

Survey of male perceptions regarding the vulva

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OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this study was to characterize male preferences of vulvar appearance, their awareness of labiaplasty, and their knowledge of genital anatomy.

STUDY DESIGN: Men 18-80 years old were recruited via emails sent by an Internet provider to participate in a 27-question web-based survey. The questionnaire included images and queried demographics, men's familiarity with vulvar anatomy, preferences regarding labial appearance, and awareness of labiaplasty. Two deployments to >150,000 email addresses were sent. Demographic data were described using frequencies for categorical variables and mean measures of central tendency for continuous variables. Logistic regression models were used to analyze associations between demographics and responses.

RESULTS: Two thousand four hundred three men responded to the survey. After excluding incomplete and ineligible surveys, 1847 surveys were analyzed. The median age of respondents was 55 years. The majority was white (87%), married (68%), employed (69%), and had completed high school or beyond (97%). One-third of the respondents lived in the South, with the other regions nearly equally represented. A significant majority, 95%, reported having been

sexually active with women, and 86% felt comfortable labeling the vulvar anatomy. With regard to preferences, more respondents considered smaller labia attractive compared to large labia; yet 36% of the men remained neutral. Men also showed a preference for partially or completely groomed genitals compared to natural hair pattern. Whereas 51% of participants believed the appearance of a woman's labia influenced their desire to engage in sexual activity, 60% denied it affected sexual pleasure. Only 42% of men were familiar with labiaplasty, and 75% of all respondents would not encourage a female partner to change her genital appearance. Multivariable analysis revealed younger age to be associated with preferences for small labia and complete genital hair removal, as well as familiarity with labiaplasty.

CONCLUSION: In this national survey, men demonstrated familiarity with the female anatomy, but many did not feel it impacted sexual desire or pleasure. Moreover, the majority lacked strong preferences for a specific vulvar appearance and would not encourage a female partner to alter her genital appearance surgically.

Key words: cosmetic, genitoplasty, labia, labiaplasty, male perception, vulvar appearance

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Female genital plastic surgery (FGPS) refers to a composite of procedures aimed to alter the vulva or vagina, often performed for nonmedical indications.¹ FGPS has become increasingly popular.² According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 5070 labiaplasty procedures were performed in the United States in 2013, a 44% increase from 2012.³ In response to this perceived increase, the American Congress of Obstetricians and

Gynecologists released a committee opinion in 2007 stating: "Women should be informed about the lack of data supporting the efficacy of these procedures and their potential complications..."¹ Furthermore, the committee opinion expressed that patient concerns may be reduced through reassurance that a wide variety of normal genital appearances exist.⁴

Available literature, however, is lacking regarding patient motives for seeking

FGPS. Media images, Internet advertising, physical discomfort, impedance of sexual activity, and dissatisfaction with appearance have been cited as indications.⁵⁻⁸ Recently, research has evaluated female opinions of their own vulvar appearance as well as patient and physician definitions of normal anatomy to shed light on these issues.^{4,9} In both US and European population surveys, most women were satisfied with their vulvar appearance; nevertheless, approximately 7% would consider labiaplasty.⁶

Female perception may be only part of the impetus driving this demand. It is speculated that male attitudes play a role in female decision-making, yet there is a paucity of data regarding male perceptions.^{7,10} Due to potential influences on a woman's desire to pursue cosmetic interventions, we sought to understand male perceptions regarding the vulvar anatomy. Specifically, we explored male preferences with respect to appearance,

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their knowledge of female anatomy, as well as their opinions and awareness of FGPS.

METHODS

This was an Internet-based cross-sectional survey study administered through a secure online server at SurveyMonkey (Palo Alto, CA). Institutional Review Board approval was granted by TriHealth, Cincinnati, OH. Funding was obtained through an educational research grant from the E. Kenneth Hatton Medical Education Research Fund, TriHealth, Inc. Males between the ages of 18 and 80 in the United States were eligible and recruited via email addresses obtained through an Internet-based provider, Infogroup Inc (Omaha, NE).

Infogroup is an Internet marketing resource that obtains email addresses from partnered company websites. Individuals providing these email addresses are >18 years old and have agreed to inclusion without compensation. To prevent duplication, a time and date stamp, Internet provider address, and a source Uniform Resource Locator are recorded and stored during data completion. The survey was designed through SurveyMonkey to allow only one response per computer, and participants could only access the survey via the emailed link.

A goal response rate of 600 completed surveys was deemed appropriate for this descriptive study. To account for invalid email addresses and a predicted survey response rate of 1-3%, Infogroup estimated, based on their previous experience, that approximately 150,000 email addresses would be required, with a second email blast 1 week after the initial deployment. All email addresses were kept confidential by Infogroup. The email addresses were selected to obtain a representative age range and geographic sampling of men.

The emails were distributed on Aug. 13, 2014, with a second deployment on Aug. 20, 2014. The email subject was titled, "Survey opportunity," and the body of the message explained the purpose of the study, contained a link to the survey, and provided a notice that images

FIGURE 1
Labia of varying size



Images of the various labial sizes that were shown to the participants.

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would be included. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential and that consent would be provided by completing the survey. Upon accessing the link, a cover letter explained all the information to the participants again. The survey remained active for 2 months; responses were collected for analysis at that time. Participants could access the questionnaire only once.

The survey, which consisted of 27 questions and included images, was designed by the authors to query men's familiarity with vulvar anatomy, preferences regarding labial appearance, and awareness of labiaplasty. The survey was pretested with a sample of 30 men, and suggested changes to image labels

and language were incorporated into the final version.

Eight demographic questions initiated the survey. The participants were then asked about familiarity with naming the external female genital anatomy and were provided an image to label the anatomy. The image was an artist rendition of the female vulva with arrows pointing towards the following structures: clitoris, urethra, labia minora, labia majora, vagina, and anus. They were provided with a list of anatomic names that included the labeled structures and 2 structures not labeled (the Mons and Skene's glands) to prevent any guidance in selecting the anatomic labels. The participants were also surveyed regarding their history of sexual activity

FIGURE 2
Labia of varying hair pattern



Images of the various hair patterns that were shown to the participants.

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