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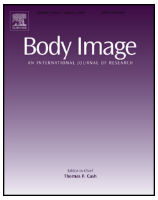

Genital panics: Constructing the vagina in women's qualitative narratives about pubic hair, menstrual sex, and vaginal self-image

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ABSTRACT

An emerging body of research targets women's relationship to their genitals, particularly as pubic hair removal and the promotion of female genital surgeries increase in popularity and visibility. This study asked women to discuss their subjective feelings about three related but distinct genital attitudes: pubic hair grooming, sex during menstruation, and genital/vaginal self-image. Specifically, this study applied thematic analysis to qualitative interviews with a community sample of 20 women (mean age = 34, *SD* = 13.35) from diverse ages, races, and sexual identity backgrounds to illuminate seven themes in women's narratives about their vaginas: (1) "dirty" or "gross"; (2) needing maintenance; (3) unknown or frustrating; (4) unnatural; (5) comparative; (6) ambivalent; (7) affirmative. Overwhelmingly, women used strong emotional language when discussing their genitals, often evoking descriptions of anxiety, excess, and need for control. Fusions between sexuality and body image, and connections between "genital panics" and internalized racism, sexism, and homophobia, also appeared.

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Introduction

This study examined the question of how women feel about their vulvas and vaginas[1] by interrogating three distinct but related aspects of women's own "genital panics": pubic hair, sex during menstruation, and genital self-image. Though an increasing amount of studies have started to examine aspects of women's attitudes toward their genitals, particularly related to female genital surgeries (Braun & Tiefer, 2009), pubic hair grooming (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010), and even aspects of pregnant embodiment and genital attitudes (Nash, 2013), few studies have combined these three dimensions of women's genital attitudes into a comprehensive account. In short, we know very little about women's overall vaginal attitudes, particularly the affective and emotional facets of their feelings and beliefs about their genitals, leaving a notable gap in the existing literatures that this study seeks to address. As such, this study examined qualitative narratives from twenty women with diverse backgrounds (including age, race, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities) to narrate their genital attitudes about pubic hair, menstrual sex, and genital self-image, revealing highly gendered, strongly emotional, and wholly paradoxical aspects of "genital panics" in their own lives.

With traditional gender roles still dictating that women remain passive and pleasant to others, engage in other-directed behavior, and construct beauty as their way of gaining value (Kwan & Trautner, 2009), some scholars have argued that the "gender revolution" has stalled (England, 2010). Overwhelmingly, feminist theorists, media scholars, and social scientists have found that women overwhelmingly report normative body discontent (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988). In fact, *most* women dislike their bodies and construct them as "works in progress" (Silberstein et al., 1988; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), with negative body image appearing as a normative aspect of women's lives (Mellor, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, McCabe, & Ricciardelli, 2010; Pruis & Janowsky, 2010). While partner evaluation can sometimes buffer or exacerbate women's body image problems (Pole, Crowther, & Schell, 2004; Weaver & Byers, 2013), even when women have supportive partners, they still struggle to feel positively toward their bodies (Wiederman, 2000). Also, with the rise of commodity culture and widespread uses of fracturing women's bodies into a series of parts—whether showcasing their "dismembered" legs on television, asking women to care

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[1] The word "vagina" in this study often refers more accurately to the "vulva" or "genitals," as the vagina is technically the passage between a woman's external genitals and her cervix. That said, most participants refer to their vagina, vulva, and pubic mound as their "vagina," so this study follows suit to avoid confusion.

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about the size of their butts, or focusing on the shape and quality of breasts in advertisements—women have overwhelmingly learned to internalize notions of their bodies as not entirely whole (Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999). Consequently, women's feelings about their genitals often exist within a context that teaches women to see their bodies as a disconnected series of parts with "problem areas" to work on (Aubrey, 2010; Kilbourne, 1999), ultimately leading to poor outcomes for women (Wiederman, 2000).

This negativity has, not surprisingly, extended into how women feel about their vaginas, vulvas, and genitals, as women reported persistent negative identifications about the vagina (Berman & Windecker, 2008; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). Virginia Braun and Sue Wilkinson identified seven common aspects of vaginal negativity found in popular culture and in writings about women's bodies, including the vagina as: inferior to the penis; absence; passive receptacle for the penis; sexually inadequate; disgusting; vulnerable and abused; and dangerous. Struck by the vast contradictions inherent in portrayals of women's vaginas, they noted, "The vagina is, among other things, the toothed and dangerous vagina dentata; the (symbolic) absence of a penis; the core of womanhood; and a symbol of reproduction (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001, p.17). Paradoxically, the media sends messages that women should not discuss (or celebrate) their vaginas while also conveying an obsession with women's sexuality" (Braun, 1999; Ensler, 1998).

Pubic Hair

In recent years, a growing body of work has examined negativity toward women's body hair, directing a particularly critical eye toward women's notions of "personal choice" about their body hair grooming behavior (Fahs, 2012, 2013; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013). While some research has interrogated women's pubic hair "grooming" behaviors—that is, the choice to remove, or trim, pubic hair, or to leave it "natural" and fully grown (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013; Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010; Riddell et al., 2010)—few studies have interrogated women's attitudes and feelings about their pubic hair. Pubic hair removal has been primarily studied as a *behavior* rather than as a series of beliefs or feelings about the genitals, though one autoethnography (Paxton, 2013) and one blog, "The Last Triangle," has looked more closely at personal experiences and reflections about pubic hair (Dault, 2011).

Women's pubic hair removal—a practice that largely stopped in the late 19th century but restarted in the 1980s (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009)—has also shown a dramatic increase in recent years, with younger and partnered U.S. women removing pubic hair at a growing rate and removing it more and more often (Herbenick et al., 2010; Herbenick, Hensel, Smith, Schick, & Reece, 2013). One study found that 50% of women removed pubic hair along their bikini line, and 30% removed all of their pubic hair (Riddell et al., 2010). Further, one recent study found that pubic hair removal was "extremely common," and that it correlated with being white, young, under or "normal" weight, and having five or more lifetime sexual partners (DeMaria & Berenson, 2013).

While both men and women experience some pressure to groom or trim their pubic hair, women reported particularly strong pressure to remove their pubic hair and far less flexibility around the choice to remove their body hair (Terry & Braun, 2013). When assessing the perceived acceptability of body hair, for example, one recent study of New Zealanders found that 11% of participants endorsed the acceptability of body hair for women, while 81% endorsed body hair for men, indicating that women's hair removal was more compulsory than men's hair removal (Terry & Braun, 2013). When asked why women removed their pubic hair, they did so to achieve "sexiness," cleanliness, and to feel "normal," particularly while wearing a bathing suit (Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Riddell et al., 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Another study found that assertions of choice, privacy, physical attractiveness, cleanliness, and sexual impact mattered most for why people removed their pubic hair (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). Adolescent girls reported feeling that they had "too much" pubic hair most of the time and that their families and friends pressured them to remove their pubic hair, particularly if they were sexually active (Bercaw-Pratt, Santos, Sanchez, Ayensu-Coker, Nebgen, & Dietrich, 2012). Further, pubic hair removal was associated with women's use of vaginal hygiene products, applying genital cream, and having a casual sex partner (Herbenick et al., 2013). Notably, women who removed pubic hair also reported more self-surveillance and self-objectification than women who did not remove pubic hair (Smolak & Murnen, 2011).

Pornography and popular culture idealize hairlessness and prepubescent female genitals (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011), with most mainstream pornographic films and images depicting hairless genitals as the "industry standard" for genital beauty (Cokal, 2007). The quest for the "perfect vagina" can symbolize a new "biopolitics" where pornography and internalized sexism fuse together (Rodrigues, 2012). One study of 647 *Playboy Magazine* centerfolds found that hairless, undefined genitalia resembling those of a prepubescent female appeared in the vast majority of *Playboy* photographs published recently (Schick et al., 2011). Notably, the quest toward hairlessness mimic sometimes led to dangerous results, as one study found that pubic hair removal facilitated some sexually transmitted infections (Desruelles, Cunningham, & Dubois, 2013).

Sex During Menstruation

In addition to facing messages that they should contain and control their "excessive" sexual bodies—as evidenced in the existing literature on pubic hair—women also face messages that portray menstruation as distressing, shameful, disabling, taboo-ridden, and in need of management (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1998; Kissling, 2006). Whether through the barrage of negative portrayals in film and television (Rosewarne, 2012), or through advertisements that encourage women to hide their "unclean" menstrual blood (Berg & Coutts, 1994; Davidson, 2012) or medicate away their troublesome periods altogether (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, & Wares, 2006; Rose, Chrisler, & Couture, 2008), women routinely encounter menstrual negativity in their lives.

The few studies that have directly addressed the topic of menstrual sex (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Fahs, 2011) showcased women's conflicts about trying to feel "sexy" while confronting their taboo menstrual cycles. One study of college students found that less than half of the women engaged in menstrual sex, over 80% of women described polarized feelings about menstrual sex, with one-third saying they would never do it, while another third engaged in it regularly without restrictions (Allen & Goldberg, 2009). Another study that used a community sample found that heterosexual women felt more negatively toward menstrual sex than did lesbians or bisexual women (even in comparison to bisexual women with male partners), while women of color described more negativity toward menstrual sex than did white women (Fahs, 2011). Women who felt negative emotions toward menstrual sex discussed their discomfort and physical labor to clean 'messes,' overt partner discomfort, negative self-perception, and emotional labor to manage their partners' disgust, while positive feelings centered on physical and emotional pleasure and rebelling against anti-menstrual attitudes (Fahs, 2011).

Other studies have also found links between menstruation, sexuality, and body image, as comfort with menstruation correlated with more comfort with sexuality, less disgust toward one's body (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003), less risk taking, as well as more body comfort, sexual assertiveness, and sexual experience

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