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"I think gorilla-like back effusions of hair are rather a turn-off": 'Excessive hair' and male body hair (removal) discourse

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ABSTRACT

Men's hair removal practices are becoming mainstream, seen as a consequence of changing masculine norms and men's relationships to their bodies. This is often presented as a straightforward 'shift' from men's ideal bodies as naturally hairy, to increased hairlessness, and the consequence on men's body concerns as inevitable. This paper analyses qualitative survey data from Aotearoa/New Zealand using critical thematic analysis, and describes three themes. Two themes capture contradictory ideas: that men's body hair is natural, and that men's body hair is unpleasant. A third theme introduces the concept of 'excess' hair, which allowed sense-making of this contradiction, mandating men's grooming of 'excessive' hair. However its vagueness as a concept may provoke anxiety for men resulting in hair removal. This paper adds to a body of research demonstrating a cultural transition: the ways changing masculinities, increased commodification of male bodies, and shifting gender roles impact on men's hair removal practices.

Introduction

The ways that men in the West are responding to hair on their bodies appears to have undergone some significant changes in the last two decades. Anecdotal evidence from the 2012 Olympic Games suggests these changes may be manifesting in different ways across various Western contexts. For instance, many of the German male athletes, much like their female compatriots, had completely hairless armpits; an observation that seems more than simply anecdotal, having been evidenced in some academic work (e.g., Brähler, 2011). In contrast, the majority of male athletes from Great Britain and the United States (US) sported a full, bushy look, suggestive of not shaving their armpits – although the same could not be claimed of their chests, backs and abdomens. These cultural differences in depilation appeared almost a reversal of female Olympic athletes' hair removal practices (or lack thereof) during the 1970s (Lenskyj, 2012). In this earlier period, a number of East German female athletes had hair growing in their underarms, a feature that was located more broadly within wider policing of ideal Olympian femininity, and was viewed as indicative of something being 'wrong' with these women (Rosen, 2008). Negatively associated with performance enhancing drugs and differing ideals around feminine athletic embodiment, an ideal image of the female athletic body based in Anglo-gendered-norms was noticeable (Lenskyj, 2012). This criticism was combined with what was already considered a European sensibility (Basow, 1991), still used in negative stereotyping of European women today (see, for instance, Fahs, 2013a).

This evidenced current variation in male hair removal practices across various contexts raises a number of questions about contemporary cultural differences, but perhaps more importantly, the relative silence about men's hairless (or hairy) armpits and bodies in this instance is jarring, when compared to ongoing talk about women's body hair practices. Much of this difference may be seen as a consequence of the ways in which gender is socially constructed within Western contexts, in particular, the narrowly defined understandings of beauty and acceptable hair practices afforded women when compared with men (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). Although there appears to be increased media-driven expectation toward 'manscaping' through removal or reduction in hair from male bodies (Frank, 2014), it does not appear to be as simple as male hair removal is good, while hair retention is not. In other words, as we have argued in an earlier paper, many Western cultures seem to be in a state of flux with regard to men's hair removal practices, and this could be a trend that follows women's, or potentially shifts in other directions (Terry & Braun, 2013). However, what seems clear, is that this flux is likely associated with changes to the ideals of hegemonic masculinities within the West, as masculinities

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adapt to increasing equalities for women and increasing consumer pressures on men (Frank, 2014).

Connell (2005) has argued that bodies, and what we do with and to them, are important to gendered meaning-making and performance – which she understands as being structured around the continuation of privilege of men over women within the West. Gender within this framework is not limited to the biological, nor is it a fixed set of internal traits "always and everywhere the same" (Connell, 2005, p. 76), but should be seen as sets of practices, accomplishments, and relational activities that guarantee the person a recognisably masculine or feminine identity within their given context and point in history. This is always done in reference to a particular ideal – in the case of men, what Connell (2005) refers to as hegemonic masculinity – the expression of masculinity which guarantees the most social privilege for men. Very few men, according to Connell, can act as pure exemplars of this ideal masculinity, but most men are complicit with their local expression – and especially the rewards it offers – trying to approximate it in various ways, according to the resources available to them. An individual man may more closely approximate hegemonic masculinity through the accumulation of 'masculine capital' via displays of masculine competence in particular arenas, such as in sport (de Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009). This may be especially necessary for men when they have been marginalised from the hegemonic ideal through various social indicators (e.g., age, race, class, sexual orientation), which can place limits on the economic and social privilege a man can garner, depending on the society they live in.

Research evidence has begun to document some changes in the way men are responding to their body hair in the US (e.g., Boroughs & Thompson, 2013; Fahs, 2013b; Frank, 2014), Australia (Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008), and Aotearoa/New Zealand (e.g., Terry & Braun, 2013). Although men have engaged in various forms of body hair removal at different points and places throughout history – for instance, wealthy men in ancient Rome and Egypt were known to remove body hair (Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005; Cokal, 2007; Hope, 1982) – it is not a practice that has been strongly associated with dominant Western masculinities. Body hair has been symbolically intertwined with masculine virility and ruggedness for much of the last two centuries in the West (Herzig, 2015; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Even in a period that seems to be defined by a decrease in the public presence of male body hair, having some body hair continues to be reflective of ideal masculine embodiment, with the absence or presence of hair symbolically reinforcing gendered differences (Boroughs, 2012; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). For instance, men undergoing chemotherapy express concern about loss of hair on the body rather than the head (Hilton, Hunt, Emslie, Salinas, & Ziebland, 2008), indicating that where given a choice, some body hair is still preferred. Fahs' (2013b) research in the US demonstrated that even among men with heightened awareness of gender norms and their impacts, a temporary removal of terminal (visible) body hair (e.g., legs, underarms) was experienced as troubling to their sense of masculine identity. Some research has also identified beardedness as a way for men to enhance perceptions of their maturity and social status (e.g., Oldmeadow & Dixson, 2015), suggesting that certain types of male body hair remain strongly associated with gendered difference.

Research concerning hair removal has primarily (and up until recently, exclusively), focused on the 'hairless ideal' (Basow, 1991) expected of women. This hairless ideal operates to produce an environment where body hair removal is so normative that the presence of body hair is constructed as unnatural. Although the absence of many forms of hair on men's bodies is becoming less commented upon, its presence is still a long way from being treated with the disgust and eradication that women's hair is (Fahs, 2011, 2013b; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). Men's bodies are, however, becoming increasingly visible in many Western countries, a new focus of attention in advertising, in health campaigns and across broader media, and it tends to be a minimally hairy male body that is made visible (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005). Perhaps as a consequence, many men are becoming progressively defined by body consciousness and awareness (e.g., Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2008; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007; Yang, Gray, & Pope, 2005); this may be reflected in body practices such as hair removal or trimming of body hair – particularly if it is perceived as enhancing muscularity (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014).

However, as we have argued previously, in contrast to women, men still have a high degree of flexibility around their hair removal – in other words hair removal is still seen as a choice for men, and furthermore a choice in terms of how much or little one needs remove (Terry & Braun, 2013). This highlights, perhaps, a distinction between body hair removal as the mandated norm (for women), and as a viable – possibly even desirable – option for men, but associated with an ideal rather than normative state of embodiment. Men (and others) seem generally to understand what this ideal expression of masculine embodiment is (Tiggemann et al., 2007), but, much like hegemonic masculinity more generally, men can be complicit with, be marginalised from, outright reject, or a hybridise any of these (e.g., Gough & Flanders, 2009; Hennen, 2005; Lin, 2014; Paxton, 2013). However, more broadly, it is the bodies of men who do not have significant financial and institutional power that are somewhat contradictorily constructed as ideal within mainstream media (Gill et al., 2005): younger men's bodies, especially muscular, hairless younger men's bodies, are often presented as an ideal expression of physical masculinity and masculine attractiveness (Drummond, 2010). This seems to follow a broader pattern identified within research that men occupying a marginalised social position tend to focus more attention on their bodies as a way of providing them with increased status or social power (e.g., Swami, Diwell, & McCreary, 2014; Swami et al., 2013; Swami & Voracek, 2013). Furthermore, an 'appearance potent' seems to be stronger for many gay men than it is for among straight men – and sociocultural pressure to embody a physical ideal of mesomorphic body, full head of hair, and largely hairless body, seems to be more intense for many gay men (Jankowski, Fawkner, Slater, & Tiggemann, 2014) – although there are certainly resistances to, and rejections of, this ideal within various gay subcultures (see, for instance, Hennen, 2005). Comparing younger gay and straight men, Lanzieri and Cook (2013) noted that although a muscularity ideal was similar for both groups, ideal body fat percentages seem to be lower, and presented as an ideal for gay men. Body hair removal facilitates display of both muscular size and definition, and both younger gay and straight men have been found to want less body hair and more muscularity (Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2008). It seems that among younger men in particular, 'improving' the body in such ways can gain them masculine capital, and body hair removal is generally a fast, low cost way of making such improvements.

As men's body hair often increases with age, especially in areas such as the back and shoulders (Price & Griffiths, 1985), it is very likely that for many men, and for those sexually attracted to men, that this increase in body hair is viewed in relation to this ideal masculine embodiment (Basow & O'Neil, 2014). This may have some potential to result in increasing body image concerns among men as they age and as the ideal becomes more muscular and more hairless. However, a focus on the body may be alleviated by men attaining success in other spheres, and also through the mediating effects of being in a secure long-term relationship. In contrast