



Educating women about normal female genital appearance variation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 August 2015

Received in revised form

17 November 2015

Accepted 20 November 2015

Available online 23 December 2015

Keywords:

Female genitals

Labia

Media

Education

Genital dissatisfaction

Labiaplasty

ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effectiveness of two online resources aimed at improving women's knowledge of the variation in normal female genital appearance and their attitudes towards their own genitals. The first consisted of a photographic array of normal female genitals and the second consisted of a video addressing digital airbrushing of women's genitals in media images. A sample of 136 female undergraduate students were randomly assigned to view the photographs, video, both the photographs and video, or neither. The video significantly increased women's perceptions of genital appearance diversity as well as awareness of digital airbrushing of genital images. Owing to relatively low levels of genital appearance concern, there was no effect of either resource on women's attitudes towards their own genitals; however, women who viewed the video indicated they would pass on their knowledge to help other women. Our results suggest that an educational video could be a useful tool.

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Introduction

According to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS, 2014), the number of cosmetic surgeries performed has risen dramatically over the last decade, with 10 million surgical and non-surgical procedures performed in 2014. Ninety percent of these procedures were performed on women and one of the fastest growing procedures for women is labiaplasty (ASAPS, 2014). The purpose of labiaplasty is to reduce the size and/or change the shape of the labia minora or, less commonly, the labia majora (Iglesia, Yurteri-Kaplan, & Alinsod, 2013). The number of labiaplasties performed in the USA increased 49% from 2013 to 2014, that is from 5070 to 7535 procedures (ASAPS, 2014), and similar trends have been documented in the UK (Crouch, Deans, Michala, Liao, & Creighton, 2011) and Australia (Australian Government Department of Human Services, 2015). Despite the increasing number of labiaplasties performed over recent years, there have been concerns expressed amongst the medical community about the necessity and safety of cosmetic genital surgery (Committee on Gynecologic Practice American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2007; Hamori, 2014). As these procedures are still

relatively new, there is still a lack of long-term safety or outcome data presently available (Cain, Iglesia, Dickens, & Montgomery, 2013). Although the research thus far suggests that surgical complication rates for labiaplasty are relatively low (e.g., Goodman et al., 2010; Veale, Naismith et al., 2014), as labiaplasty involves the removal of highly sensitive tissue, risks of the procedure include a reduction in sexual pleasure, as well as infection, bleeding, scarring and wound separation (Crooks & Baur, 2013; Liao, Michala, & Creighton, 2010). Thus, labiaplasty is a procedure involving some risk and it is somewhat concerning that an increasing number of girls and women are willing to undergo this procedure.

Although research addressing labiaplasty is still limited, a number of studies have suggested that the primary motivator for surgery is concern over genital appearance. For example, in Veale, Eshkevari, et al.'s (2014) study of 55 women seeking labiaplasty in the UK, the most commonly reported reason for surgery was aesthetic concern (70.8%), followed by physical concerns such as irritation (62.5%), and then sexual difficulties (37.5%). Similarly, in a retrospective study of 163 labiaplasty patients in France, aesthetic dissatisfaction was the most common concern reported by 87% of patients (Rouzier, Louis-Sylvestre, Paniel, & Haddad, 2000). In addition, a recent analysis of women's comments on online cosmetic surgery forums in the USA, UK, and Netherlands, showed that emotional discomfort with the appearance of the labia was the most frequently reported motivator for labiaplasty, regardless of the woman's age and nationality (Zwier, 2014).

This common theme of appearance concern was explored in detail in Bramwell, Morland, and Garden's (2007) qualitative study

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of six women who had undergone labiaplasty. All women reported that they perceived their genital appearance prior to their labiaplasty as “odd” or “weird”. It appeared that these women were attempting to achieve a “normal” genital appearance through surgery (Bramwell et al., 2007). Using surgery to achieve a “normal” appearance has been well documented for other forms of cosmetic surgery such as breast augmentation and rhinoplasty (e.g., Gimlin, 2000). Surprisingly, this concept of “normal” female genital appearance has received little medical or scientific attention. To address this gap in the literature, Lloyd, Crouch, Minto, Liao, and Creighton (2005) examined the anatomical dimensions of the genitals of 50 premenopausal women. These women varied greatly in all genital measurements which included labial length, width, colour and texture, and so Lloyd et al. (2005) concluded that there is wide variation within normal female genital appearance. In fact, almost all women who request labiaplasty (Crouch et al., 2011; Veale, Eshkevari, et al., 2014a) have labia within normal size limits (Lloyd et al., 2005). These studies suggest that there is widespread lack of awareness of the wide variation in normal female genital appearance.

In particular, research indicates that women mistakenly perceive “normal” female genital appearance to consist of a completely smooth vulvar surface with no protruding labia minora (e.g., Yurteri-Kaplan et al., 2012), and that this is the aesthetic ideal which labiaplasty patients reportedly seek (Liao & Creighton, 2007). This aesthetic ideal has been colloquially termed the “Barbie look” (Alinsod, 2007; Iglesia et al., 2013), as Barbie has no labial or genital structure whatsoever. This look resembles that of a prepubescent girl which adult women can rarely fulfil owing to the development of labial tissue during puberty (Farage & Maibach, 2006). This unrealistic genital ideal did not develop in isolation, but rather as a function of broader sociocultural influences. These sociocultural influences were recently examined by Sharp, Tiggemann, and Mattiske (2015) in a general community sample of adult Australian women. Sharp et al. (2015) found that media exposure and peer influence predicted greater consideration of labiaplasty, while relationship satisfaction buffered against interest in labiaplasty. Of the specific media sources examined (television, internet, advertising), pornography was the most influential source (Sharp et al., 2015).

Pornography is generally classified as either hard-core or soft-core and within these two categories there are a number of genres (McNair, 2013). The difference between the two broad categories is that hard-core pornography contains graphic sexual content, as exemplified by the reality-based genre of pornography called “Gonzo” where the camera person is actually taking part in the sexual act so the viewer is placed directly in the scene (Shimizu, 2010). In contrast, soft-core pornography contains only simulated sexual activity and sexually suggestive content, such as men’s magazines like *Playboy* (Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2015). Studies have reported that women show a strong preference for the consumption of soft-core over hard-core pornography, while the opposite holds for men (e.g., Hald, 2006; McKee, Lumby, & Albury, 2008). Although all media representations of the female body have the potential to influence women’s attitudes towards their own physical appearance, pornographic images may be particularly influential in affecting women’s attitudes towards their own genitals with the lesser exposure of this body part in other forms of media (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011). As two qualitative studies have found, when women compare their bodies in general to the ideal bodies of women shown in pornography, they report feeling “inadequate” and label their own bodies as “fat”, “ugly”, “old”, and “repulsive” (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). In the case of representations of female genitals in women’s preferred medium of soft-core pornography, they are shown as smooth and hairless with no protruding labia minora (McDougall, 2013). Soft-core porn actresses are reportedly chosen on the basis of their small labia minora and digital removal of protruding labial tissue from

magazine photographs is common practice in Western countries (Davis, 2002; Green, 2005; McDougall, 2013).

In regions like Australia and Britain, there are also legal reasons behind the digital removal of visible labia minora tissue (Drysdale & Russell, 2010; Hoyles, 2012). For example, there have been reports of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) implementing the so-called “ILOOLI” rule, which refers to “inner labia out” (i.e., not allowed to be shown) and “outer labia in” (i.e., allowed to be shown) (e.g., Hoyles, 2012). In Australia, the Classification Board states that only “discreet genital detail” with “no genital emphasis” can be shown to individuals aged 15 and over in “unrestricted” or soft-core pornography publications (Australian Government ComLaw, 2005, p. 8). Drysdale and Russell (2010) suggest that protruding labia minora tissue is too graphic and so publishers of soft-core pornography in Australia will digitally remove this tissue so as to avoid the classification of “restricted” or hard-core (i.e., only for individuals aged 18 years and over).

Although the digital alteration of genital images is not widely known, women are certainly aware of the digital alteration of other parts of the body (e.g., face, waist, thighs) of the models shown in fashion magazines (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000). There is a large volume of correlational (for a meta-analysis, see Levine & Murnen, 2009) and experimental (for a meta-analysis, see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008) evidence to show the link between exposure to such digitally altered idealised images and women feeling worse about their own bodies. In response to these findings, a number of studies have included education around the variety of techniques used by the media industry to create these “perfected” looks as part of their interventions to alleviate body image concerns. Results have shown that such media literacy education is effective in reducing media-induced body dissatisfaction (Ogden & Sherwood, 2008; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). Although there is a marked difference in the level of exposure women have to thin and attractive media images in their daily lives compared to the idealised genital images shown in pornography, we predicted that providing information about the wide diversity of normal female genital appearance and the digital alteration of genital images would similarly decrease women’s genital dissatisfaction and desire for labiaplasty.

Over recent years, a number of community groups have recognised and responded to the significant lack of information about normal and healthy female genital appearance available to girls and women. Owing to the potentially sensitive and embarrassing nature of the topic of genital appearance, individuals are more likely to seek information on this topic online (Koning, Zeijlman, Bouman, & van der Lei, 2009), and so a number of websites have been developed as freely available educational tools (e.g., “The Centrefold Project”, “Large Labia Project”, “The Labia Library”). However, it would appear that the number of individuals actually accessing these websites is relatively low (e.g., Malone & O’Halloran, 2014), while the percentage of women in the general community considering labiaplasty has been estimated at as high as 17% (Sharp et al., 2015). Furthermore, to our knowledge, a systematic experimental investigation of the educational impact of any of these online resources is yet to be conducted.

Thus the present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of two freely available online resources (a photographic array of normal female genitals to show the diversity of appearance, and a short video about the digital alteration of genital images) on women’s knowledge of and attitudes towards female genital appearance. Our first hypothesis was that participants who viewed either the photographs or video would be more likely to perceive other women’s genital appearance as normal. Our second hypothesis was that the video would result in greater knowledge about the digital alteration of genital images in the media. Our third hypothesis was that the

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