

Forces and Feelings: Analyzing Body Hair as a Product of Socially Constructed Gender Norms

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The topic of body hair has been wildly uncontested and unquestioned for the average person in the Global North. Throughout history, the notion of body hair has been strictly divided and unknowingly perpetuated in relation to the gender binary. The normalization of body hair practices within the framework of the gender binary are built on a foundation of opposing expectations for men in comparison to women. With focus on the Global North, the hair on our heads and its social expressions is something separate than the rest of human hair (Synnott, 1987, p. 383). Unfortunately, the pre-existing gendered norms and expectations have drastically shaped the way humans groom their body hair – especially for women. Currently, the gender binary encourages a general hairlessness for women, but not for men. After all, the expression of women's bodies have always been subject to stricter regulation than men. Nonetheless, all hairy beings are affected by the social construction of body hair as a gendered practice.

Essentially, our way of being – our mode of being – is heavily influenced by a long list of external socialization. Because body hair has been constructed as a way we 'have to be,' the pressures often go unnoticed, therefore becoming 'the norm' to follow. While body hair practices are often confused for being an individual choice, we argue that the decision is often a product of socially constructed ideas built on a foundation of the gender binary.

The questions below are intended to encourage one to think of how external social forces contribute to the ‘choices’ made regarding body hair, and to raise awareness of the existing pressures seen through gendered body-hair practices.

Currently, do you believe there are any socially constructed expectations regarding body hair?

The growth of body hair is inevitable. However, individuals have the freedom to choose if and how they would like to groom themselves. Although it may seem like a very personal decision, many fail to recognize how socially constructed expectations influence the decision-making that occurs within the safety of one’s own bathroom. Especially within the Global North, women are expected to remove most of their body hair, while men are encouraged to grow and maintain it. For hundreds of years, “the presence of body hair as traditionally been symbolic of masculinity and associated with men’s attractiveness and virility” (Boroughs et al., 2005, p. 637). There is a very specific expectation for the male to grow facial hair, to grow hair in general, but never hair that resembles the female. Therefore, shame and disgust remain entangled with practices around body hair among both men and women (Jóhannsdóttir, 2019, p. 195).

The perspective of body hair has been divided through the gender binary for so long that it often goes unnoticed today. By considering the act of grooming to be socially constructed within the social expectations of gender, an individual is forced to question their own practices regarding their body hair as influenced by external forces. After speculation, this personal decision is not so personal after all.

Do you have any early memories associated with body hair while growing up?

The purpose of this question is to probe the mind for early childhood and/or adolescent memories that are associated with the choices one has made regarding their body hair. Analyzing who or what contributed to decision making at a young age, when an individual's mind is at its most malleable, is significant for generating an individual's current personal perception of body hair. Because a majority of personal perspectives are formed out of external social experiences, recalling how parental guardians groomed themselves or how peers in elementary school influenced personal body hair decisions, is crucial to understanding how an individual formulated those decisions and maintain them throughout adulthood. During childhood and adolescence, humans are unknowingly generating the most favourable ways of 'being' by the influences that are closest.

Therefore, an individual may feel relieved when the subconscious pressures and influences are revealed as external and completely unavoidable. What anyone can put into practice, now, as an adult, is to reclaim the agency of what to do with one's body hair, regardless of any existing pressures and influences.

What do you think has influenced you most in your personal decisions regarding body hair? (Examples include family members, friends, pop culture references, pornography, and/or social media).

Even after the years of youth and adolescence, individual's continue to be influenced by external forces. These trends are displayed to society through the strong influence of

today's media such as television and movies, pop culture, and even pornography. More specifically, for example, Internet-based heterosexual pornography has shown an increase in full pubic hair removal, implicating a shift in cultural attitudes to pubic hair for a woman in contrast to her hairy male counterpart (Ramsey et al., 2009, p. 2105). However, Synott (1987) reminds us that the expectations for body hair, like all hair, "is malleable, in various ways, and therefore singularly apt to symbolize both differentiations between, and changes in, individual and group identities" (p. 381). Ranging from the 60's to early 80's, women displayed the popular trend of hairy vulvas. Now, and over the last three decades, there has been a "trend to the gradual erosion of pubic hair, from the natural look in the 1970's to the 'Hollywood' or 'Brazilian' highly maintained look" (Ramsey et al., 2009, p. 2104).

As for men in pornography's past, we notice little evolution to their hair -- suggesting that women carry more weight to conform under the pleasure of men (and, to reiterate, this is formulated through a heteronormative lens). To notice these changing trends through mediums showcasing gendered expectations and ponder as to why individual's follow suit is important to the evolution of body hair.

Do you consider these influences to have any positive effects on your personal perspective or decisions regarding your body hair? Do you consider these influences to have any negative effects on your personal perspective or decisions regarding your body hair?

Due to the influences mentioned above, these socially constructed expectations may

have both positive and negative effects on one's perception of body hair, not only on an individual's own body but also on others. Whether one may believe the effects to be positive or negative, this question is designed to provoke the subject of personal decisions regarding grooming -- ensuring an individual is self-aware of and how external forces may influence the corresponding practices in a positive or negative way. Since humans naturally have a strong desire to fit in, individuals often subconsciously make decisions built on a foundation of societal gender norms. And on the account of women, women are subject to *more* pressures, feeling a stronger pressure to remove their hair and far less flexibility around the choice to remove their body hair than men (Terry & Braun, 2013, p. 605). While there are many reasons as to why women feel this way, many argue it is because, generally speaking, "women's bodies are under more surveillance than men's" (Jóhannsdóttir, 2019, p. 195).

The current positive and negative connotations surrounding body hair are out of the control of the individual, as they are externally constructed to regulate our gendered bodies. Therefore, through the answering of these questions, the notion of normalizing body hair for all genders and freeing the choice of how to groom is encouraged.

What is your opinion on normalizing body hair for all genders?

In order to successfully normalize body hair for all genders, we must reverse the embedded norms and perpetuated expectations that may currently affect an individual's expression of hair. Such norms and expectations are set early on in childhood, "from a

fusion of family, media, educational, medical, peer, and partner influences, not to mention sociocultural context” (Fahs, 2014, p. 215).

Therefore, the alleviation of pressure requires individuals to become aware, accepting that as a whole, humans often subconsciously conform to body hair trends in relation to gender norms. The battle between external forces and internal feelings represents a dialectic relationship; it is up to the individual in how they express the duality of influences through the authentic self. This is, obviously, easier said than done. However, reflecting on the decisions regarding body hair will contribute to the rise of gender equality. The normalization of body hair for all genders will further deconstruct the gender binary which is currently a force responsible for regulating bodies in the Global North.

References

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