

Depilatory Practices and the Dichotomization of Sexes in Twentieth-Century America

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Abstract

Depilatory practices (hair removal) have become commonplace for many in the United States, especially women. Although depilatory practices are now entrenched in American culture, their social enforcement has a surprisingly recent history. I review U.S. advertisements from the period 1915-1945 and situate the rise in popularity of hair removal in its historical context: the increased popularity of more revealing women's clothing, changing conceptions of modesty, and stocking shortages. I then jump back further in history, and examine ancient Roman depilatory practices to further denaturalize and historicize hair removal. Finally, I reflect on how this history has shaped the present, through an empirical review of modern body hair perceptions. I assert that hair removal in America was originally, and remains, a tool for dichotomizing sexes amid fears about changing gender roles. Deviations from expected depilatory practices have become a social marker of queerness. These beliefs surrounding hair removal have created a unique and undue pressure for conformity in American women and men.

Hair removal is not a concept unique to the United States. Historical accounts of Egypt, Greece, and Rome all contain such practices. What *is* striking about the United States are the efforts we undergo to make our depilatory practices seem (paradoxically) effortless. Several factors influence these endeavors, particularly gender and site of hair growth, along with race and class, relative to social expectation. I focus, in the main, on the conceptual shift society underwent to transform the “masculine” practice of hair removal into a habit of daily life for women. I argue that hair removal has historically and contemporarily been used to police gender. This could explain why stereotypes like the “hairy lesbian” (Gordon, 2002) and the “hairless gay man” (Vytniorgu, 2023) exist and contribute to the increased levels of discrimination these populations face (Casey et al., 2019). To support my arguments, I will explore shaving companies’ language in advertisements between 1915-1945. I will then examine the attitudes of individuals today through a review of empirical studies measuring perceptions of a woman with body hair. The sentiments revealed in these studies demonstrate how the sales pitches of past advertisements have influenced America’s perception of femininity and in turn, acceptable ways to establish gender norms.

The rise of jazz music, a booming economy, and a lively urban scene characterized the Roaring Twenties in America. Less evoked is the desexualization occurring alongside these changes (McGovern, 1968). The boundaries in America between men and women were blurring. Former markers (e.g., lack of voting rights, clothing emphasizing the waist and bust) were becoming rare. Additionally, female clothing became more revealing. In 1915, dresses began to show previously covered areas of the female form, starting with the underarm and continuing with legs in later years. The enduring Victorian value of feminine modesty had previously been displayed by adherence to unrevealing clothing. The changing fashion necessitated a new

method for women to prove their modesty. Underlying this American value for chastity was patriarchal anxiety over the changing gender roles (Hope, 1982). America is particularly prone to these anxieties; take some men's fear of the end of civilization when women began bobbing their hair for example (Jolly, 2004). To cope with these anxieties, American culture generally responds by asserting gender distinctions in other domains of life. This proved to be the case with women's body hair.

The fight against restrictive fashions of the past ended up being a double-edged sword; while women were now free from girdles, corsets, and cloistering skirts, they had to bear the burden of fashioning themselves in a way to differentiate from men (Jolly, 2004). Men's bodies had long been shown and known to have hair. Only one option was left for the newly bared female form. We can't solely attribute this new expectation to fashion without considering the driving forces behind the latest styles. They weren't based only on consumers' wishes; the advent of World War I led to shortages of fabric previously used for stockings. The invention of rayon (artificial silk) provided an alternative to the customary dark wool stockings (Hansen, 2007). These stockings became popular due to their affordability. A drawback was their sheer and flesh-colored tones that made leg hair visible, keeping the "need" for hairless legs alive.

Changes in the clothing industry and shaving technology can explain how leg and axillary hair removal became a concept in America. To fully account for its widespread popularity, media must also be considered. How else was this new idea to be transported to the masses? Christine Hope notes that the period between 1914-1945 marked the sudden rise of depilatory advertisements in women's magazines. *Harper's Bazaar* was one of the first magazines to market these products. The magazine's intended audience was upper-class white women. Ads initially focused on axillary hair. Hair removal at this site was uncommon in

American society; while faces and forearms had been targeted since 1874, fashions had not revealed the female underarm until around 1915 (Hope, 1982). As a result, ads were forced to explain why hairlessness here was necessary. Some 62% of the ads from 1915-1919 were instructional (Hope, 1982). The educational nature of ads shows that axillary hair removal before 1915 was an unknown practice that had to be explained. Ads did their best to fill this ignorance by insisting that modern fashions (sheer or sleeveless dresses and rising hemlines) necessitated the removal of this hair.

The language of hygiene and comfort used by many female-identifying individuals today to explain their depilatory practices was curiously rare between 1915-1920 (Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008). It appears that appealing to fashion requirements was enough for upper-class consumers. However, women from lower classes required a better explanation for the necessity of this initially blue-blooded practice. Hair removal could be an expensive, dangerous, and time-consuming practice. Advertisers wanting to increase their client base obliged with a new language, casting a negative association on body hair and women who didn't remove it. This language soon dominated advertisements. Unsuccessful social interactions, embarrassment, and body odor were attributed to body hair they labeled as "ugly" and "repulsive" (Hansen, 2007). Conversely, women without hair were "dainty", "womanly", "sanitary", "perfectly groomed", and "modest" (Hansen, 2007). While making depilatory practices seem like a high-end habit may have encouraged some lower-class women to adopt the removal of their body hair, the practice did not convince nearly as many women as later advertisements did. Shaming consumers by connecting the Victorian values of modesty and cleanliness with the new practice of hair removal seems a more significant motivator than the early calls of fashion (Herzig, 2016).

Hope asserts that the argument for cleanliness as the explanation for hair removal's adoption is incomplete. She points out that past societies preoccupied with hygiene required hair removal from *both* sexes (Hope, 1982). Hair removal in America did not have this equal application. This shows that a different force must at least supplement women's desire to remove body hair. An analysis of advertisements from 1920-1925 shows that advertisements sought to emphasize hair removal as a feminine practice that differentiated women from men. One ad was even bold enough to ask, "Can any woman afford to look masculine?" following it up with a perky admonishment promoting the use of their depilatory product. Gender divisions were important in 20th-century America (Bates et al., 1979; Rekers & Mead, 1980). By capitalizing on this, advertisers could help justify the continued use of their depilatory products.

Using hair removal practices to differentiate gender was not a new concept. In ancient Rome, hair showed differences between gender and class (Hubbard, 2020). Facial hair in men distinguished free men and slaves, and the presence of pubic hair differentiated males and females. Wealthy women practiced full body hair removal using pumice stones, razors, depilatory creams, or tweezers (Hansen, 2007). Deviations from "proper" gendered hair removal practices prompted ridicule and homophobia. The author Novius described men who depilated their buttocks as sexually passive. Ancient Rome used activity and passivity in sex as a tool to define sexuality; people who took the active role were expected to be male, leaving the passive part for females (Speth, 2015). As Novius demonstrated, deviations from expected sexual roles invite derision. Homophobia is even more evident in the satirist Juvenal's portrayal of a group of stoic philosophers. He writes about a wedding between these men, with their "hirsute limbs contrasting with a carefully depilated anus, hair neatly tucked in a snood, [and] eyebrows lengthened with a pencil" (Hubbard, 2020). The very fact that body hair removal is mentioned

demonstrates its importance in delineating gender. Ancient Rome expected males to only remove body hair from their faces; any other site of removal was associated with femininity.

An interesting intersection can be drawn between the arguments of Christine Hope and the Roman practices of pederasty. She asserts that removing body hair “encourages women to deny their full adulthood” (Hope, 1982). After all, body-hair growth is part of the pubertal process and, in men, associated with strength and virility (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Its removal forces women to symbolically revert to their immature, powerless, child-like selves. Hair-removal products inadvertently reinforce this through language promoting baby-soft skin (Freund, 2021). Hairlessness was frequently mentioned in male-male sexual encounters in ancient Rome. Pederasty is the most well-documented of these encounters. Documents tell us that domineering male masters targeted pubescent, hairless males. Homoeroticism was an acceptable part of male Roman culture, provided that the person in power was the active sexual partner (Simon et al., 2009). Pederasty was seen as a way to promote one’s masculinity and as punishment for the “passive” partner (the pubescent male). Some accounts document that wealthy masters specifically required their older male slaves to practice hair removal to extend their youthful appearance (Hubbard, 2020). Male’s preference for younger, hairless bodies continues today (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Hairlessness in ancient Rome portrayed docility and a lack of power. A lack of body hair still indicates passivity, a meaning tied to hairlessness that persists today and according to some scholars might underlie a male’s attraction to the hairless female form (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003).

Hair choices among same-sex attracted women in ancient Rome also received attention, though only on the head. Lucian’s *Dialogue of the Courtesans* 5 tells of a female couple where one partner uses a shaved head to transition from a masculine and feminine identity (De Block &

Adriaens, 2013). However, the narratives of women's same-sex relationships in ancient Rome are rare and possibly never from an authentic female voice (Hubbard, 2020). The assumptions we can draw from same-sex attracted women's hair removal practices are therefore limited. The dearth of literature may be explained by the Romans' lack of acceptance of women's same-sex affairs. Husbands were known to kill wives if these liaisons were discovered (Simon et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it is clear that harsh punishment ensued when women deviated from cultural norms. Disapproval would likely extend to gendered hair removal practices as well.

Body hair is still used to distinguish genders today. In a 2009 study conducted at Arizona State University, researchers had participants (34 female & 8 male) grow out their body hair for ten weeks (Fahs, 2011). Participants were instructed to keep weekly logs of reactions to their body hair and changes in behavior (both from themselves and outsiders). Findings indicate that body hair functions as a heteronormative social control through three main gendered anxieties: "(1) direct and anticipated homophobia; (2) concerns about deviating from traditional gender expectations; and (3) control and possession of women's bodies by men (particularly boyfriends)" (Fahs, 2011). Participants in this study were recruited from a feminist course, making the concerns more poignant in the face of the feminist attitudes they may have cultivated.

Direct and anticipated homophobia mainly manifested as questions on sexuality. As most of the participants were women, questions on lesbian identities dominated these questions. For example, one participant's brother asked "if this was some kind of sign that my women's studies degree was corrupting me and turning me into a big lesbian. He said that any woman with body hair certainly couldn't get a man, so I'd have to start dating women if I wanted to ever have sex" (Fahs, 2011). Familial responses like this were common in the sample. Heterosexual women were able to deflect these inquiries by asserting their heterosexuality. The need for this "bill of

normalcy” demonstrates an evident fear of the breaking of gender roles and queerness. However, not all participants could flaunt their heterosexual status as protection. At least 30% of the women in this study were LGBTQ+. These women faced a harsher set of worries about further gender deviance (i.e., fears of a transition into a transgender individual) from family and had higher fears of homophobic hate crimes than their heterosexual peers. It seems that when gendered body hair practices aren’t followed, women are placed on a dangerous middle ground outside of the heteronormative, where the modern value of appearance still reigns over all other qualities.

The second common theme identified was related to sexuality but focused more on concerns about deviating from traditional gender expectations. Body hair’s association with masculinity led others to question the sexual attractiveness of women participants. In particular, family and friends who were comfortable expressing their concerns to participants’ shared fears about women’s inability to attract a man. Heteronormativity for women is meeting the aesthetic desires of men. Women who didn’t remove their body hair had to constantly defend their femininity from outsiders seeking to clearly define gender. They were forced to prove that their attractiveness and sexuality didn’t depend on the state of their body hair. One participant was forced into this position by a male coworker questioning whether her husband still had sex with her while she had hair. “I still have boobs and a vagina. I’m still the same person as before. I just have some hair.’ I have really enjoyed making the guys at work cringe.” Other women weren’t as empowered by their body hair. Lynn recalls a family gathering where her sister lifted Lynn’s arm to show everyone her axillary hair. “I got at least 10 ‘Ewww’s’ and lots of ‘Why?’ and ‘That’s so gross!’ ‘You look like a man.’ My sister put me on the spot in front of everyone” (Fahs, 2011). The embarrassment that Lynn experienced illustrates society’s rejection of women

who do not meet the standards of femininity. When we don't remove our hair, we threaten. We become the dreaded "Other" not reined in by societal expectations of beauty (Cowan et al., 1992).

The third theme common among female participants was the assumption of a male's control over their body hair. The first comment many received on their body hair experiment was whether their male partner approved. One participant stated "People are concerned about a man dealing with a hairy woman. People don't really seem to believe that my partner doesn't care about the hair and that he actually thinks it's normal and kinda funny" (Fahs, 2011). The issue of control around women's body hair ties back to the earlier arguments of Hope and the Roman practice of pederasty. Fourteen centuries later, hair removal still serves as a source of power for male "masters". It is also related to the practices of the 20th century, where male manufacturers and owners of ladies' magazines were again responsible for implementing controls on women's body hair.

I argue that depilatory practices in 20th-century America were an underrecognized tool used to dichotomize gender. Manufacturers and advertisers combined efforts to reinforce the ideal of the hairless female form. Ads tied body hair to the masculine form (Hansen, 2007; Hope, 1982), driving sales of depilatory products. I take this point further by asserting that nonadherence to created societal hair norms stimulates fears of queerness in America. Advertisements for depilatory products never specifically labeled nonconformers as part of the LGBTQ+ population, likely because homosexuality was considered a mental disorder in the 20th-century (Drescher, 2015). Mental illness held a stigma that severely limited open discussions (Rabkin, 1972). Using a "mental illness" in advertisements would have been taboo. The concept of queerness and deviation from depilatory practices was instead seen by the

attributes linked to said deviators. Hair removal made women seem clean and full of feminine virtue; women who didn't remove their hair were thus seen as dirty, unattractive, and masculine. Queerness in women was also associated with masculinity in the past (Lombroso, 1893; Fleming, 1934; Reddy-Best & Jones, 2020) and currently (Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008; Fahs, 2011). To properly avoid this derogatory label, women were forced to utilize any means that asserted their femininity and, consequently, their distance from the "mental illness" of homosexuality.

Some who have seen the growing ledger of women's rights and the LGBTQ+ population may question the necessity of spurning the label of queerness. However, every right these groups have now was hard won. Women campaigned tirelessly for the right to vote, only gaining it in 1920. Members of the LGBTQ+ population faced more difficult discrimination. Queerness, which begins as an invisible characteristic of a person, is not as obvious as the usual dichotomy of human genitalia. The prejudice that women faced in the past was tied to one attribute. Queerness wasn't as simple and incited suspicion in community members. After all, American society craved clear distinctions. Behaviors, emotions, and careers were assigned to certain genders. Individuals who experienced emotions or performed behaviors outside of the stereotypical roles assigned were accused of being homosexual, and being homosexual conferred many disadvantages with it. Historically, queerness has been associated with dishonesty, untrustworthiness, and pedophilia (Rapper, 1970). LGBTQ+ individuals faced severe discrimination in the job market, were more likely to get locked up in prison, and usually lost custody of their children (Morris, n.d.). Senator Joseph McCartney's investigation of homosexuals holding government jobs in the early 1950s exemplifies this. With the significant hardships a queer identity conferred, it is little wonder that women strived to dissociate from this

identity. Queer rights are slowly being acknowledged today but remained almost nonexistent throughout 20th century America.

So what do we do with this newfound understanding of body hair removal's importance in expressing gender and sexuality? I think that acknowledging this fact is a significant first step. Modern studies indicate that many women today cite comfort (i.e. positive responses to "I like the soft, silky feeling") as a primary reason for hair removal (Tiggeman & Hodgson, 2008). In general, a more liberal tolerant individualism is expressed when the propriety of women's hair removal is brought up (Terry et al., 2018). This makes it seem like the choice *not* to remove hair is free of social repercussions. Tolerant attitudes towards hair removal are rarely extended to a woman's own body though; fears about attractiveness and femininity still prevail to foster the practices (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). It is clear that the fight to decrease stigma around an individual's choice to remove body hair is not yet won. We as a society have not accepted that not every woman who chooses to leave her body hair is queer; nor is every woman who decides to remove it heterosexual. Many factors outside of an individual's gender and sexuality influence a woman's hair-removal choice. While considering this, people must recall that body-hair removal on its own is not the issue. Reducing a feminist identity to a non-shaving woman has sadly divided some feminist activists. We need to remember that hair-removing women are not necessarily victims of 20th century patriarchal marketing (Gurrieri, 2021). What *is* problematic are the associations hair removal has with cleanliness and virtue. Queer women today are more likely not to practice hair removal and thus bear more significant associations of uncleanness and immorality (Hayfield et al., 2017). These negative moral perceptions may promote job discrimination in LGBTQ+ communities. It is time for these erroneous historical ideas to be abolished. I am uncertain of the best way to erase these assumptions but am hopeful that

advertisements like the one featuring Emily Ratajkowski's armpit hair in the 2019 edition of *Harper's Bazaar* will help us head in a direction with equitable depilatory practices across genders and sexualities (Yates, 2019). The magazine's 180-degree change in perspective is promising; it offers hope that body hair can be recognized as an almost universal human experience.

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