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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH—WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH

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# "What Motivates Her": Motivations for Considering Labial Reduction Surgery as Recounted on Women's Online Communities and Surgeons' Websites

Sandra Zwier, PhD

Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

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**Introduction.** Increasing numbers of women are seeking labial reduction surgery. We studied the motivations for considering labial reduction surgery as recounted on women's online communities and surgery provider's websites.

**Aims.** The study analyzed motivations for considering labial reduction surgery expressed by women on online communities, looked at the role of the women's age and nationality, compared findings with motivations indicated on the websites of an international sample of surgery providers, and identified similarities to and differences from what is known from extant studies.

**Methods.** Quantitative content analysis of the posts of 78 American, British, and Dutch women on online communities, and 40 international surgery providers' websites about labial reduction surgery was conducted.

**Main Outcome Measures.** Main outcome measures concerned the incidence and prominence of different motivational categories (functional/emotional and discomfort/enhancement related). Differences in motivations as a function of age, national background, and women's vs. surgeons' stated motivations were tested.

**Results.** Emotional discomfort regarding self-appearance and social and sexual relationships was found to be the most frequent and most prominent motivation for considering labial reduction surgery on women's online communities, regardless of age and national background. Functional discomfort and desired emotional enhancement ranked second. Very few age or national differences were found. The surgeons' websites recognized functional discomfort more and elaborated upon emotional issues in sexual relationships less than members of the online communities.

**Conclusions.** Feelings of emotional and psychosexual distress in addition to functional distress are a highly prevalent motivation among women considering labial reduction surgery. Emotional distress appears to be greater and more freely emphasized when women communicate on online communities, while functional issues appear to receive greater notice on surgery provider's websites. **Zwier S. "What motivates her": Motivations for considering labial reduction surgery as recounted on women's online communities and surgeons' websites. Sex Med 2014;2:16–23.**

**Key Words.** Labiaplasty; Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery; Online Communities; Surgeons Websites

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## Introduction

"I hate mine, hate, hate HATE it! It's like a tongue sticking out for heavens sake!" "What if they told everyone in school 'yeah, she's pretty but there's something wrong down there.' " "I'd like to cut them off."<sup>1</sup>

This article is about women's motivations for considering a surgical reduction of their labia, or labiaplasty (labioplasty). The focus will be on a reduction of the labia minora through surgical procedures rather than on other forms of female genital cosmetic surgery, such as surgery of the labia majora or clitoral hood.<sup>2</sup> There is broad consensus that female genital surgery for a reduction in the size of the labia minora has risen sharply in recent years [1,2], and sociocultural explanations and implications are broadly discussed [3–8]. Our study aim was to provide further empirical evidence on the question about what motivates individual women to consider this very intimate form of surgery. The study is based on two original data sources. The first is a quantitative content analysis of motivations for considering labial reduction surgery as shared by 78 American, British, and Dutch members of women's online communities in recent years. The motivations for considering labial reduction surgery that the women gave in this anonymous, nonclinical context were systematically coded and analyzed to identify recurrent patterns. The second data source is a content analysis of motivations for considering labial reduction surgery given on 40 surgery providers' websites, allowing comparisons between women's online communities and surgery providers' websites.

The extant knowledge of individual women's motivations for considering labial reduction surgery is based almost exclusively on reviews of the medical records or surveys of surgery providers' patients (for reviews: [9–11]). A critically confounding factor of the findings obtained in this clinical context however is that women may not reveal all of their motivations in this context [9,12]. There are at least two reasons for this. First, because surgery providers function as gatekeepers in women's admission to labial reduction surgery,

and a woman may not be accepted for the surgery if the doctor believes she is psychologically unstable or under third-party influence [13]. In addition, women in most Western countries are denied insurance coverage unless the doctor can confirm that the procedure is for purely functional reasons [14]. In fact, every community we analyzed for the present research included women seeking advice from other women about the right prompters to say to the doctor to warrant surgery and coverage. Second, issues related to the genitals are an extremely sensitive topic that the majority of women would find awkward talking about, including during the medical encounter [15–17]. Indeed, many members of the women's online communities expressed intense fears of having to talk about and undergo a medical examination of their labia with a doctor. Both these factors may seriously complicate the interpretation of motivations for labial surgery as recounted in patient–provider communication.

One study that reported interviews with women about their motivations for considering labial reduction surgery that were conducted outside a direct clinical context [12] identified feelings of "imperfection" and issues in sexual relationships as the primary motivations. With six interviewees, however, the study was exploratory in nature.

## Aims

The present study extends upon the extant research by: (i) analyzing motivations for considering labial reduction surgery expressed by a larger international group of women in an anonymous, nonclinical context; (ii) studying the role of women's age and national background; (iii) analyzing motivations for considering labial reduction surgery indicated on an international sample of surgery providers' websites; (iv) comparing the motivations of members of women's online communities with the motivations presented on surgery providers' websites; and (v) identifying similarities to and differences from what is known from clinical research about why women choose to undergo this controversial surgical procedure. The study was primarily guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: Women's online communities will express more emotional than functional discomfort motivations for considering labial reduction surgery.

H2: Women's online communities will reflect more emotional and less functional motivations

<sup>1</sup>These are literal quotes from contributions to online communities about labia reduction surgery (first quote from: <http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/community/forums/thread/1406999>, second quote from [http://www.experienceproject.com/group\\_stories.php?g=106234](http://www.experienceproject.com/group_stories.php?g=106234), third quote [translated from Dutch] from: <http://www.medischforum.nl/onderwerp/9915/0/>).

<sup>2</sup>Surgical procedures are reviewed in many of the cited articles [10,11,21–26].

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