

THE HAIRLESS IDEAL

Women and Their Body Hair

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A major component of “femininity” in the United States today is a hairless body, a norm that developed in the United States between 1915–1945. Little has been written regarding the development of this norm, and virtually no empirical research has been done to assess how universally ascribed to is this standard or why women actually remove their leg and underarm hair. More than 200 women from two national professional organizations responded to a mailed questionnaire (response rate 56%). The majority (around 80%) remove their leg and/or underarm hair at least occasionally. Two types of reasons for shaving emerged: feminine/attractiveness reasons and social/normative reasons. Most women start shaving for the latter reasons but continue to shave for the former reasons. Certain groups, however, were least likely to remove leg and/or underarm hair: strongly feminist women and self-identified lesbians. The results of the study are discussed in terms of the function the hairlessness norm may serve in our culture.

A major component of “femininity” in the United States today is a hairless body (even pubic hair may be shaved). Discussions by feminists of the taboo against body hair (e.g., Brownmiller, 1984; Chapkis, 1986; Freedman, 1986) often focus on facial hair or “excessive” hair growth (hirsutism). Very few writers focus on the norm for *all* women to remove leg and underarm hair. Furthermore, there is virtually no empirical research

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regarding the universality of this behavior in the United States or why women actually engage in these efforts. The present exploratory study attempts to answer these questions.

Hope (1982) examined the development of the norm for white women to remove body hair in the United States by examining advertisements in *Harper's Bazaar* and *McCall's*, beauty books, and catalogues from Sears between the years 1915–1945. Prior to 1915, most women in the United States did not remove underarm or leg hair, and there were very few ads relating to body hair, probably because very little body hair was publicly visible due to the clothing styles. However, visible hair on places other than the head was viewed as “superfluous.” The only women who removed body hair during this period seem to have been vaudeville dancers, women who displayed large portions of skin. Between 1915–1919, “The Great Underarm Campaign” in advertising began. The Gillette Safety Razor Company introduced a special razor for women in 1915 and advertised the “Milady Decollete” as the “safest and most sanitary method of acquiring a smooth underarm” (Adams, 1978, p. 92). Most ads were instructional and informed women that new dress styles (sleeveless or very sheer sleeves) made removing underarm hair important since visible hair not growing on the head was “superfluous,” “unwanted,” “ugly,” and “unfashionable.” Legs were never specifically mentioned during these years, nor was shaving itself mentioned. Men shaved; “women merely smoothed” (Adams, 1978; Hope, 1982).

Between 1920–1940, Hope (1982) found that the ads for hair removal products changed both in number (becoming less numerous) and tone (less instructional, more focused on the specific product). Indeed, most advertising during these years focused on giving people reasons to purchase a particular product—what the consumer would gain from a particular purchase or lose by not making the purchase (Fox, 1984; Meyers, 1984). The Gillette Company marketed a new scaled-down safety razor for women in 1924, the “Bobby Gillette,” to keep women’s newly bared neck “smooth and white” along with their underarms (Adams, 1978, p. 109). The 1920s also were a time when advertising in general seemed focused on changing the human body (Fox, 1984). Advertising of products such as mouthwash, deodorant (to women), tooth products, and sanitary napkins, all “projected a WASP vision of a tasteless, colorless, odorless, sweatless world” and may have been aimed at the waves of newly arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe, Italy, and Ireland, who came to the United States in the early 1900s (Fox, 1984, p. 101).

During the 1920s, an increasing proportion of magazine ads emphasized the importance of appearance for women in order to “ensure [her mate’s] fidelity in particular and home security in general” (Ewen, 1976, p. 177). It became a woman’s duty to attract and please men by her appearance in the “beauty contest of life” or else lose out on patriarchal privilege (Ewen, 1976; Marchand, 1985). The “right” look was slender, youthful, sensual, and sophisticated. As women’s “duty” to be sexually attractive evolved,

skirt lengths became shorter, silk stockings began to be widely worn, and bathing suits became more abbreviated. It is likely that some leg shaving began during this time period due to both the emphasis on sexual appeal and the emphasis on cleanliness and meticulous hygiene. Certainly, fashion advertisements of sleek models and motion pictures of leggy chorus girls showed no visible body hair (Brownmiller, 1984). Advertisers mentioned but did not focus on the legs during this period, perhaps because legs were seen as too sexual, leading as they do to the genital area. Indeed, the word “legs” was viewed as too bold to be used with respect to women; instead, women had “limbs.” It also was harder to remove hair from so large an area as the legs. Furthermore, women could wear “flesh-colored” dress shields and heavy stockings to avoid hair removal. Hope (1982) speculated that the lack of emphasis on leg hair in advertising was due in part to cultural ambivalence regarding the changing roles of women. Women had won the right to vote, had abandoned restrictive clothing, and were increasingly present in the labor force, yet they were viewed in ads as nearly exclusively homemakers and narcissistic consumers (Ewen, 1976). “Amid an ideology of unsullied chastity, women were reduced to a primarily sexual identity, or to the identity of a child” (Ewen & Ewen, 1982, p. 237).

Examining the period between 1941–1945, Hope (1982) found a “minor assault on leg hair” in ads and advice books, coinciding with the shortage of silk stockings due to the war, the resultant bare-legged style, and the introduction of sheer nylons (Brownmiller, 1984). By the end of this period, the majority of women removed both leg and underarm hair as part of their personal hygiene routine in order to be clean, neat, attractive, and “modern” (Hope, 1982). Ads no longer had to convince women to remove body hair. Instead, they concentrated on proving that one product was superior to all others. Thus, with the help of Madison Avenue, hair removal behavior had become normative. This pattern of convincing women that they are inadequate without a particular product has been the hallmark of advertising at least since the 1950s, as can be seen in later campaigns for deodorants, diets, cosmetics, hair coloring, and feminine hygiene products, among others (Fox, 1984). The primary message in most of these ads is that women need to change their looks and their bodies in order to be socially acceptable, especially to men. Although ads aimed at men also try to manipulate them into buying a product by playing on their insecurities, especially regarding getting and keeping a job, the vast majority of appearance-related products are geared to women.

But why body hair? Societal norms since ancient times have varied with respect to body hair. During ancient Rome, women removed body hair with hot tar and razor-sharp shells. Beards for men went in and out of fashion throughout recorded time, frequently for functional reasons, such as to decrease the ability of one’s opponent to get a handhold during military combat (Adams, 1978). The years 1915–1945 witnessed dramatic changes in women’s roles. As middle-class white women moved out of

their “separate sphere” of domestic life both physically and behaviorally, the removal of body hair may have served to maintain a certain distinction between the genders. It also may have served to de-emphasize women’s adult status, since increased body hair and the development of underarm hair are secondary sex characteristics that develop after puberty. Since hair has long had sexual associations for men and for women, its removal also may have conveyed two closely associated sexual messages—that a woman’s mature sexuality is controlled at the same time as her “tamed” sensuality is on display (Brownmiller, 1984; Freedman, 1986). The current taboo against showing pubic hair reflects this process. Women’s bathing suits increasingly reveal the pubic area; women now are encouraged to remove or bleach those hairs that show. Visible hair, not the pubic area itself, is too risqué to reveal.

This examination of the development of the hairless norm for women suggests that the norm developed as a result of a number of social forces, especially the increased movement of white women into the public sphere and the rise of the advertising industry. The norm apparently serves two functions: (a) it exaggerates the differences between women and men, and (b) it equates female attractiveness with youth (Brownmiller, 1984; Chapkis, 1986; Freedman, 1986; Hope, 1982; Sontag, 1979). These functions tie in with other prescriptions for female attractiveness; for example, a thin body and the use of makeup. Fundamentally, the hairless norm signals that women’s bodies are not attractive or indeed acceptable when natural. Given these assumptions, it is predicted that the more committed a woman is to feminism, the less likely it is that she will conform to the norm of hairlessness. Furthermore, norms for female attractiveness implicitly or explicitly revolve around attracting men (Dworkin, 1989). Therefore, it is predicted that women who are not trying to attract men (i.e., lesbians) will be less likely to conform to the norm than other women.

In addition to examining the frequency of hair removal as a function of feminist identification and sexual orientation, the present study attempts to explore the reasons women give for removing their hair. It is recognized that people are not always aware of the reasons why they behave in a certain way. Nonetheless, since the pitch of advertisements for hair removal products emphasize that to be feminine, attractive, and socially acceptable is to be hairless, it is predicted that these reasons will predominate. Since this study is exploratory, differences among women with respect to their reasons for hair removal as a function of their feminist identification and sexual orientation also will be examined.

METHOD

Participants

Two groups of professional women were surveyed, since they constituted a readily available national sample: 210 members of the National Women’s

Studies Association (NWSA), and 210 members of the American Psychological Association (APA). The first group was chosen to maximize the number of feminist and lesbian women; the second group was chosen to control for educational level and professional status. Names were chosen randomly from the most recent membership lists according to their position on a page. There was a 66% response rate for NWSA members (138 participants) and a 46% response rate for APA members (97 participants). Thus, there were 235 women in the sample, primarily white (91%), ranging in age from 20–81 ($M = 44.0$, $SD = 10.6$).

Procedures

Each participant received a 16-item questionnaire that was developed from pilot interviews with 100 women, primarily white.¹ Information was obtained regarding the woman's degree of perceived body hair (rated from (1) *very little* to (5) *a great deal*) and rate of growth of body hair (rated from (1) *very slowly* to (5) *very quickly*). She indicated whether she removed her leg and/or underarm hair. If she did, the age she began and her reasons for both beginning to do so and continuing to do so were assessed separately. Fourteen possible reasons were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) *not at all* to (5) *major reason*. If the respondent did not remove leg and/or underarm hair, seven possible reasons for not doing so were assessed using the same scale. Demographic information also was obtained on age, ethnic identity, generational status (first-, second-, third-, or later-generation American), marital status, sexual orientation (rated on a 5-point scale from *exclusively lesbian* to *exclusively heterosexual*), and identification as a feminist (rated on a 5-point scale from *not at all* to *very much so*). In addition, there was room for comments, and about half of all respondents made some.

RESULTS

Results indicate that, as expected, the majority (85%) of professional women began to remove their leg and/or underarm hair, most by age 14. Approximately 81% continue to do so, at least occasionally. About half of the respondents remove hair at least once a week, although about 25% of those who remove hair do so only seasonally (mainly in warm weather). The primary method of removal is shaving (96%). As would be expected statistically, most women rate their degree of body hair and rate of hair growth as "average." Frequency of hair removal is significantly related to perceived growth rate, $r(179) = .157$, $p = .035$, for legs; $r(166) = .181$, $p = .019$, for underarms.

In order to clarify the reasons why women shave, each set of reasons was factor analyzed using a principal components analysis and varimax rotation. Two factors were identified for the reasons why women began

to remove body hair. Starting Factor 1, accounting for 69% of the variance, is composed of eight reasons (loading $> .35$) primarily related to femininity and sexual attractiveness; Starting Factor 2, accounting for 23% of the variance, is composed of four reasons primarily related to social norms. Table 1 contains the factor loadings of each reason in addition to the mean ratings. Interestingly, although feminine/attractiveness reasons (Starting Factor 1) account for most of the variance, the most important reasons for starting to shave were the social/normative ones (Starting Factor 2), especially "It was the thing to do." One reason, "Men prefer women without leg and underarm hair," loads strongly on both factors, but more strongly on Starting Factor 1. Two reasons do not load strongly on either factor, and both were rated as relatively unimportant reasons: "My husband/boyfriend wanted me to shave" and "Body hair is unclean."

Approximately 30% ($n = 55$ for legs, 57 for underarms) of the women who started removing body hair stopped at some point: 18% ($n = 10$) restarted on their legs; 7% ($n = 4$) restarted on their underarms. (Slightly more women continue to remove leg hair [77%] than underarm hair [74%]). The reasons why women continue to shave fit into two factors (see Table 1). Continuing Factor 1, accounting for 62% of the variance, is similar to Starting Factor 1, and is composed primarily of six reasons related to femininity and sexual attractiveness. Continuing Factor 2, accounting for 27% of the variance, is similar to Starting Factor 2, and is composed primarily of six reasons related to social norms. Of the 81% who presently continue to remove leg and/or underarm hair, the strongest reasons given were the feminine/attractiveness ones (Continuing Factor 1), especially the reason that the respondents like the soft, silky feeling, and it makes them feel attractive. Two reasons do not load strongly on either factor: "Body hair is uncomfortable" and "Body hair is unclean." Two reasons that load on Starting Factor 1 load on Continuing Factor 2: "I don't want to look like a man" and "I don't want to look like an animal," but these were rated by respondents as relatively unimportant reasons.

For the 38% of the sample who stopped removing their leg and/or underarm hair at some point, the strongest reasons given were: "Women's bodies are fine as they are," "Women shouldn't have to remove their body hair," and "Shaving is stupid." These three reasons, which challenge the social norms of what is acceptable female behavior, constitute 96% of the variance among the seven rated reasons for not shaving (see Table 1). Women who stop shaving their legs do not rate themselves as having less body hair than do women who shave ($M_s = 2.9$), but they do view their hair as growing significantly less quickly ($M_s = 2.7$ and 3.2 , respectively), $F(2,225) = 5.53, p < .01$.

Given the oppressive social norm that women must change their bodies in order to be socially acceptable, it was predicted that women who identify as feminists would conform less to the norm than other women. In the

Table 1

Mean ratings (SD) and mean factor loadings for hair removal reasons

	Ratings	Factor 1	Factor 2
<i>Reasons for starting (N = 199)</i>			
It was the thing to do.	3.9 (1.3)	-.059	.634
Women are supposed to shave.	3.0 (1.5)	.096	.624
It made me feel grown up.	2.9 (1.5)	.104	.552
People would look at me funny if I didn't.	2.7 (1.5)	.166	.586
It made me feel attractive.	2.7 (1.4)	.581	.314
It made me feel feminine.	2.6 (1.3)	.663	.394
I liked the soft, silky feeling.	2.5 (1.4)	.393	.103
Men prefer women without . . . hair.	2.1 (1.4)	.577	.486
Body hair is gross/ugly/disgusting.	2.0 (1.2)	.458	.195
I didn't want to look like a man.	1.6 (1.1)	.630	.174
I didn't want to look like an animal.	1.2 (0.7)	.502	-.019
Body hair was uncomfortable.	1.6 (1.0)	.378	-.042
Body hair is unclean.	1.2 (0.5)	.329	-.119
My husband/boyfriend wanted me to shave.	1.2 (0.6)	.195	.088
<i>Reasons for continuing to remove hair (N = 190)</i>			
I like the soft, silky feeling.	2.6 (1.4)	.592	-.183
It makes me feel attractive.	2.5 (1.3)	.751	.018
It makes me feel feminine.	2.1 (1.3)	.779	.195
Men prefer women without . . . hair.	1.8 (1.2)	.573	.350
My husband/lover wants me to shave.	1.5 (1.0)	.530	.185
Body hair is gross/ugly/disgusting.	1.6 (1.0)	.346	.079
It is the thing to do.	2.3 (1.4)	-.050	.611
People would look at me funny if I didn't.	2.3 (1.4)	-.055	.512
Women are supposed to shave.	2.1 (1.3)	.001	.491
I don't want to look like a man.	1.4 (0.9)	.328	.527
I don't want to look like an animal.	1.1 (0.5)	.274	.420
It makes me feel grown up.	1.1 (0.5)	.221	.354
Body hair is uncomfortable.	1.8 (1.2)	.320	-.037
Body hair is unclean.	1.1 (0.5)	.236	.100
<i>Reasons for not removing hair (N = 90)</i>			
Women's bodies are fine as they are.	4.0 (1.6)	.856	
Women shouldn't have to remove . . . hair.	4.0 (1.6)	.879	
It's stupid.	3.2 (1.7)	.683	
I don't really need to.	2.6 (1.7)	-.066	
I'm too lazy.	1.9 (1.3)	.329	
My skin is sensitive.	1.8 (1.3)	-.046	
It goes against my cultural background.	1.3 (0.9)	.005	

Table 2
 Percentage of women who do not shave by
 feminist identification and sexual orientation

	<i>Legs</i>	<i>Underarms</i>
<i>Feminist identification</i>	*	*
Very strong (<i>n</i> = 143)	28	34
Strong (<i>n</i> = 46)	17	13
Low to moderate (<i>n</i> = 46)	11	11
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	**	**
Lesbian (<i>n</i> = 28)	39	46
Bisexual (<i>n</i> = 59)	39	39
Heterosexual (<i>n</i> = 143)	13	16

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

sample, 61% of the women self-identified *very much so* as a feminist, 20% slightly less strongly, 15% moderately, and 4% only a little or not at all. Because of the small number of women who identified as a feminist only a little or not at all ($n = 10$), this group was combined with those who identified only moderately. There is no difference in degree of body hair or rate of growth as a function of degree of feminist identification. Feminist identification also is unrelated to how frequently a woman removes her hair, for those who do. However, as identification as a feminist increases, so does the likelihood of not removing underarm hair, $\chi^2(2) = 14.71$, $p = .001$, and leg hair, $\chi^2(2) = 6.70$, $p < .05$, supporting the experimental hypothesis (see Table 2 for percentages). About one out of three very strongly identified feminists does not remove underarm hair, and nearly that percentage does not remove leg hair, about triple the frequency of low to moderately identified feminists. Nearly all of the women who started shaving and then stopped at some point (although a few restarted) were very strong feminists.

There were no significant differences among the three feminist-identification groups with respect to the two sets of reasons for starting to shave (see Table 3). All groups rated the social/normative reasons the highest. For continuing to shave, all groups rated the feminine/attractiveness reasons the highest, but there were significant group differences in the actual ratings (Continuing Factor 1), $F(2,187) = 3.79$, $MS(E) = 24.74$, $p < .05$. Women who rated themselves as very strong feminists rated the feminine/attractiveness reasons the lowest of all groups (see Table 3).

The three groups also significantly differed with respect to the three political reasons for not shaving, $F(2,87) = 5.68$, $MS(E) = 16.71$, $p < .01$, with the women who rated themselves low-to-moderate in terms of feminist identification rating these reasons significantly lower than the

Table 3
Mean rating per reason for each factor score by
feminist status and sexual orientation

	<i>Start</i>		<i>Continue</i>		<i>Do Not</i> <i>Factor</i>
	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	
<i>Feminist identification</i>			*		**
Very strong					
<i>M</i>	2.0	3.2	1.9	1.7	3.9
<i>SD</i>	.80	1.12	.76	.64	1.33
Strong					
<i>M</i>	2.2	2.9	2.2	1.7	4.0
<i>SD</i>	.69	1.09	.84	.70	1.25
Low to moderate					
<i>M</i>	2.0	3.0	2.2	1.6	2.4
<i>SD</i>	.70	.93	.99	.59	1.67
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	*		***		
Lesbian					
<i>M</i>	1.8	3.5	1.3	1.7	4.4
<i>SD</i>	.75	1.28	.43	.72	.60
Bisexual					
<i>M</i>	1.9	3.2	1.8	1.6	3.7
<i>SD</i>	.72	1.23	.62	.61	1.31
Heterosexual					
<i>M</i>	2.1	3.0	2.2	1.7	3.4
<i>SD</i>	.77	.97	.87	.64	1.71

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

women who rated themselves as either strong or very strong feminists. However, since there were only five women who rated themselves low-to-moderate in terms of feminist identification and who did not shave, these results should be viewed cautiously.

A category that overlaps with feminist identification is sexual orientation. Although 63% of the sample identify as exclusively heterosexual (12% as primarily heterosexual, 6% as bisexual, 8% as primarily lesbian, and 12% as exclusively lesbian), exclusive heterosexuals are overrepresented among the less feminist groups and underrepresented among the very strong feminist, $\chi^2(6) = 49.76$, $p < .001$. All of the nonfeminists, 92% of the moderate feminists, and 87% of the strong feminists identify as exclusively heterosexual, whereas only 45% of the very strong feminists are exclusively heterosexual. Thus, differences found between very strong feminists and other groups may be confounded by differences in sexual orientation. Because of the small n s in the strictly bisexual category, and

because the two groups of major interest were the exclusively heterosexual and the exclusively lesbian groups, the three middle groups (primarily heterosexual, bisexual, and primarily lesbian) were combined to form a larger bisexual group consisting of 25% of the sample. Groups differed significantly with respect to age, $F(2,231) = 7.18, p < .001$, with heterosexuals being significantly older ($M = 46.0$) than lesbians ($M = 39.4$) and bisexual women ($M = 41.5$).

When hair removal behavior was examined as a function of sexual orientation, very strong differences emerged (see Table 2). Whereas only 13% of exclusively heterosexual women do not remove leg hair, 39% of lesbian and bisexual women do not, $\chi^2(2) = 21.342, p < .001$. A similar pattern exists with respect to removing underarm hair, with nearly half of the lesbians not shaving, $\chi^2(2) = 19.751, p < .001$. There were no differences among groups regarding degree or growth of hair. Thus, the hypothesis that the hairless norm sets a standard of appearance that is considered attractive to men was partially supported by the finding that women who do not primarily seek or have male partners were less likely to remove leg and/or underarm hair than were women who defined themselves as exclusively heterosexual.

Sexual orientation groups also differed significantly with respect to the feminine/attractiveness reasons for removing hair, both when starting to shave (Starting Factor 1), $F(2,195) = 3.21, MS(E) = 35.95, p < .05$, and when continuing (Continuing Factor 1), $F(2,186) = 12.05, MS(E) = 22.86, p < .001$ (see Table 3 for means). Exclusively heterosexual women were significantly more likely to use these reasons than lesbians and bisexuals. The three groups differed with respect to their single strongest reason for continuing to shave. For lesbians it was that people would look at them oddly if they did not ($M = 2.6$), for bisexual women it was because they like the silky feeling ($M = 2.5$), and for heterosexual women it was because it makes them feel attractive ($M = 2.8$). There were no differences among groups regarding frequency of hair removal. The three sexual orientation groups differed slightly ($p < .10$) on political reasons for not shaving, with lesbians rating the political reasons most strongly.

DISCUSSION

As expected, the majority (about 80%) of the sample remove their leg and/or underarm hair. This study throws light on the reasons why they do so. Girls start shaving at puberty primarily because of social and normative reasons, particularly because "it was the thing to do." Thus, shaving seems to act as a rite of passage for girls, perhaps analogous to shaving facial hair for boys. Unlike boys, however, who generally cannot wait to shave, many of the respondents wrote of parents and/or friends who subtly or not so subtly indicated that it was time they started to shave despite

their own disinterest. When the age breakdown of the sample was examined, it was found that women over age 60 ($n = 21$) started removing both their leg and underarm hair significantly ($p < .001$) later than did the other groups ($M = 18.5$ for legs, $F(4,179) = 8.83$; $M = 17.3$ for underarms, $F(4,169) = 5.07$), supporting Hope's (1982) findings that the norm to remove leg hair for women became very strong in the 1940s.

Most women continue to shave for reasons relating to femininity and sexual attractiveness. Few respondents say that they remove leg and/or underarm hair for functional reasons; i.e., that body hair is unclean or uncomfortable. Few also say body hair is gross, ugly, or disgusting; or that they shave to avoid looking like an animal or even like a man. Furthermore, few say they shave to appeal to men. Although self-reports may not be entirely accurate, the results do suggest that white women shave primarily because it is socially normative and because shaving is tied to feeling attractive and feminine. Not coincidentally, this is the major pitch of nearly all current advertising. The result is that most white women shave at least once a week, and many once a day. It would be interesting to survey men's attitudes toward women's body hair to see if the advertised message actually reflects men's opinions.

Given the pervasiveness of the hairless norm, it is surprising that so many women do not conform (about 20%). Even among those who do remove leg and/or underarm hair, many do so only occasionally. It must be kept in mind that although the sample probably was representative of the groups from which they were drawn (NWSA and APA), the women in this study are more highly educated, more professional, and probably more feminist than most other women in the United States. Whites also are overrepresented in this sample, as probably are lesbians and bisexuals. Furthermore, it is likely that women who do not remove leg and/or underarm hair would more readily respond to the survey questionnaire than women who continue to remove hair, thereby inflating the percentage of women who do not shave. There is a need to administer this questionnaire to less well-educated and less feminist women. It seems reasonable to posit that such groups should conform to the standard of hairlessness to a greater extent than the current groups, although their reasons for doing so may be different.

The large majority of women who did not shave their legs identified as very strong feminists (75.5% of those who do not shave) and/or as not exclusively heterosexual (64.2% of those who do not shave). The major reasons these women gave for not shaving were political. They think that women's bodies are fine as they are, that women should not have to remove body hair, and that shaving is stupid. More than one-third of the very strong feminists stopped shaving at some point. These results are in line with the two experimental hypotheses that the hairlessness norm denigrates women's bodies and exists to make women more appealing to men, either by emphasizing a woman's childlike qualities or by emphasizing

ing the difference between women and men (Brownmiller, 1984; Chapkis, 1986; Freedman, 1986; Hope, 1982; Sontag, 1979). Feminists, who are most likely to recognize the hairlessness norm as oppressive to women, and lesbians, who have the least interest in appealing to men, are least likely to conform to the norm.

Why then do most very strong feminists (72%) continue to remove leg and/or underarm hair? The social norm that smooth, hairless skin is part of female attractiveness appears to be accepted by both feminists and nonfeminists, but very strong feminists rate this factor lower than the other groups. The fact that there were very few nonfeminists in the sample limits the ability to find contrasts among the groups. Clearly, a more heterogeneous sample of women with respect to feminist identification is needed.

The heterosexual basis of the hairless norm for women is highlighted by the finding of strong conformity among women who identify as exclusively heterosexual and much less conformity among women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Furthermore, heterosexual women are most likely to start and continue to shave for reasons related to femininity and attractiveness. In contrast, those lesbians who continue to shave do so primarily for social normative reasons. Many respondents wrote that the social disapproval with which they would have to contend for not shaving was "not worth it," and some felt it would damage their credibility at their job. This was the major reason given by those who had stopped shaving and later restarted. Thus, lesbians are less likely to conform to the norm of hairlessness for women, but when they do conform behaviorally, they do so primarily to avoid social disapproval rather than to fit in with the conventional heterosexual norm of female attractiveness.

These general findings need to be qualified by possible ethnic group and class differences. Since 91% of the sample is white, this pattern of behaviors and reasons apply primarily to white professional women. Since only 12 black women were respondents, statistical analyses of their responses are problematical. However, their results are suggestive of a very different social norm regarding body hair. Although there were no significant differences found between the black and white respondents with respect to age, degree of body hair, growth rate, frequency of shaving, sexual orientation, degree of feminist identification, or removal of underarm hair (25%), more blacks than whites do not remove leg hair (50% compared to 21%). Those black women who do shave rated most of the reasons very low, especially the social normative ones. It may be that the questionnaire did not tap the major reasons why black women shave since the reasons were generated by white women. There was an "Other" category that could have been used but was not. More research needs to be done to explore what seem to be different norms among blacks regarding body hair, and leg hair especially. The initial advertising campaigns for hair removal products clearly were aimed at white women, since they emphasized how shaving makes skin smooth and *white*. A study of the

presence of black women in contemporary advertising for hair removal products might shed some light on this topic.

Cultural norms are strongly at work here. Not only may black women be responding to a different sub-cultural norm, but during the beginning of the second wave of the Women's Movement in the United States in the 1970s, many feminists also responded to another sub-cultural norm. In order to "prove themselves" by defying conventional standards for female appearance, many women stopped shaving and stopped wearing makeup, girdles, and padded bras. Indeed, the women in this study who stopped shaving generally did so in the early 1970s, although many restarted in the 1980s. The 1990s may be even less accepting of deviations from traditional norms regarding "feminine" appearance than were the 1970s. As a recent *Time* magazine cover story stated, "Hairy legs haunt the feminist movement. . . . Feminine clothing is back" ("Onward, women!", p. 81).

Between 1940–1980, the norm of hairlessness for women appeared to be primarily a white U.S. norm, not accepted by our European sisters. Recent anecdotal reports from Western Europe and Israel suggest that the norm now has crossed the Atlantic. The process of how this norm was transmitted is worthy of study.

Despite the relationship among feminist identification, sexual orientation, and hair removal behavior and attitudes, most strongly feminist women and most lesbians and bisexuals do remove their body hair. Dworkin (1989) also found that most lesbians have accepted a male-defined image of women's bodies. These findings certify the strength of the social norm of hairlessness for women, especially since a dominant reason why these women shave is to avoid social disapproval. Although shaving for most women is habitual behavior, and usually viewed as trivial, the intense social reaction to violations of this norm emphasize its power. Further examination of this norm is needed since the implication of the hairlessness norm is that women's bodies are not attractive when natural, and must be modified. Although this message certainly is evident with respect to other aspects of women's bodies—for example, their size and shape—nowhere is it adhered to more strongly than with respect to body hair.

NOTE

1. These interviews, conducted at a shopping mall and among women's groups, were open-ended, and asked women their reasons for shaving if they did, or for not shaving if they did not. Fourteen reasons for shaving and seven reasons for not shaving were identified and included in the final questionnaire.

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