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**To let hair be, or to not let hair be? Gender and body hair removal practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

**Gareth Terry & Virginia Braun**

**Abstract**

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest women continue to remove body hair, and there is some evidence for cultural changes in men's hair removal practices. This paper reports on data collected using an online mix-methods survey from 584 New Zealanders between the ages of 18-35 (mean age 26, 48.9% male, 50.6% female). The data demonstrated that substantial proportions of both women and men in Aotearoa/New Zealand remove body hair from many sites. However, gendered differences remain, and a key dimension of gendered difference appears in the concept of flexible choice around body hair removal or retention. This was seen in the difference between perceived acceptability of having body hair (81% for men, 11% for women). These findings suggest that although men, like women, are now coming under some pressure to remove body hair, there is still a great difference in men and women's capacity to choose whether to bow to it.

Key words: Hair removal; online survey; gendered differences; mixed methods; social norms

Body hair removal has had a long history that has spanned many cultures and periods of human history, and has often been viewed as a 'civilising' practice (Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005; Cokal, 2007; Hope, 1982). It has become a relatively mundane, normalised, unquestioned part of many (Western) women's lives, and this may be starting to be the case for some men, too. Normalised hair removal practices provide an excellent example of social influence on individual body practices, and the ways norms naturalise the outcomes of these practices. Enactments of resistance to such influence – such as women displaying leg hair – are typically more salient than practices produced in conformity to such expectations – such as leg hair removal for women (see for instance, Fahs, 2011, 2012; Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Investigating hair removal practices, which we do in this paper, can offer some insights into both existing, and changing, social meanings and body-presentation mandates, the pressures they exert, and the impact these pressures have on individuals' feelings about their bodies and their body practices (Smolak & Murnen, 2011).

In the last few decades, body hair and its removal has been identified as one of the key domains of gendered difference (Boroughs et al., 2005; Synnott, 1987), with Western women's conformity to a 'hairless ideal' (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998) exaggerating 'natural' gendered differences in body hair. UK, US and Australian surveys highlight the normative status of women's body hair removal: over 90% of women typically remove their armpit and leg hair, and apparently increasing numbers remove substantial proportions of their pubic hair (Basow, 1991; Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). Reasons women give for hair removal are many (e.g., Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008), including perceived attractiveness/desirability of the 'hairless' body or body part, as well as conformity to norms about contemporary feminine bodies – to leave hair in its natural state is perceived to be 'masculine' or 'unfeminine' (Toerien et al., 2005).

Although women's hair removal, as with many gendered differences, can often be framed as an individual choice (Braun, 2009; Tricklebank, Braun, & Clarke, in press), responses to women who

do not remove body hair indicate it as a strongly socially-policed activity. Women who display visible body hair are subject to a range of negative judgements or actions on the part of others. Open expressions of disgust, and inference or attribution of assumed negative personal characteristics to an individual, such as: dirtiness, 'manliness,' animalistic traits, a lack in education, being aggressive or having mental health issues (Basow & Braman, 1998; Burchell, 1964; Fahs, 2011; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), are among the judgments and experiences women displaying body hair receive – all of which have potential negative impacts on women's wellbeing (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004).

In contrast, men's hairiness has been long associated with virility and 'manliness' in the west (Boroughs et al., 2005; Toerien et al., 2005), with the only socially-expected area of hair removal being the face (Boroughs, 2012), alongside head-hair reduction. There is some indication that women in the UK and Sri Lanka identify men's body hair as attractive (Dixon, Halliwell, East, Wignarajah, & Anderson, 2003), but we know relatively little about what men themselves think about their body hair, or to what level male body hair maintains attractiveness (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Men's hair removal practices do seem to be going through a period of rapid change, with the limited empirical evidence suggesting hair removal or reduction from multiple sites is now a common Western practice (Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008; Porche, 2007). According to US and Australian studies, between 60 and 70% of men remove at least some hair from the pubic area, but more commonly reduce it, usually through trimming (Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008). High percentages of chest and back hair removal were also found in these samples. Recent German research indicates a reducing gender difference, with armpit hair removal very high among men (70% of participants) and pubic hair removal quite high (30%), (Brähler, 2011). The hair display of the actors who have portrayed James Bond reinforces this: Sean Connery, Roger Moore and Pierce Brosnan, who played 'classic' versions of Bond, often had clean shaven faces offset by hairy chests and abdomens. Their bodies are in stark contrast to the hairless

body (but often stubbled face) of the current Bond, Daniel Craig. Men who remove hair cite cleanliness, appearance and attractiveness as primary reasons for its removal (Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008).

We do not know yet whether the negative social attributions applied around women's body hair (Basow & Braman, 1998; Fahs, 2011) might now also be applied to men's body hair, or to men without body hair. However, it appears that men's experience of body hair removal is potentially quite different to that of women who display body hair. Men in Fah's (2013) work, for instance, reported having to negotiate complex expectations of masculinity, and having to find ways to 'masculinize' complete hair removal. Trimming of hair appears to be a 'safe' middle ground in this regard, as it still maintains the visibility of some hair, while achieving some of the suggested benefits of hair removal, such as improved view of muscularity, appearance of 'cleanliness' and perception of a larger penis (see Boroughs et al., 2005).

An individual's hair display and/or removal choices and practices sit at a complex intersection of sociocultural meanings, norms and expectations, media and other influences, 'personal' desires and tastes, the desires and tastes of others, such as a sexual partner (which may be assumed, or expressed), and the intersection of the 'private' with the 'public'. We will briefly consider pubic hair in this regard. Its removal might be understood as outside the public gaze, reserved for the view of intimate partners and the self, and hence a private matter. Although personal 'choice' provides a key rationalisation for pubic hair removal, reduction and alteration, ideas of public invisibility and privacy feature very strongly in reasons why pubic hair should be removed (by women) – for instance 'bikini line' hair removal is performed to prevent public 'exposure' of hair associated with genitalia (Tricklebank et al., in press). Less hair is also cited as more attractive (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). However, norms do not just reflect personal actions, and the recent trend towards complete or majority pubic hair removal, particularly among women, has been theorised as strongly linked with increased accessibility of pornography and other sexually-explicit media (Cokal, 2007; Peixoto Labre,

2002; Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009), which now often display reduced or removed pubic hair (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011).

This paper adds to a small but growing body of research that engages with the ways women and men – often implicitly generalised from idealisations of white women and men – take up or resist hair removal norms within Western contexts. It offers the first survey of men’s and women’s views and practices around body hair and hair removal in Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ). The analysis reported here derives from a project on body hair and body hair removal, which utilised a mixed (quantitative/qualitative) survey design. Surveys are frequently used method of data collection for personal or sensitive topics (O’Connell-Davidson & Layder, 1994) as they provide anonymity for participants to report their views, experiences and practices. Alongside anonymity, large sample sizes and question standardization, qualitative surveys allow participants to identify their own key issues and “researchers to capture the nuances, contradictions, and ambiguities” in participants’ experiences (Frith & Gleeson, 2008, p. 253 ; see also, Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). The project aimed to describe: body hair removal practices in NZ; views on body hair and its removal; and the meanings associated with hair and hair removal. The specific objectives of this paper were: a) to assess young men’s and women’s (18-35 years) current body hair removal practices at different bodily sites; b) to identify why men and women remove body hair (at different sites); c) to identify perceived benefits and risks/costs of body hair removal; and d) to determine whether reported NZ practices fit with international trends.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 1000 people provided some data or began an online survey on body hair removal and alteration. Selection criteria (being aged 18-35, and identifying as a New Zealander<sup>1</sup>) were defined in the Participant Information Sheet, consent form and survey proper, but were occasionally ignored by some participants. The age group criterion was selected due to this group being identified as more likely to embrace or reflect contemporary changes in body hair removal practices. The

nationality criterion was selected for the purpose of locating the study within a particular sociocultural context. After excluding those who did not meet the selection criteria for participation (12.3%), and those who had solely provided demographic information (29.3%), 584 'completed' surveys remained, which comprised the dataset analysed here. There are some fluctuations in *N* values across results, as participants were not excluded for occasional omissions. Of the 584 participants, roughly equal numbers identified as female (50.4%) and male (48.8%); three participants identified as "other." Age ranged from 18-35, with a mean of 26.13 (*SD*: 5.64), with the mean time spent living in New Zealand 22.93 years (*SD*: 8.44, range 1 to 35 years). In terms of ethnicity, 87% identified as Pākehā<sup>2</sup>/New Zealand European/Other 'white', 9% Asian (or of Asian ancestry), 5% Māori (or of Māori ancestry), 3% Pasifika (or Pasifika ancestry), <1% Middle Eastern. There is some overlap in ethnicity demographics due to some participants identifying with more than one ethnicity. Heterosexually-identified participants made up 79.9% of the sample; gay-identified 10.3%; bisexual-identified 6.7%; other-identified 2.7%; lesbian-identified 0.3%. In terms of relationship status, 40% were single; 27% partnered; 20% married; 5% 'in a relationship'; 3% engaged; 2% de facto; 1% other. All geographic regions in New Zealand were represented: participants resided in Auckland (51.4%); Wellington (15.8%); Canterbury (10.4%); Otago (7.3%); Manawatu/Taranaki (3.6%); Bay of Plenty (3.1%); Waikato (2.4%); Hawkes Bay (1.4%); Southland/West Coast (1.2%); Northland (0.7%); and Nelson/Marlborough (0.7%).

## **Measures**

The 'Body Hair and its Removal and Alteration' (BHRA) survey was developed specifically for the project. It utilised a mixed methods design, with both quantitative and qualitative questions designed to identify participants' practices of hair removal, reduction and alteration, and assess their views around hair, hair removal, reduction and alteration practices, and gender and body hair. As the survey was intended to be inductive, with an emphasis on collection of descriptive/behavioural data, rather than the testing of hypotheses (Yardley & Bishop, 2008), testing normally associated

with psychometric questionnaires (such as alphas, scaling, validity and reliability) were not integral to its design.

The questions and structure of the survey were developed based on the VB's previous hair removal research survey tool (Tricklebank et al., in press), and on hair surveys made available by other hair researchers (Basow, 1991; Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). For the purposes of the survey, we defined hair 'removal' as "removal of hair from the visible surface of the body", 'reduction' as "reduction of length of hair while still retaining visible hair" and 'alteration' as "any change to hair as it grows naturally on the body (e.g., bleaching, dying, shaping etc.)." Although definitions of 'removal' and 'reduction' were clear in the survey, it is possible that the percentages described in the Results section do reflect some blurring between the definitions. For instance, facial hair removal may not be total in every instance, and public hair removal may allow for shaping, defining of boundaries etc. We defined 'currently' as "practices typical of the last month or so," which enabled breadth of interpretation by the participants. Wherever we refer to 'ever' hair removal (see Table 1, Results and Discussion), data was generated from the question "What areas of the body have you *ever* removed hair from? Please tick all that apply."

The BHRA survey was then subjected to peer review by a group of expert hair researchers, and underwent piloting ( $N = 65$ ). Refinements post-peer review and piloting included the deletion of questions judged repetitive or redundant, merging of questions that captured similar data, and moving the demographic information section from the end to the start of the survey. No new questions were added. The final survey contained 92 questions, distributed across four sections: (1) Demographic information (18 questions), (2) Body Hair and Men (19 questions), (3) Body Hair and Women (19 questions), and (4) Your Own Body Hair and Practices (36 questions). These sections were formulated thematically.

## **Procedures**



In order to achieve a diverse sample, we recruited participants using a variety of methods: advertising via posters placed in cafes, bars and on university campuses; a Facebook page for the project; a national media press-release; and word of mouth and snowballing using the researchers' personal networks, which included using 'recruiters' to promote the study within their large social networks. Participation was voluntary, but participants were advised of the opportunity to enter a draw for \$200 worth of vouchers of their choice, upon completion. The press-release was the most successful recruitment strategy: almost two thirds of the overall sample (approximately 650 respondents) completed the survey following a news piece in a key national newspaper (and its online counterparts); less than two days after the story, we closed the survey with 1000 responses received. As noted above, 42% of the respondents did not complete the survey or failed to meet the selection criteria. Potential for duplications was minimised through SurveyMonkey limits of one survey per IP address. Surveys were also cross checked both at both quantitative and qualitative levels to ensure no other duplications had occurred.

The survey was delivered online through SurveyMonkey. Everyone who clicked the survey link was first directed to a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) briefing them on the purpose of the study. After reading the PIS, they were required to indicate their informed consent, confirm they were 18 or over, and confirm they were a New Zealander. If all were confirmed, they were directed to the first page of the survey. Overall, the survey took most participants between 30 and 45 minutes to complete. Upon completion, participants were notified of an email address they could email to enter the \$200 voucher draw, if they wished to. This process ensured email addresses could not be linked to a completed survey. In addition, no identifying information was collected, and the survey was encrypted. The project received ethical approval from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

### **Analysis**

Quantitative data reported here were analysed using descriptive statistics. Unless indicated otherwise, the chi-square was used to test for statistical significance between sexes, as appropriate.

All tests were performed with a .05 level of significance. Cramer's V was used for chi square effect sizes with tables of more than 2x2, Phi for tables of 2x2. Cohen's d was used to test for effect sizes associated with t-tests. Given the small number ( $N = 3$ ) of 'other-sex'-identified participants, statistical testing for difference has only been conducted on male-female differences; other-sex-identified participants' data are still indicated. The limited qualitative data reported in this paper were coded using NVivo following the procedures for a descriptive, inductive form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to identify key patterned meanings.

## Results

The analysis reported here identifies current and past hair removal practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand, identifies influences on hair practices, and explores differences between 'acceptable' and 'desirable' hair practices. It also specifically focuses on what the data reveal about the currently 'hot topic' of pubic hair removal.

### Current and Past Hair Removal Practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Virtually all participants (99% women; 99% men; 100% other) had engaged in body hair removal in their lifetime. Women (mean age 12.72,  $SD: 1.72$ ) were significantly younger than men (mean age 17.14,  $SD: 4.33$ ) at age of first hair removal,  $t(469) = 13.11, p < .05, d = 1.42$ . Looking at ever body hair removal by body area and sex, for women the most common areas of hair removal were lower legs (97%), armpits (96%) and the pubic area (86%). For men, the most common area of hair removal was the face (89%), followed by the pubic region (78%) and chest (59%). For other participants, armpit (100%) and pubic hair (100%) were the most commonly removed. Details of ever hair removal practices by body area, and sex differences, are shown in Table 1.

Current hair removal followed similar patterns, albeit with often lower levels than ever hair removal. For women, the lower leg (93%), armpit (91%) and pubic area (69%) remained the most common areas of hair removal. For men, the most common current hair removal was on the face (78%), pubic area (54%) and back (39%). For other participants, armpit, leg and face (all 67%) were

the most common areas of current hair removal (see Table 2). The data show a clear trend where current hair removal occurs at lower level than ever hair removal, for both women and men.

### **Acceptability and Desirability of Body Hair and Body Hair Removal**

Participants were asked whether they felt it was socially acceptable for men or for women to remove hair, or to leave hair in its natural state. The results for men showed high levels for both removing and retaining body hair, in general: 64% agreed it was socially acceptable for men to remove it (men 71.6%, women 56.6%,  $\chi^2(2, N = 582) = 14.463, p < .05, v = .158$ ), 81% agreed it was socially acceptable for men to leave their body hair in its natural state (men 79%, women 84%,  $p > .05$ ). The situation for women was different: body hair removal was almost universally agreed (by 99%) to be socially acceptable; leaving body hair in its natural state was understood to be socially acceptable by only a small minority (11%) of participants. There were no differences in how male or female participants understood the social acceptability of women's hair retention or removal.

The survey also measured perceived acceptability and desirability of hair on various body parts, for men or for women. Wilcoxon paired samples tests were performed on the differences between acceptability and desirability of hair removal by sex. Considering male bodies first, there was high to very high levels of acceptability (66% to 97%) for body hair on all body parts measured, with the exception of the back (which 34% judged to be acceptable). The proportion rating body hair desirable on male bodies was significantly lower,  $z = -2.701, p < .05$ , a pattern sustained across all of the main body areas measured (see Table 3). However, rates indicating desirability of hair were still high - predominantly between 50 and 70%. The notable exception was a very low rate (<7%) indicating desirability of back hair. In general, female participants tended to rate men's body hair as both more acceptable and more desirable than male participants, with this difference particularly notable in relation to the lower legs and pubic area.

In contrast, hair was typically not perceived to be either acceptable or desirable for different areas of women's bodies. Notably, the proportion of participants perceiving hair as desirable was

significantly lower than as acceptable, both overall,  $z = -2.244$ ,  $p < .05$ , and across every part of the body considered (see Table 4). The pubis was the only area where more than 1/3 of participants reported hair to be either acceptable (76%) or desirable (71%). In general, female participants tended to rate women's body hair as both more acceptable and more desirable than male participants.

### **Influences on hair removal practices**

Although the majority of participants (66% men; 66% women; 33% other) considered hair removal a private matter — not often discussed openly — a range of influences on their hair removal choices, both past and current, were reported. The proportion who reported they were influenced by different people or factors in their lives often differed significantly for male and female participants, with women consistently more likely to report an influence of friends, and men consistently more likely to report an influence of pornography and the internet (see Table 5). Participants reported engagement with pornography significantly differed by sex, with 86.4% of men reporting watching or reading pornography (regularly, occasionally or sometimes), compared with 39.5% of women,  $\chi^2(1, N = 580) = 134.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $f = .48$ . Among those who reported 'regular' reading or viewing of pornography, the differences were pronounced, 34.9% of men and only 3.7% of women. A standard regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well engagement with pornography predicted pubic hair removal among participants, finding a no relationship,  $F(1, 572) = 3.286$ ,  $p > .05$ .

When asked in an open-ended question to explain why women or men might remove or alter their body hair, participants gave a range of answers which were also clearly patterned. The most commonly identified reasons for women's hair removal or alteration were: (1) societal norms (often in reference to hairlessness and 'femininity'; noted by 78%); (2) attractiveness (overall, typically in relation to men's sexual interest; noted by 46%), and (3) 'practical' reasons (such as sport or comfort; noted by 9.2%), so-called 'hygiene' or 'cleanliness' reasons (8.13%), and the tactile pleasure

of hairless skin (for self or a partner, sometimes related to sex; noted by 8%). Only 5% suggested it was personal preference that motivated hair removal, and it was almost always listed with other reasons. Less than 1% identified women's hair removal with mental health issues within this open ended question, for instance, some commented that hair removal acted as a protective practice in dealing with trichotillomania (the compulsive urge to remove one's hair, usually by pulling it out by the roots).

The explanations for men's hair removal or alteration were similar, but in different proportions. The most commonly identified reasons were: (1) 'new' fashionable grooming norms (noted by 46%, but never evoking hairlessness as 'masculine'); (2) attractiveness (noted by 28%, often specifically related to a particular part of the body); (3) practical reasons (sport, hygiene, etc., noted by 25%). Only 4% of participants made any reference to personal choice. Mental health issues were raised by 2 participants, and related to their own experience of Body Dimorphic Disorder.

#### Pubic Hair removal

Pubic hair removal practices were analysed in more detail. The data indicate that pubic hair removal or alteration was common across both men and women in this sample, with only 21% of men, and 17% of women, not removing any pubic hair. Approximately half the women (49%) and close to half the men (44%) removed (or reduced) what they considered to be "most" or "all" pubic hair, a non-significant difference. However, women were far more likely than men to remove all their pubic hair – 25.9% of women but only 10.7% of men removed all pubic hair,  $\chi^2 [1, N = 508] = 19.098, p < .05, \phi = .194$ . Table 6 demonstrates pubic hair removal practices broken down by age and sex. The sample was broken down further by age (rather than cell size) in Table 6. Analysis of qualitative responses regarding reasons for women to remove pubic hair included desirability/sexiness for sexual partners, or imagined sexual partners (77.3%), general social expectations/pressure (41.3%), and practical reasons (e.g., hygiene, comfort) (35.6%) as the predominant reasons.

## Discussion

This study, the first to explore body hair removal practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and one of the few studies to focus on both women and men's views and practices, reveals continuities with previous research on hair removal, as well as offering up new insights into body hair practices. Key and new findings from this study include: identification of the differences between men and women in A/NZ, in terms of an apparent 'flexibility of choice' (or lack thereof) around hair removal practices, through the lens of 'acceptability' and 'desirability' of body hair; identification of pubic hair removal practices among men and women, and how these match to the broader notions of acceptability and desirability; indications that ideals concerning men's hair and hair removal practices are in a period of transition – potentially similar to the one Hope (1982) described women experiencing post-World War 2 in the United States.

There are indications that on select areas of the body, hair removal is persistently normative (armpits and legs for women; back, pubic area and face for men) with little difference between 'current' and 'ever' hair removal (see Tables 1 and 2). What is apparent from these small differences is that for the majority of participants, hair removal on some areas appears more 'non-negotiable' than others – and these continue to be clearly gendered. Large differences between current and ever hair removal might suggest hair removal practices associated with these areas have more scope for flexibility of choice. They might be trialled and then stopped, become inconvenient or problematic, or become too time consuming to continue for some people. The very low percentages of hair removal in some body areas may indicate these are unusual areas for hair growth (such as toes for women), or that hair in those areas is typically fine, or hidden. The pressure for those who do grow hair in these places to remove it, especially when it crosses the line into visibility, may therefore become greater.

Women's hair removal practices in A/NZ showed a great deal in common with survey data from other studies (e.g., Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien et al., 2005), and hair removal from

women's underarms and lower legs remains a normative – and indeed desirable – practice for the vast majority of participants. Hair removal in general was associated primarily with being attractive or feminine, often with little differentiation between the two. This suggests the previously identified association of femininity with being 'attractive' or striving to make oneself (more) attractive (see also, Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Measuring perceived acceptability of natural body hair on women allowed us to examine the claim that "a woman's body is unacceptable if unaltered" (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004, p. 71) – with the data indicating that the vast majority did not view unaltered female bodies to be socially acceptable. The much earlier age that women begin engaging in hair removal practices (a finding that showed a significant difference and large effect size), likely reflect the lack of room women have to question, or even understand these norms before they must begin practicing them. Thus, the situation for women and body hair in A/NZ appears similar to that of women in many other Westernised countries, with a very strong social mandate for removal.

However, the data did not indicate a total or unquestioned conformity to the 'hairless ideal' (Basow, 1991). For instance, that over one-fifth (21%) of female participants reported not removing lower leg hair as acceptable suggests some perception of freedom for women regarding what they do (or do not do) with their lower leg hair. However, from the quantitative data, we cannot conclude this means the display of leg hair on women is commonly accepted, because the imaginary object to which participants responded – 'women's lower leg hair' – might have been quite different for different participants (Potter & Wetherell, 1987): darker, lighter, denser, shorter, and displayed or not, in different contexts. As women's body hair varies in density and colouration, across women as well as across body sites, some participants might consider it acceptable for women with fairer or sparse hair to not depilate, or for women not to depilate if they are not revealing their legs in public (such as in winter, or due to cultural/religious clothing norms), or to a sexual partner. Indeed, that fewer participants (16%) felt that the denser, longer, and 'coarser' underarm hair was acceptable for women to leave 'as is', even though it is potentially more concealable than leg hair, raises questions

about how meaning and practice intersects with the social meanings attributed to hair on different sites, as well as different forms or 'types' of hair. Is denser/longer body hair read as more masculine? It also potentially links to the association of hair removal as hygienic (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004), with body hair framed as unhygienic. If hair is framed as unhygienic in a non-gendered way, with men's bodies as 'naturally' more hairy than women, men would be potentially subject to more pressure to remove more hair. But the situation for men is not so simple.

The data show large proportions of men in A/NZ are removing body hair from various sites of their bodies, and the data suggest agreement with research from Australia and North America (e.g., Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008; Porche, 2007). However, what our data suggest is that rather than male hairlessness – or reduced hairiness – now situated as the norm for men, this could be a time of transition. As Hope (1982) has identified, significant cultural shifts in hair removal practices do not happen without such liminal periods. However, it is hard to determine at this point whether the shift will go one way or the other, and whether men will maintain such practices as they become older. Certainly, as with the example of James Bond, observing older male bodies displayed in various visual media may provide scope for analysis.

Substantial proportions of women and men see male body hair as acceptable, unless it is on the back – but there, too, acceptability of body hair was higher than for almost every region of the female body (with the exception of the arms, and the pubic area). This acceptability sits alongside typically lower levels of desirability of body hair, for men, and alongside around two thirds of participants indicating social acceptability of male body hair removal. Although this could indicate that men now 'have it all,' and can be either hairy or hair-free, as they wish, it might also indicate a transition towards Western societal expectations around male body hair display are becoming more constrained, with men expected to be 'groomed,' or potentially even hairless in parts (see also, Boroughs et al., 2005). What men (and women) make of this apparently inconsistent terrain will be explored through the analysis of the qualitative data, and reported in other papers, especially as it



relates to dominant contemporary rhetoric of freedom of individual choice, and personal responsibility for those choices in the West (Braun, 2009).

For younger men in A/NZ, desirability may now already be associated with at least some hair removal. This seems to fit with other Australian research, which indicates that a mesomorphic, minimally hairy body, with a full head of hair, is considered the masculine ideal (Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008). As very few men will 'naturally' fulfil this ideal, however, hair removal or reduction provides a fairly straightforward move toward partial fulfilment (Tiggemann et al., 2008). As men age, and distance from this ideal further increases for many men, there may also be the contradictory effect of men finding even more flexibility of choice regarding their hair removal practices.

High percentages of participants found pubic hair in women and men both acceptable, and also desirable. This situates pubic hair on women as an exception to the more typical 'hairless ideal'. However, this desirability (and acceptance) coexisted with very high rates for the practice of pubic hair removal, for both men and women. And the data themselves were not detailed enough to fully unpack what this might mean. As also noted above, an object like 'pubic hair on women' might be imagined in very different ways by different participants: one might imagine full-length hair with a minimal amount of bikini line removal; another might imagine a very small narrow strip on the mons pubis, trimmed to about 1cm in length. Likewise for men, does 'removal' evoke full removal, or trimming, or some combination? Future research, perhaps using visual methods, needs to untangle 'how much' hair, in what state (trimmed vs. full growth) is too much, or too little, for male or female bodies to be read as acceptable, and as desirable, and why this might be so. Certainly some of our previous research suggests that pubic hair becomes a problem when it unexpectedly enters the 'public domain' from the private – from the sides of a swimsuit for instance (Tricklebank et al., in press). Although a significant difference was found between the percentage of men and women who remove all hair, the effect size for this finding was small. This may suggest that there are greater similarities between these two groups than differences. Although women are more likely than men

to remove all their pubic hair, this practice is not limited to them alone and should be understood as a broader pattern affecting both groups.

In our data, women's pubic hair removal practices matched or exceeded the levels reported in other similar studies (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008) – with almost half (48.9%) of all female respondents removing most or all of their pubic hair. This may well be indicative of the age group surveyed, as younger women (and men) may be particularly invested in embodying a sexually liberated identity, or in being perceived as desirable (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). It may also be indicative of some features of New Zealand culture, for instance the proximal nature of beaches, and moderate climate may make bikini line hair removal more salient for many women.

Alternatively, this conformity to apparently normative practices could (also) be a reflection of culturally dominant notions of New Zealanders as 'conservative' or reticent talking about sexual things (see Braun, 2008; Terry & Braun, 2012). That sexual partners would find a hairless or virtually hairless vulva 'sexy' may simply be assumed by women, rather than something they have been explicitly told. This possibility is evoked in youth sexuality research which reported the idea of a 'male in the head' whose imagined preferences and desires are assumed and 'internalised' by young women (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Sharpe, 2004). This research has identified that women often co-produce these sorts of norms in relation to one another, and in fact can be more likely to police them than male partners (Holland et al., 2004). This seems to fit closely with two distinct features of our findings: a) that women's friends are the most likely influencers of their hair removal behaviour, and b) that sexual partners are the imagined audience for hair removal despite this. Our findings that many men and women find pubic hair to be desirable should be considered important to offering more space for greater variation of expression – potentially disrupting the extremely narrow expectations that such internalised versions of male desire elicit, if in fact they exist. However, as noted above, what the imaginary object 'pubic hair' actually entails for people needs further exploration.

Certainly, our finding of no relationship between pornography viewing and one's own pubic hair removal is interesting, however, if expectations of pubic hair removal among women are theorised as coming from the imagined expectations of sexual partners, or imagined sexual partners (as 77% of our participants suggest), then one's own pornography viewing is perhaps less salient than that of those one is sexually interested in, or even the perception of one's sexual partner's engagement with pornography. Of particular interest, would be whether this trend of full pubic hair removal continues if patterns of hair removal change within pornography. A more detailed understanding of the prevalence of pornography engagement in A/NZ would be needed to make fuller commentary. At the time of writing there is no prevalence data to enable international comparisons to be made.

However, what is very clear from our findings is that social pressure, either from partners, imagined partners, friends, media (including pornography) or even an imaginary, monolithic 'society' has a significant impact upon what is often constructed as an individual choice. Even where participant responses suggest the justifications for pubic hair removal may be individualised (such as 'hygiene' and even 'comfort'), these might also be seen as socially generated categories, which cannot be separated from other categories such as 'social pressure' and 'desirability'. That reasonably high percentages of women removed no pubic hair (16.9% overall) is also of interest. The highest levels of non-removal among women occurred in the 18-20 age group (24%, compared to the overall rate of 17%). Whether or not this suggests a reversal in pubic hair removal trends remains to be seen, although it has been claimed that the 'bush is back' (Germinsky, 2008) The comparatively high rate of complete pubic hair retention could reflect a number of things, including age and developmental stage (with younger women having less pubic hair growth than older women, and so less 'need' to remove, or possibly less sexual engagement).

Although this study has presented new findings and ones which affirm previous hair research from other countries, certain limitations of the study need to be acknowledged when interpreting these results. First, although diverse and broadly nationally representative on a number of axes, the

sample was self-selected, so we are not claiming that those who took part are representative of the A/NZ population. The self-selection element may be more of an issue in relation to male participants, given that hair practices appear to be far less circumscribed. This may have led to a sample of men with a higher than average hair removal practices; we cannot know. What we can suggest is that men who engage in hair removal practices may feel more comfortable or invested participating in surveys about their practices. A reasonable number of men and women also expressed frustration with the current trend toward men's hair removal in the open ended questions, which may suggest that those who identify themselves at polar ends of the 'debate' were more willing to respond to the survey. Second, the length of the survey, which took on average 30-45 minutes to complete, may have resulted in higher levels of non-completion among those without a particular interest in the topic, which again may have swayed the results in a particular direction, particularly for men. However, the large sample size does provide some assurance that the patterns reported are likely not to reflect haphazard sampling issues. They suggest something important about body hair removal, reduction and alteration in A/NZ; considered in light of consistency with international hair removal research, they add to our empirically-based understanding of contemporary hair removal expectations and practices. Third, our sample excluded those over the age of 35. Although this was valuable for the purposes of understanding the hair removal practices of younger people, research with those over the age of 35 may provide a different, more complex story to the one presented in this paper. Finally, although all areas of the body were identified for sites of hair removal, some of these were made so only through the open ended questions (buttocks, toes etc.). It is difficult to ascertain whether our findings reflect the actual levels of hair removal at these sites within our sample, or only among those motivated to comment in the open question.

We aimed to provide a baseline measure of hair removal practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand, among men and women, and focusing on an age group that has been associated with higher levels of change in other Western contexts (18-35). This first study from Aotearoa/New Zealand revealed as normative body hair removal for women, in line with other Western countries, but also high levels of

body hair removal practices for young men. Through differentiating between ‘desirable’ and ‘acceptable’ body hair practices, we were able to explore some of the potential gendered strictures around body hair removal and display – revealing that for women, with the exception of pubic hair, this remains narrowly bound, but for men, with the exception of back hair, there is far more flexibility of choice. Analysis of local manifestations of broader Western norms provides a rich opportunity to interrogate the various ways in which these norms may be taken up, resisted and reshaped. This may further allow opportunities to question or challenge those norms that may be counterproductive to wellbeing and positive self-evaluations, especially if it is possible to identify the points at which ‘transition’ solidifies into unquestioned norm.

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, the term ‘New Zealander’ will be used to refer to all ethnic groups that identify Aotearoa as their home country through birth or settlement.

<sup>2</sup> Pākehā is a Maori term for those of European descent. It is a disputed term, and not all white New Zealanders will identify with it, as can be seen by some participants’ use of terms such as ‘NZ European,’ or the unmarked ‘Kiwi’ or ‘New Zealander.’

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Table 1: Percentage who have ever removed hair by area of body as a function of sex

Area	Female % (N = 278)	Male % (N = 245)	Other % (N = 3)	Total % (N = 529)
Leg-lower*	97.5	45.7	33.3	73.0
Armpits*	96.4	35.9	100.0	68.3
Pubic Area*	85.6	77.6	100.0	81.9
Leg-thigh*	82.0	44.1	33.3	26.4
Face <sup>#</sup>	62.6	88.6	66.7	74.7
Arms	29.9	22.4	33.3	64.1
Abdomen <sup>#</sup>	27.3	51.4	66.7	38.8
Chest <sup>#</sup>	15.1	59.2	66.7	35.9
Back <sup>#</sup>	5.0	53.9	66.7	28.1
Other	9.7	13.5	0.0	11.4
Never removed hair	0.4	0.8	0	0.6

\* indicates women were significantly more likely than men to remove hair from this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

# indicates men were significantly more likely than women to remove hair from this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

Table 2: Percentage who currently remove or reduce hair by area of body as a function of sex

Area	Female % (N = 277)	Male % (N = 243)	Other % (N = 3)	Total % (N = 523)
Leg-lower*	93.1	13.6^	33.3	55.8
Armpits*	91.3	21.0^	66.7	58.5
Pubic Area*	69.3^	54.3^	66.7	62.3
Leg- thigh*	61.0^	15.2^	33.3	39.6
Face <sup>#</sup>	52.0	78.2^	66.7	64.2
Arms*	15.2^	8.2^	33.3	12.0
Abdomen <sup>#</sup>	13.4^	25.1^	33.3	18.9
Chest <sup>#</sup>	7.6^	29.6^	33.3	18.0
Other <sup>#</sup>	5.4	11.5	0.0	8.2
Back <sup>#</sup>	1.4	39.5^	33.3	19.3
Never removed hair	1.8	4.9	0.0	3.3

\* indicates women were significantly more likely than men to remove hair from this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

# indicates men were significantly more likely than men to remove hair from this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

^ indicates a significant reduction in current hair removal in this area, compared to ever hair removal (at  $p \leq .01$  level)

Table 3: Percentages of participants (male, female and total) rating body hair on men as acceptable and as desirable

Area	Acceptable			Desirable			<i>d</i> (Total)
	Total (N = 586)	Male (N =285)	Female (N = 298)	Total (N = 557)	Male (N =264)	Female (N = 290)	
Abdomen	66.4	69.1	63.4	32.0	32.6	31.0	34.4
Face	90.6	91.9	89.3	56.6	63.3*	50.0	34.0
Chest	81.2	84.6*	77.9	53.3	56.1	50.7	27.9
Back	34.0	30.2	36.9	6.8	8.0	5.2	27.2
Legs-thigh	86.7	86.3	86.9	60.9	52.7	68.3*	25.8
Arms	93.0	91.2	94.6	69.3	61.4	76.6*	23.7
Armpits	92.5	89.8	95.0*	69.8	65.9	73.4	23.2
Legs - lower	96.6	94.0	99.0*	75.8	64.4	83.4*	20.8
Pubic Area	79.2	74.0	83.9*	60.3	53.4	66.2*	18.9
Other	4.9	4.6	5.4	5.6	7.2	4.1	-.07

\* indicates men/women were significantly more likely women/men to find hair as acceptable/desirable on this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

*Table 4: Percentages of participants (male, female and total) rating body hair on women as acceptable and as desirable*

Area	Acceptable			Desirable			<i>d</i> (Total)
	Total ( <i>N</i> = 473)	Male ( <i>N</i> = 201)	Female ( <i>N</i> = 269)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 325)	Male ( <i>N</i> = 123)	Female ( <i>N</i> = 199)	
Legs - lower	21.4	17.9	23.8	9.6	8.9	9.5	11.8
Legs-thigh	33.1	19.9	42.4*	12.7	8.9	14.1	20.4
Arms	72.5	58.2	82.5*	38.9	24.4	47.2*	33.6
Armpits	16.3	15.9	15.6	8.6	7.3	8.5	7.7
Face	12.5	7.5	15.2*	5.6	4.9	5.5	6.9
Chest	8.3	5.5	9.7	6.5	5.7	6.0	1.8
Abdomen	11.4	8.5	12.6	7.1	7.3	6.0	4.3
Back	8.7	6.0	10.0	5.6	4.9	5.5	3.1
Pubic Area	76.3	80.6	72.5	71.0	75.6	67.3	5.3
Other	11.0	4.6	5.4	17.9	7.2	4.1	-6.9

\* indicates men/women were significantly more likely than women/men to find hair as acceptable/desirable on this part of the body (at  $p \leq .05$  level).

Table 5: Influences on current and past hair removal practices

Source of Influence	Past (%)			Current (%)		
	Female	Male	Other	Female	Male	Other
	(N = 275)	(N = 235)	(N = 2)	(N = 253)	(N = 221)	(N = 2)
Friends	84.0*	57.9	100	46.2*	29.9	0
Media	74.5*	63.4	100	43.9	45.2	100
Sexual partner	70.2*	79.1	50.0	68.0	74.7	50.0
School friends	68.4*	31.1	50.0	11.9*	3.6	0
Parents	38.5*	14.9	100	5.1	5.0	0
Internet	28.4	43.0*	100	15.0	28.5*	0
Porn	17.8	49.4*	100	7.1	30.8*	100
Health Prof/ls	6.2	4.7	0	5.5	5.0	0
Illness	3.6	3.8	0	1.6	0.5	0

\* indicates were significantly more likely than the other sex to have hair removal practices influenced by source (at  $p \leq 0.05$  level).

*Table 6: Current pubic hair removal practices, by age group and sex*

	None (%)	Some (%)	Most (%)	All (%)
<i>Male</i>				
18-20 (N = 48)	16.7	33.3	38.9	11.1
21-25 (N = 80)	16.1	46.8	29.0	8.1
26-30 (N = 81)	19.7	32.8	37.7	9.8
31-35 (N = 24)	25.0	27.2	35.9	12.0
Total (N = 233)	20.6	34.3	34.8	10.3
<i>Female</i>				
18-20 (N = 46)	23.9	28.4	19.3	28.4
21-25 (N = 93)	11.9	32.1	27.4	28.6
26-30 (N = 63)	17.0	46.8	19.1	17.1
30-35 (N = 70)	13.2	35.8	26.4	24.5
Total (N = 272)	16.9	34.2	23.2	25.7