

Aesthetic Exploration and Identity Perception of Body Hair

Yifan Wang¹, Yaluo Bai²

¹ Department of Arts Management, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

² Department of Financial, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: Traditionally, thick male body hair is seen as a symbol of masculinity, while women tend to seek a smooth state of body hair as a reflection of softness and beauty. As aesthetic concepts change, more and more people are embracing and celebrating body hair in its natural state, viewing it as a direct expression of their unique style and self-confidence. In this article, we firstly explain the development of body hair removal by introducing the history of hair removal, then further explore the aesthetics and identity perception of body hair by sorting out the relationship among body hair, gender, and aesthetics, then validate the emergence of the idea of freedom of body hair by using examples, and finally summarise the thematic ideas of the article.

Keywords: Body Hair; Women; Freedom.

1. Introduction

For human beings, the construction of identity is complex and varied, they will determine their own identity in various ways, and the environment and external evaluation will largely influence people's worldview and aesthetics, they show themselves by grooming their body parts to establish their self-identity. Shaving armpit hair is naturally on the agenda before summer, when most women change their clothing for the season and make wardrobe space for sleeveless summer clothes. Many girls struggle with hair removal and how society judges them. Although often trivialised, and seldom the subject of academic study, the hairlessness norm powerfully endorses the assumption that a woman's body is unacceptable if unaltered; its very normativity points to a socio-cultural presumption that hairlessness is the appropriate condition for the feminine body[1]. However, a woman's beauty should never be judged by others, and body hair anxiety should not be a shackle on a woman's charisma, just as there is freedom of weight and freedom of dress, women should also have freedom of body hair.

2. History of Hair Removal

A historical perspective on the origins of hair removal, which began as a survival strategy. In this case, nomadic people were the first to embrace hair removal, but their methods were painful and inevitably scraped off skin and flesh. Despite this, however, hair removal made early settler communities safer, as a smooth head and face prevented them from being caught by rivals. Ancient Egypt thousands of years later made hair removal more modern. The method of hair removal invented during this period involved plucking body hair with a sticky paste made of sugar, water, and lemon juice, which was then applied to the skin and covered with gauze, using the stickiness of the material to quickly remove the hair. During this period, body hair was considered a symbol of filth and uncivilisation. As a result, many men and women chose to remove hair from their entire body, including the head, as a sign of higher social class.

Similarly, the ancient Greeks used body hair to define social class. However, the Greeks were the first to begin distinguishing between male and female methods of hair removal; women's nudity and hairless private parts represented chastity and were a symbol of upper class. In contrast, men's body hair represented their masculinity. Thus, the Greeks were the originators of the different importance given to female and male private hair. In the Middle Ages, Queen Elizabeth I of England pioneered facial hair removal in Western culture, influencing women to pluck their eyebrows completely and shave their hairline to create the illusion of a larger forehead and longer face.

In 1760, a French knife maker named Jean-Jacques Perret created the first straight razor for men. Although the marketing of the product was heavily gendered, women used the product with increasing frequency, and in 1884 Dr Gouraud produced the first depilatory creams, called Poudre Subtile. 1880, American businessman Gillette introduced a straight razor that was safer than Perret's original model, and soon evolved into the handy razor as we know it today. This era had no strict aesthetic standards for female body hair. During the Second World War, a shortage of nylon forced women to go bare-legged, which made the practice of women's razors even more popular. As a result, Gillette introduced the first women's razor, the Milady de Collet, in 1915, and Remington introduced the first electric razor for women in 1940. As competition in the market intensified, hair removal creams and advertisements then spread widely, and both methods of hair removal became a profitable mode of competition. Years later, a women's fashion magazine ran an advert featuring a model showing her armpits, marking the first time that the fashion industry had a direct impact on the aesthetics of body hair.

In the 1960s, the sexual revolution and feminist movement made women freer and defended their bodily autonomy. As a result, mini-skirts and leggings became popular, more skin was exposed, leg and underarm hair removal became popular, and waxing strips became hugely popular for their efficiency and effectiveness. This led to more and more women continuing the trend of removing their body hair completely.

3. Body Hair, Gender and Aesthetics

3.1. Body Hair and Gender

Terry, G collected data from 584 New Zealand. The data demonstrated that substantial proportions of both women and men in New Zealand remove body hair from many sites[2]. Women's hair removal throughout history has not been solely due to the watchful eye of a patriarchal society, but rather there have been very valid safety reasons, symbols of cleanliness and neatness, nobility, ruler's preferences, race and intentional commercial orientations in the media that have influenced the decision to remove body hair[3]. It cannot be denied that there are some elements of female purity at work in the service of male power. These aesthetic justifications are artificially added and unfixated concepts. Connell 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[4]. In modern society, the aesthetics of female hair removal remain largely a product of male domination. Thus, although men also remove hair to make themselves more sexually attractive, media and commercial guidance can also influence different views on the subject. As Milestone, K. and Meyer, A. put it, "The model of power on which this theory is based is simplistic and one-dimensional, as the media has all the power to impose its message on a completely powerless audience."

As to why contemporary society considers it necessary for women to deal with armpit hair, feminists have two different explanations: one explanation is that hair is a metaphor, a symbol of gender experienced through one's own body. Generally speaking, the more hairy a man is, the more he is regarded as a "manly man", whereas the less hairy a woman is, the more she is regarded as "feminine". In general, the more hairy a man is, the more "masculine" he is perceived to be, and the less hairy a woman is, the more "feminine" she is perceived to be. In this context, the requirement for women to shave is an expression of patriarchy that contributes to gender polarisation. In this understanding, women who actively or passively remove their hair are pretending to be objects, and clean armpits, like make-up, high heels and slingback lingerie, are unnatural artefacts used to portray the femininity prescribed and expected by men. The other interpretation is more radical. It argues that armpit and pubic hair, the two primitive types of hair remaining on the human body since the evolution of apes and monkeys, have a special sexual appeal. In the past, when a woman was bound to her family, this sexual attraction was exclusive to men, so men didn't mind if women retained it; but when a woman came out of her family and her body and skin came into the public eye, this primitive sexual attraction constituted an offence in the eyes of men. A woman who exposes her armpit hair is sexually provocative, but men can't do anything about such a woman; they can't control her body, so they can only devalue this overpowering symbol of sexual attraction.

As the famous Taiwanese feminist, He Chun-ru, writes: "In such a twisted society, men have a distorted view of women's armpit hair: on the one hand, they fantasise about other hairs on a woman's body after plucking out her armpit hair; on the other hand, they imagine the woman in front of them to be a little girl who hasn't yet grown her armpit hair, in order to satisfy another psychological need ". However, it may also be unfair to interpret armpit shaving exclusively as

another example of the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. This is because today, when men are required to bare their upper bodies in public, many men also choose to shave their armpit and chest hair to show a sense of civilisation and upbringing. Borkenhagen A did a survey of men and women in Germany, he found that 69% of the questioned women removed their body hair while only 41% of men do and the gender effect is statistically significant[5].

3.2. Body Hair and Aesthetics

Aesthetic perceptions vary according to culture, time and individual differences. In some cultures, body hair is seen as a symbol of naturalness, health, and sensuality; in others, it may be seen as indecent or in need of removal. In ancient Rome, for example, hair was strongly associated with social status, and the ancient Romans believed that the cleaner a person's body was, the purer and nobler that person's soul was. However, during the Renaissance, the "hair removal business" of European women was reversed and associated with physical liberation. During this period, with the emancipation of human nature and the change of aesthetic concepts, women began to pay more attention to the nudity and display of the body. They believed that the more parts of the body that needed to have their hair removed, the more parts of the body that could be exposed, which to a certain extent became a symbol of body liberation. As society progresses and awareness of gender equality increases, people's aesthetic concept of body hair is gradually changing. More and more people have begun to accept and appreciate the natural and diverse beauty of the body, and no longer see body hair as a "blemish" that needs to be removed. Feminist advocates even see not shaving as a symbol of women's bodily autonomy, and the retention of body hair has begun to become a symbol of women's awakening sense of autonomy. Some young women have even begun to accept and embrace body hair as part of their self-expression.

4. Freedom of Body Hair

How many girls have been teased during puberty for being "hairy", how many girls have suffered social death moments because of unshaved armpits, and so we actively refuse to be "Kiwi girls" in order not to be embarrassed, and in order to be seen as decent and elegant? But why is it that no one ever refers to men with thick body hair as "kiwi boys" and their leg hair as a symbol of masculinity, even having some body hair continues to be reflective of ideal masculine embodiment[6]? With the awakening of women's consciousness, a number of public figures and organisations have taken up the banner of body hair freedom and spoken out in favour of it. It is not just a discussion about body aesthetics, but also a topic about self-acceptance, body autonomy and changes in social attitudes.

4.1. Public Figures on the Freedom of Body Hair

Julia Roberts, as a famous actress in Hollywood in the early 1990s, has long fought for the status and respect of female stars. 1999, at the premiere of the film "Notting Hill", because she did not shave her armpits, she was accused by many media on the spot that it was "indecent", which triggered a public outcry. In response, she said, "Well, for the sake of aesthetics, I will shave my armpits when I attend public events in the future, but whether or not I do it regularly is up to me." Julia's attitude conveys women's control over their

own bodies and challenges society's harsh demands on women's body hair. Lady Gaga is known to dye her armpit hair a bright blue colour and display it in her performances as a sign of solidarity and support for body hair freedom. Her behaviour has attracted widespread attention and discussion, furthering the social awareness of the body hair freedom issue. Madonna has been called a "freedom artist" for her armpit hair photos. Madonna's daughter, Lola, has never shied away from her body hair and has been in the spotlight for hiding it under her raised arm when posing for photos with her mum. As a public figure who is often in front of the media, Lola has also not been shy about going against the grain of the idea that "actresses have smooth, delicate skin". She has bravely displayed her body hair, including armpit and leg hair, to challenge society's stereotype of female body hair. She once said: "When I saw that popular girls had to be pretty to get the boys, I knew I wouldn't fit in. So I decided to do the opposite; I refused to wear make-up, I refused to do my hair, I refused to shave. My armpits are just hairy." In addition, her series of comments led to a joint campaign between Calvin Klein and skateboarding hipster brand Palace. Lola's behaviour demonstrates women's acceptance and confidence in their bodies and encourages more attention to the topic of body hair freedom. These seemingly "rebellious" actions exude confidence and bravery from the inside out, and have influenced many girls who do not want to be judged by others and change themselves.

4.2. Organizational Movements on the Freedom of Body Hair

Over the past few years, there has been a real rise in Europe and the United States of a movement of body hair tanning, including armpit and leg hair. These campaigns encourage women (and men) to share photos of themselves with body hair on social media, and to share their reasons and feelings about not shaving. The UK Daily Mail quoted blogger "Sarah" as saying, "This blog is for women with thick leg hair, let's make our legs the champions!" Xinhua reported that according to a European and American women's website called "Luminescence", there is an account called "Hairy Legs Club" on a social media site, which encourages women to actively show off their body hairy thighs, which has created a "Hairy Legs Club" on all major social media sites. This has led to a "body hair" movement on social media. According to an American blog site called The Independent, in January 2013, the "Armpits4August" campaign was launched in the United States to encourage women not to shave their armpits and to raise money for charities or to raise awareness of specific social issues. The campaign, which encourages women not to shave their armpits as a way to raise money for charities or to draw attention to specific social issues, such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), has been supported by a number of celebrities.

Since 2008, Professor Fahs of the Arizona Public University has been conducting a classroom experiment: in her "Sexuality and the Body" course, women who retain all their body hair, including armpit and leg hair, and men who remove their body hair from the neck down for 10 weeks and record their experiences, receive extra credit in the course. To Professor Fahs, hair removal symbolises a kind of submission; it means surrendering power and giving up what you already have. Years of classroom experimentation have taught her that men have more choices and more power in deciding how to present their bodies, whereas the freedom to deal with body

hair, by contrast, exists only in women's "imagination".

In addition, Xiao Mei-li, a young Chinese feminist activist, launched an activity on Weibo called the "Armpit Hair Contest", encouraging women to show their armpit hair as a way of exercising their right to free choice. The campaign sparked a certain amount of social attention and discussion, and although the number of participants was limited, it attracted the attention of foreign media, such as CNN and the BBC. Xiao said: "Many people reacted as if shaving armpit hair was justified since ancient times, in fact, China has the tradition of body hair and skin, received by parents, originally not shaving armpit hair. Today, people don't seem to realise that aesthetics are a product of social construction. This campaign is not a call for women not to shave their armpit hair, but a call for people not to dislike women who don't want to shave their armpit hair."

4.3. Film and TV on the Freedom of Body Hair

In addition to real-life public figures or organisations speaking out in support of body hair freedom, a number of film and television productions have also expressed support for body hair freedom.

In the film "Love Story", Kong Hyo-jin plays the role of the "girl with armpit hair". From her short hair to her personality to the fact that she never shaves her armpits, she is portrayed as independent and sexy, and although she attracts the hero, she is not the ideal girl in the hero's mind. She sticks to her beliefs and doesn't care about the outside world, so when the hero and heroine meet for the first time, the appearance of armpit hair messes up the hero. However, instead of feeling inferior, the heroine says, "If you have a problem with my armpit hair again, I won't be with you." Taking armpit hair as the starting point, the heroine's many behaviours break the "perfect shackles" of the ideal woman, making the hero feel uncomfortable and at the same time triggering the audience to think about women's aesthetics. Tang Wei wears an elegant cheongsam in "Lust, Caution", but when she raises her arms, she reveals thick armpit hair, which surprises many viewers. In order to restore the true aesthetics of Shanghai women in the 1930s, Tang Wei kept her armpit hair for eight months before filming "Lust, Caution". When interviewed by the media about Chinese women not shaving their armpit hair in the 1930s, director Ang Lee laughed and said, "Even my mother didn't shave in the 1960s and 1970s, armpit hair is very sexy and it's a pity to shave it off."

5. Conclusion

Much of the modern aesthetic of intimate body hair still relies on gender orientation, and this aesthetic is further developed subconsciously. However, in this age of diversity and de-gendering, we need to continue to break these rules and aesthetics. More and more people have begun to wake up and take action against such gender stereotypes. Although we have our own preferences, we should all begin to look at hair removal with diversity and tolerance, as there is no need to be ashamed of the hair that we are born with on our bodies, and it is up to us to decide for ourselves whether or not to accept the hair that grows naturally on our bodies.

We always try to remove the hair from our body and once we forget to remove it one day, we have to lose the courage to raise our arms. Body hair is something that grows naturally on the human body and just like our hair, we have the freedom to choose whether to cut it short or grow it long, shave it or

style it. Freedom of body hair does not mean that we should refuse to shave armpit hair, on the contrary, the freedom of body hair lies in the shaving or not shaving, showing or not showing, all by our own decision, this kind of thing should not become the focus of public opinion, and should not be too much judgement. Facing our true selves, facing our looks, aging, and weight, accepting and tolerating our subjective feelings, and refusing to do what we don't want to do in order to enjoy true freedom, perhaps it starts with enjoying the freedom of body hair.

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