attractive, and men with full beards were rated the highest when it came to parental abilities (Dixson & Brooks, 2013). Facial hair amplifies male characteristics strongly valued by women in long term relationships, such as “age, social maturity, industriousness, sincerity and ambition” (Kenny & Fletcher, 1973; Pellegrini, 1973; Hellström & Tekle, 1994, 1996, as cited by Dixson & Brooks, 2013). Additionally, men’s facial hair is associated with sexual maturity, masculinity, aggression and dominance (Neave & Shields, 2008, as cited by Dixson & Brooks, 2013). Although these last two characteristics can be seen as negative, they are directly related to protection benefits for long-term relationships (Neave & Shields, 2008, as cited by Dixson & Brooks, 2013), explaining the full facial hair rating for high parental abilities. Another study that explored other determinants of sexual attraction concluded that women also rate men with hair in the chest and abdomen as more attractive (Dixson et al., 2003). Data clearly show that women prefer men with body hair, a direct indicator of sexual maturity. Considering that this feature is present in both men and women, the same would be expected when males look for attractive characteristics in women.

Despite the evidence that men should like female body hair, including the fact that it’s a signal that women are sexually matured, current research suggests differently. A study conducted in 2016 showed that heterosexual men aged between 19 and 38 years old consider pubic hair much less attractive than shaved female genitalia (Prokop, 2016). Additionally, an entertainment video by *Glamour* magazine exposed three men to a female mannequin with body hair and asked

them to alter it to make the body attractive to them. The subjects immediately removed all of the mannequin's arm, armpit, leg hair, indicating they prefer women with a hairless body (*Glamour*, 2016). However, besides these two sources, there is not enough evidence and scholarly articles on men's opinions regarding female body hair.

To further investigate men's preference for a hairless body and understand the factors behind their choice, I conducted a survey. The survey had heterosexual men as the target audience, and it involved a questionnaire on female body hair. Since Prokop's 2016 study was focused on pubic hair, I decided to gather data on body hair located in other parts of the female body. The survey was composed of three sections. Each section included a picture of a woman with visible leg and/or armpit hair and of a similar woman without body hair and asked the participants to choose the most attractive one and explain their answer. Below each picture, I also asked the participants to give an age estimate for the woman portrayed in the pictures. The survey was conducted through Google Docs and had a total of 21 subjects, aged 19-28 years old. To decrease the chance of bias in the result, the pictures included in each question were of women with similar physical features; the main difference between them was whether they had body hair or not.

One important result of my study was that women without body hair were perceived as younger when compared to the ones with body hair. Between the three pairs of pictures included in the survey, the women with a hairless body were considered younger by 87.3% of the responses. Considering this result, it is possible to draw a connection between female hair removal and the sexualization of young women. When women shave, they are removing one of their secondary sexual characteristics, and as a result they will look younger, in a prepubescence stage. In popular culture, infantilization of women is often seen as sexy (Sullivan, 2012). A well-

known example watched around the world would be Japanese anime, since they often sexualize underage female characters. Music videos, such as Britney Spears' ". . . Baby One More Time" also gives a sexual connotation to high school girls. With this in mind, it is possible to assume that women shave their body hair to look prepubescent, as men feel attracted to youth.

On top of that, the most important confirmation of my research is that men do indeed prefer women without body hair, no matter if it's located in the leg and/or armpit. In the "choose the most attractive picture" questions, the photo of a woman without body hair was rated significantly more attractive than the one with body hair, with 95.2% of the participants choosing the hairless women. When it came to explaining their answers, the participants stated the following opinions: preferring partners with smooth skin (95.2% of the participants), seeing body hair as an emasculating feature (85.7%), and considering that females "just look better" without body hair (28.5%). These results demonstrate that body hair is associated with femininity, and having a hairless body is an expectation of men towards women. Given that women need to find mates to procreate, they grow up trying to fit in the patriarchal society's expectations towards them. This means that they try to look "more feminine" by removing their body hair. A study by Kitzynger and Willmott (2002) found that the body hair growth of female participants made them see themselves as "unfeminine, abnormal and 'freakish.'" Despite being a natural secondary sexual characteristic, women don't feel comfortable with body hair, as they associate beauty with hairlessness (Kitzynger & Willmott 2002). Another study showed that women with body hair are perceived by both men and women as more aggressive, active, and strong, and also less sociable, intelligent, happy, and positive (Basow & Braman, 1998). Around 80% of women remove their leg and/or underarm hair often, and for them the reason behind this habit is to be pursued as feminine/attractive while also fitting into the social norms (Basow, 1991). These sources not

only reinforce the idea that female body hair is perceived as not feminine but also highlight that women share the same opinion as men about a natural feature of their own bodies.

Considering that female body hair is a natural secondary sexual characteristic, it is important to discuss why it's considered unfeminine by society. The book *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (Sherrow, 2006, p. 180) explores the origin of hair removal, also known as depilation. According to the book, the removal of pubic hair was common among ancient Hindus in India (Sherrow, 2006, p. 180). Ancient Egyptians also shaved their heads to prevent lice infection and made use of beeswax and alkali depilatory creams to remove leg hair (Sherrow, 2006, pg180). This illustrates how hair removal has always existed in human society across the globe. However, it has only become an important part of femininity between 1915–1945, especially in the Western world (Basow, 1991). Before this time, by looking at beauty books and catalogs, it is noticeable that most women didn't remove armpit and leg hair (Hope, 1982). In the first decades of the 20th century, dresses, sleeves, and skirts started to get shorter because of the shortage of fabrics during World Wars I and II (Webb-Liddall, 2019). In 1915, Gillette released its first razor marketed for females, called Milady Décolleté, and the company started to make explicit statements about the importance of female shaving for beauty and attractiveness (Webb-Liddall, 2019; Cochrane, 2018). By convincing society that natural body hair is “unfeminine, abnormal and ‘freakish’” (Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002), an enormous and lucrative market was created. In the 1940s, bikinis became popular in the US, and in the 1950s, with the first edition of *Playboy* magazine, a clean-shaven woman became the new symbol of sexiness (Cerini, 2020). This trend was interrupted in the 1960s. With the second feminist wave and the spread of hippie culture, pubic hair was neither uncommon nor seen as unnatural (Cerini, 2020). Unshaved female genitalia even started to be represented in *Playboy* (Cerini, 2020). This completely changed in

the following decades, however, as full body hair removal became not only preferred, but the norm. With bikinis getting smaller and low-cut, the removal of most or all pubic hair became extremely popular (Cerini, 2020). Also known as the Brazilian wax, this type of depilation exploded in the market as the media and celebrities began to support and advertise this completely hairless look (Webb-Liddall, 2019). Research associated exposure to certain magazines and TV shows with pubic hair removal (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2012, as cited by Li & Braun 2017). The famous show *Sex & the City*, for example, aired an episode in 2000 in which the main character got a full Brazilian wax (Webb-Liddall, 2019), influencing the masses to do the same. The practice continues to be popular today. By understanding the history behind female body hair removal, it is possible to see how it started as a way to generate profit through the development of a new market. Advertisements and media influence made female body hair removal escalate from the shaving of axillary hair and legs to bikini waxing and full shaving. It is interesting to see that the association of a hairless body with femininity grew over the course of decades to become what men see as ideal when looking for a mate today.

Uniting the perception of youth and femininity with the removal of body hair, there is a growing industry that is also responsible for these male expectations towards women: pornography. The fact that mainstream pornography represents a hairless female's genitalia, along with the increased accessibility to this type of content, directly contributes to the male vision that hair removal is normal, expected, and an attractive feminine characteristic (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011, as cited by Li & Braun 2017). Additionally, a study that analyzed 2,600 randomly selected pornography covers from 1995 to 2007 showed that over 20% of them depicted images of women dressed as teenage girls with things such as braces, pigtails, stuffed animals, and school uniforms (Jensen, 2010). The oversexualization of youth in adult movies

only happens when the character being portrayed is a woman (Jensen, 2010). A hairless body is a direct representation of a pre-puberty body, and pornography uses this fact to associate childish with sexy. By having constant access to this type of content, men grow to expect a hairless body as an indicator of youth and femininity. They form the wrong expectation of how the female body should look, which directly affects women, as they report being influenced or pressured by sexual partners to remove body hair (Fahs, 2014 as cited by Li & Braun 2017).

The existing stigma towards female body hair is a complex topic. Considering the evolutionary roots, men should feel attracted to female body hair, as it is a secondary sexual characteristic, such as breast size and waist to hip ratio, and hence a sign of sexual maturity and ability to procreate. However, the opposite happens. Women regularly remove their body hair, and the media portrays them as more attractive for doing so. Current research confirms this, showing that heterosexual men are more attracted to women with a hairless body. Although this seems like a satisfactory explanation, supported by data, for why women remove their body hair, this line of thought fails to consider the reasons behind this aspect of male attraction towards women and the external factors influencing their decisions. The removal of body hair is highly influenced by marketing strategies and media, which paints hair removal as a representation of youth and femininity. Therefore, the primary reason for the male preference for a hairless body is the preconceived expectation towards women regarding youth and femininity. There is a socially constructed, artificial link between shaving and attractiveness/femininity. Biologically, sexually mature females have body hair, but society has made femininity more connected to youth and pre-pubescence than to a woman's ability to reproduce. The pornographic industry also plays a key role by exposing men to oversexualized images of young women without body hair. Adult movies reinforce the association of hair removal with youth and femininity, and men grow with

this distorted image of how females in reproductive age should look. As a result, their expectation is transformed into societal pressure, as women start feeling abnormal for having body hair and decide to remove it in order to be seen as attractive.

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