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Article

Body hair and its entanglement: Shame, choice and resistance in body hair practices among young Icelandic people

Abstract

Iceland's performance on the Gender Gap Index has been outstanding in the last nine years. It now has a reputation for being one of the most gender equal countries in the world. However, local feminist activists argue that challenges to full gender equality remain. Underlying both the dominant gender equality rhetoric and feminist activism is a neoliberal, postfeminist sensibility that all are free to choose their most preferred body practices and that empowerment is a fact. There are, however, more subtle indications that young people's views of body hair practices, hinging around binaristic gender norms, are more ambivalent than that. This paper investigates how body hair practices are performed among young Icelandic people. The theoretical framework draws on feminist, poststructuralist, and affect theories. The data was collected between 2012 and 2016 and consists of semi-structured interviews with young women and men, group interviews with five young women based on co-operative inquiry, and an instrumental case study focusing on the issue of body hair practices. The analysis shows that shame and disgust remain entangled with practices around body hair among both men and women. It is gendered in that women's bodies are under more surveillance than men's. The paper concludes that, notwithstanding feminist activism and gender equality rhetoric, policing around body hair practices still exists in contemporary Icelandic society.

Keywords: Body hair, affect, shame, young people, Iceland

'It is perfectly natural for women to have pubic hair, but I personally think it is more convenient and sexier if they don't' (Hermann, 22-year-old male participant on the subject of body hair).

Body hair removal has historically been practiced by both men and women. In Western culture in the late twentieth century, body hair was seen as masculine (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013), making the hairless body feminine and providing for a narrow idea of acceptable body hair on women where 'hairlessness is the taken-for-granted condition for a woman's body' (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, p. 341). The removal of pubic hair is a growing phenomenon, as Western popular culture idealises women's bodies as hairless, and a high percent of young women report frequently removing pubic hair (see for example Braun et al., 2013; Fahs, 2014b). A similar trend has recently become more popular on the male side, where male body hair is represented negatively in relation to hygiene and self-control (Frank, 2014). There is still a difference in the space available for men and women to choose whether or not to comply with these body hair practices (Terry & Braun, 2016).

In this paper, I discuss the ambivalence surrounding body hair practices among young people in Iceland and how the rhetoric of choice and individuality, as well as the gender equal rhetoric, affects their body hair practices. I will look at if and how the vibrant feminist activism in Iceland makes space for body hair practices. I will also foreground how affective practices, such as shame and disgust, shape the body hair practices of young, Icelandic people. This fuses into a mixture of compliance and resistance, where normative gendered expectations play a significant role.

The rhetoric of choice and gender equality – the case of Iceland

The ideology of neoliberalism (Brown, 2006) has heavily impacted Icelandic society (Ólafsson, 2011). At the same time, Iceland has, for nine consecutive years, held the first place in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2017), resulting in a reputation as a feminist paradise (Johnson, 2011). These two factors are ideal for promoting a postfeminist discourse where gender equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed (McRobbie, 2008). This results in what Gill (2007) calls a postfeminist sensibility where women's identities are bound to their representation as being sexually desirable. This requires a great deal of self-surveillance and self-discipline. Women are said to possess independence, choice, and freedom from injustice and power imbalances. Everything they do is for themselves and on their own terms. This concept of choice and empowerment is widely available for young women in Western societies (McRobbie, 2008), also in Iceland (Gústafsdóttir, 2016). Gill (2007) argues that ideas such as independence, freedom, and choice are borrowed from second-wave feminism, stripped of their progressive meaning, and attached to neoliberal ideas such as self-governance, surveillance, and self-discipline. The postfeminist message relies on neoliberal discourse, making it difficult to identify and resist normative ideas about body hair removal. The pressure to adhere to disciplinary norms of sexual desirability is an everyday, often oppressive, requirement for women who subscribe to idealised femininity (Li & Braun, 2016).

Icelandic feminist activism in recent years

In recent years, feminist initiatives have been vibrant in Iceland, especially among young women. Online and offline activism, for example #freethenipple, has garnered many participants and gained much attention in mainstream media (Rúðólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). The battle

against sexist discourse and rape culture is ongoing and can be seen, for example, in the rap scene, where a large group of radical young women started the rap group Reykjavíkurdætur (Daughters of Reykjavík), using their lyrics to defy patriarchy, slut-shaming, and body policing. These performers are provocative in their appearance. They expose hairy armpits and wear punk-like makeup and clothes and have strongly influenced the female music scene in Iceland, as well as the discourse around feminism (Petzold, 2014). With such vibrant feminist activism, it is interesting to investigate body hair practices among young, Icelandic people. This research contributes to the inspiring field of feminist research on body hair practices and the pull of affect when it comes to compliance or resistance to ideal notions of body work.

Body hair practices as affective practices

Affect has made it to the social sciences, helping us bring the dramatic and everyday back into our research. It allows for a deeper analysis of how social formations take hold. Affective practice ‘focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do’ (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). Shame is a strong affect, and the impact of shame in making people conform to the norms of society is undisputed. Shame can help us realise ‘the affective dimension to the transmission of cultural values’ (Epstein, 1984, p. 49, cited in Probyn, 2005). Affective practices can be stabilised in small groups or on a massive scale and often consist of habits of which we are not aware. However, affective practices are still about training; they work on the psychological level and are a form of discipline and control (Wetherell, 2012). This is important to keep in mind when looking at body hair practices, as research shows a link between shame and embarrassment in relation to body hair (Li & Braun, 2016), more so among women than men (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003; Fahs, 2014a; Terry, Braun, Jayamaha, & Madden, 2017).

Tiggermann and Lewis (2004) explore how women’s body hair evokes an affect of disgust, while

the same is not true in relation to men's body hair. The removal of body hair has become a relatively normative practice among Anglo/Western women (Butler, Smith, Collazo, Caltabiano, & Herbenick, 2015; Li & Braun, 2016; Terry & Braun, 2016; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005).

According to Silvan Tomkins, shame 'operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated' (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995, p. 5). Probyn (2005) has further explored this point by stating that 'shame illuminates our intense attachment to the world, our desire to be connected with others' (p. 14). Without interest, there would be no shame. So, shame can be linked to positive affect since we are interested in what others think of us. This can be seen in Li and Braun's (2016) research that shows how the conception of pubic hair removal was influenced by the anticipated notion that men preferred hairless vaginas, not by the women's own desires or sexual sensations. Other research shows that women's body hair is associated with shame, dirtiness, and embarrassment. For example Smolak, Murnen, and Myers, (2014) document how removal is not only linked to the desire to look more sexually appealing, but also to negotiating feelings of dirtiness, shame, and embarrassment (see also Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). This pressure was not only anticipated, but was also experienced among the participants in Fahs' (2011) study, where some of the women participants reported pressure from sexual partners to remove their pubic hair. Similarly, Epperlein, and Anderson (2016) show that some of the men in their study preferred hairless vaginas, explaining that it showed that the woman had 'made the effort to beautify' (p. 7).

As Crann, Jenkins, Money, and O'Doherty (2017) argue, the available discourses around normative femininity and heterosexuality construct the unmodified female genitalia as problematic. The discourse about the improvement needed to vaginas can have a significant

psychological effect on women (Braun, 2010; Fahs, 2014a), fuelling the ‘anxiety women nurture about the abnormality of their genitals’ (Epperlein & Anderson, 2016, p. 10). This is not surprising since young women’s heterosexual sexuality has been focused on satisfying their partners’ desires rather than their own (Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma, & Matti, 2015). Here, the reward for performing normative femininity is being the subject of desire (Leavy, Gnong, & Ross, 2009).

This normalization ‘suggest[s] that body hair removal has transitioned from an optional form of body modification to a relatively universal expectation placed upon women’ (Fahs, 2014b, p. 168). There is also evidence of increased expectations of body hair practices for men (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014). However, there seems to be less compulsion regarding men’s body hair removal, indicating a difference in gendered expectations (Butler et al., 2015; Li & Braun, 2016). For women, the mundane practice of removing leg and underarm hair is rarely questioned (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). Removing pubic hair is also becoming a daily routine for many young women (Herbenick et al., 2013), where the primary reasons cited are physical and sexual attractiveness, cleanliness, and personal choice (Braun et al., 2013). These findings are in line with an Icelandic study on pubic hair removal among women where the rhetoric of choice, cleanliness, and increased sexual pleasure was strong (Friðriksdóttir & Hjalmsdóttir, 2014).

Gendered body hair practices are powerfully linked with idealized femininities (see Epperlein & Anderson, 2016), where hair on the bodies of women is loaded with negative affect, such as disgust (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) and shame (Fahs, 2011). Bartky (1991) states that shame is a pervasive affective attuning to the social environment, indicating that it continually connects us to our environment. However, our experience of shame in the past affects how we might experience shame in the present. According to Probyn (2005), those who ‘have been the object of

shaming early on have a greater capacity to re-experience the feeling’ (p. 83). Moreover, Lehtinen (1998) states, ‘What might only slightly embarrass a privileged person might evoke shame in the socially subordinate’ (Lehtinen, 1998, p. 61-62), arguing that there is a distinction in how one experiences shame based on the class, race, or gender a person holds. This is evident in the existing literature on body hair practices (see for example Fahs & Delgado, 2011). With shame frequently linked to body hair practices (Li & Braun, 2016), especially women’s, this paper focuses on gendered body hair practices and surveillance within the context of the strong gender equality rhetoric and feminist practices in Iceland.

Methods

In this paper, I use semi structured interviews, co-operative inquiry, and an instrumental case study. The study was conducted from 2012 to 2016. The data is part of a larger study on the performance of gender in Iceland.

Interviews

Interviews took place from 2012 to 2014. Participants included nine women and nine men, each interviewed once, with interviews lasting from 90 to 180 minutes. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The criteria for the purposive sample were that participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, had no children, and lived in Reykjavík.¹ All participants were middle-class, white, and able bodied. All but one identified as heterosexual. Two participants were working full time, while the other participants

¹ Reykjavík is the capital of Iceland.

were attending upper secondary schools or universities. All the interviews were conducted in Icelandic by the author, and quotes in this paper have been translated into English by the author.

Co-operative inquiry

Co-operative inquiry is similar to action research. Participants enter into the research inquiry alternating between co-subjects and co-researchers (Heron, 1996). Preferably, the groups are homogeneous along some demographic lines because participants need to generate common issues and experiences for discussion (Riley & Scharff, 2013).

The co-operative inquiry (CI) consisted of six women (including the author) who discussed being a young woman in Iceland. The co-operative inquiry began in February 2014, and we had six meetings, each lasting from three to four hours. We met in a youth house in Reykjavík, which was a neutral, private space. The meetings were audio recorded for convenience of analysis. Even though co-operative inquiry is a very good method to diminish power incongruence in research (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2013), the perception of the expert has the inherent risk of overriding shared experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As I am 15–17 years older than the participants, I was well aware of my position as a perceived expert and actively held back when discussions arose, so I would not direct the conversations. We managed to build trust within the group, discussing things we had not discussed before. The participants referred to it as a safe space. The data consists of audio recordings and extensive research notes.

Instrumental case study

The instrumental case study was used to focus on a specific issue (Creswell, 2012), the issue of body hair. Students in the Sociology Department at the University of Iceland could sign up for an extra-credit assignment where women were asked to grow out their body hair and men to remove

their body hair for 10 weeks.² They were asked to write weekly journal entries about the experience and hand in a paper reflecting on the project at the end of class. The aims were to gather data, to increase consciousness, and to move students out of their comfort zones by exposing them to ideas and experiences that would help them understand gendered dynamics more broadly (Fahs, 2011). It was also an opportunity for the students to attempt a body hair rebellion of their own. I advertised the instrumental case study in three classes I taught in the spring semester of 2016.³ The students could enrol in the case study and get 2 ECTS⁴ for participating. Nineteen people signed up and started, with seventeen finishing the project (two men and fifteen women). The data consists of the weekly journal entries and the final reflection papers.

Analytical procedure

The transcripts were put into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software (Hwang, 2008), and the analysis was approached from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, which always sees discourses as potentially ambiguous. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to organise and pull out discursive themes while keeping in mind that discourses do not simply structure and streamline representations and subject positions. They also serve as vehicles to circulate affect (Wetherell, 2012). In this case, affect refers to the emotions triggered by following or not following the normative ideal of body hair practices.

This correlates well with the research questions posed on how body hair practices appear among young people in Iceland, how gender equality rhetoric and feminist practices in Iceland

² This study is identical to Fahs (2011) study on body hair practices.

³ The classes were on qualitative research methods, men and masculinities, and social psychology. The students were either in their second or final years.

⁴ The European Credit Transfer System is an academic credit system based on the estimated student workload required to achieve the objectives and learning outcomes of a module or programme of study.

affect the surveillance surrounding body hair practices, and how shame affects body hair practices among young Icelandic people.

Results and discussion

The following section is divided in five parts: (1) choice, (2) pressure, (3) hygiene, (4) gatekeepers of the norm, and (5) resistance. Choice was discussed in an individualistic way, that everyone can do what they want in their body hair practices regardless of societal norms. The experience of pressure did, however, come as a counterpoint to the choice rhetoric, as people felt that body hair is disgusting and unsexy. The discourse about hygiene, which was the spontaneous explanation for the removing of hair, was correlated to that of choice. Gatekeepers of the norm, whether or not they are strangers, appear when norms are explored. Resistance came about mainly because of the instrumental case study that gave participants a space to resist body hair practices, resulting in the discovery of pressure and the realisation of the restrictions on choices. These descriptions indicate strong affect. Shame pushes participants into conforming to avoid the shame associated with hairy bodies. It also holds the promise of pleasure through having a desirable, sexy (hairless) body.

Choice

In the instrumental case study, societal pressure to remove body hair appeared clearly when the women in the study described how partners and friends reacted to their body hair projects. However, they still talked a lot about choice regarding their decisions about whether to remove body hair. Elísabet⁵ and Ragna described this in a clear manner. Elísabet explained that it was her personal choice to remove her body hair after the 10 weeks because of the itch and bad smell:

⁵ All of the participants were given pseudonyms.

I think my sweat smells stronger and the hair makes me itch. That is why I am going to shave as I did prior to this project, but I will only do it for myself, not for anyone else.

Ragna said:

I will continue to shave but only when it is convenient for me. When saying that, I mean that I will shave either because I want to or if I want to dress in clothes that reveal the area where the body hair grows.

The space within the postfeminist sensibility is limited and sexual agency has become compulsory (Li & Braun, 2016) and tied to surveillance and self-discipline (Gill, 2007). The women explained how their individual choices are intertwined with how they might appear to others.

They described this freedom of choice as non-problematic, even though both wrote in earlier journal entries about how conforming to prevailing norms is expected and sometimes demanded.

Ragna swung between the rhetoric of choice and acknowledging demand. She wonders:

Whether we can talk about freedom of choice for women in regard to body hair practices when society sends as clear messages as it does. The message being that body hair and femininity are two opposites. Do women really have a choice when it comes to body hair practices?

The rhetoric of choice was all-encompassing among the men, and Birgir told me that the decision to shave body hair was just a personal choice that everyone makes for him- or herself.

When asked if his partner's preference would affect his body hair practices he said:

No it would not. I mean, if people do not like each other then so be it.

He was very firm saying this. Thoughts about shame and social norms affecting personal choice were miles away.

If you do not want to shave, there is no one going to change that.

Hermann had similar ideas about these matters. He linked his preference to his personal choice.

It is perfectly natural for women to have pubic hair, but I personally think it is more convenient and sexier if they don't.

The women in the CI group discussed shaving as a choice and expressed that not shaving was not necessarily a feminist act. This is interesting due to the fact that they were quite feminist and some of them participated in feminist activism after the CI. Only one woman in the group, Katrín, objected. She felt that not shaving was indeed a feminist act, since the norm is for women to shave. She said the freedom of choice was an illusion because:

the common view of having hair is that it is considered disgusting and dirty.

The discourse of freedom and individual choice appeared to be so strong in the minds of the young women that it was hard for them to grasp the idea of oppressive social structures; since no one explicitly forbids you growing hair, you must be free to do so.

To sum up, the rhetoric of choice is strong, even though cracks can appear, as with Katrín and Ragna, with the realisation of the shame attached to body hair. Then they began questioning whether or not the choice is real.

Pressure

Gender dynamics appear clearly in the experience of pressure. Young men act out social expectations, pressuring women to conform to the norm. The women in the study expected certain views from the men in their lives based on the stories they had heard or based on urban legends, such as the story Ester (interviewed 2013) had heard about a friend of a friend who went home with some guy who backed out on sleeping with her due to pubic hair. A male friend of Sóley (case study 2016) told her the same story, but with him in the leading role of the one

turning down sex. The women heard first-hand from their male friends that pubic hair on women is disgusting. This is very effective in producing shame and illustrates the link between interest and shame that Probyn (2005) mentioned. Being heterosexual women, they are interested in sex with young men. This interest can produce shame if they do not play along in the normative body hair practices. Elísabet (case study, 2016) felt like all the men around her:

talk about how disgusting female pubic hair is and I just don't want to see the reaction from a man.

She wrote this in her weekly journal entry, explaining why she refrained from sleeping with an old crush during the time of the experiment. She did not feel up to seeing a disgusted reaction.

Elísabet pondered the issue of why she had remained celibate during the experiment:

I have always shaved and heard from so many guys how disgusting they think women are who do not shave. I have been very sensitive about this and, therefore, I have not been able to have sex with anyone since I stopped shaving.

At risk of being shamed for their bodies, many of the women explained the difference between sex in a long-term relationship and one-night stand. They would not dare to have a one-night stand without shaving their pubic hair. In the CI group, all of the women expressed this, and some of them used it as a means of controlling their own behaviour – not shaving meant no one-night stands. This means of control also came up in the instrumental case study. Ingibjörg described a conversation between her and her friends:

I am just going to go straight home. There is no way that I am going home with someone tonight... I didn't even shave my vagina!

They used not shaving 'to not say yes in the heat of the moment'. By doing this, they avoided the risk of shame when having sex with someone they did not know or trust. Some of the women

who were in a long-term relationship experienced less pressure regarding their body hair. Dagrún (case study 2016) explained how she felt less pressure to manage her looks and stated that her boyfriend's attitude played a big role.

He says that I look more beautiful when I am natural, and that is a big factor.

During the body hair experiment, her boyfriend was not bothered by the body hair but by Dagrún's insecurity about the body hair:

During sex, I do not allow him to go down on me, and I know that he is not happy about that.

Other women in the study described supportive boyfriends. Ólöf (interview 2014), for example, said that her boyfriend stated that he really did not mind pubic hair. She did, however, have a hard time believing him after having had many male friends state the opposite.

These expectations of negative views from men, however, did not come out of thin air and not all boyfriends were supportive. Ingibjörg (case study 2016) explained how her participation in the experiment had a negative effect on her sex life.

My boyfriend does not like to touch my vagina like this. He barely does. When we have sex now, the positions we are in are so that he does not have to look at it. I kind of think it is funny.

Saying that this was something funny can be seen as a way of coping with the difficult emotions that come from your partner being disgusted with you. How do you react?

The extreme reactions from Ingibjörg's partner do not seem to be unique. Guðrún (interview 2012) said that women have to shave everything from the neck down. She experienced pressure from her boyfriend to shave very frequently:

I have to shave almost every day so that you stop whining.

In response, she pressured him by saying that:

If I have to shave, you have to shave.

The pressure she put on him might be seen as a way to deal with his demands. Similarly Þórunn (case study 2016) experienced pressure from her boyfriend, who asked her to

not wear sleeveless tops in the gym during the experiment to save him from embarrassment.

As the experiment progressed, Þórunn experienced increased insecurity around him as he often told her:

how unfeminine he thinks this is and that he can't wait for it to finish.

Helena (case study 2016) also had a partner who was not supportive, which she described as the 'hardest part of this project'. These stories resonate with Fahs' research (2011) showing that male disgust with women's body hair seems to be a significant factor in women's decisions to shave and with Smolak et al.'s (2014) findings that pubic hair is associated with shame, dirtiness, and embarrassment.

In the interviews with the men, the issue of pressure and expectations also came up. Similar to findings from Epperlein and Anderson (2016), there was a preference for a hairless vagina. For example, Hermann (interview 2012) described how he asked his friend with benefits to remove some of her pubic hair:

She had a thick bush and I just "wow fuck this is too much, why don't you remove it?"

He went on to explain how he realized that 'her hair was her choice' and that his opinion was maybe not welcomed, which raised his consciousness about the effect social norms have on his taste in body hair practices.

Jóhann (interview 2014) stated that he had real trouble with female underarm hair:

You know, women with hair under their arms (...) my first reaction is still (makes gagging sounds) yuck.

He stated that he would not put female body hair in the 'sexy box'. Intellectually, he disagrees with his own opinions and thinks they are ridiculous. He links these opinions back to upper secondary school where he says body hair practices were more rigid:

Body hair is just disgusting... you know all that talk. No one wants to have sex with girls who have (laughs nervously) hair all over. That is just imprinted in you in your teens that it is not sexy. This is possibly the biggest reason why this was not an issue, because everyone just did it. We didn't need to talk about it, it's just the way it is.

Body hair practices are not considered problematic until someone violates the norms, and that might be the core of the issue. Birgir (interview 2012) did not consider this an issue. He thought it was really unsexy for women to have body hair and explained to me:

The women themselves also think shaving their pubic hair is sexy.

Later, he added that 'all my friends, both men and women, do that'.

As in previous studies (for example Butler et, al., 2015; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003), there are gendered expectations in relation to body hair practices. One man in the study experienced some pressure and some was applied by the women themselves (as in the case of Guðrún). Jóhann had experienced pressure in his past for not shaving in the pubic area and when he asked one of his female friend about this she scolded him by saying that:

it is just utterly disrespectful to your partner if you at least do not trim.

Other men in the study did not express similar experiences. Possibly, they have less pressure in this area. Bylgja (case study 2016) said that she did not care whether or not men had body hair and did not link negative affect to male body hair as much as to female body hair.

The pressure young people experience in complying with normative body hair practices is great. The women in the study were prone to feeling pressure as a part of their daily lives. They did not question this pressure or their partners' right to pressure them, but they internalize it and made it their own. Some of the men acknowledged the fact that they put unreasonable pressure on their partners or girlfriends and were aware of the effects of social norms on their preferences. Others were not that critical and considered it not to be an issue of pressure but of preference among most young people, often framed as an issue of hygiene.

Hygiene

All the participants linked the removal of body hair to good hygiene, especially the female participants in the case study. In their weekly journal entries, they discussed the issue of feeling dirty and worries about smelling bad at length. Their main worry was that other people might think that they were unsanitary with their hairy armpits. Sóley described how she accidentally wore a short-sleeve t-shirt while working and became very self-conscious about her underarm hair when her boss came:

I was afraid my underarm hair would make him think I was unhygienic and sloppy.

The women expressed an overall concern with cleanliness, which they named as a big reason for hair removal. Kolbrún (case study 2016) explained how she told one of her friends about the project. The friend replied,

that is disgusting and just unhygienic.

Kolbrún added in her entry, that this kind of reaction might explain:

how disgusted I feel towards myself these days.

The affects they described, shame and disgust, make self-surveillance easier. However, the women also presented body hair as a hygiene problem. Guðrún's found body hair generally disgusting and did not want to grow it. She declared that it is just a matter of hygiene, adding that:

You don't want to put on a bikini and there's hair everywhere!

This is in line with Braun, Tricklebank, and Clarke's (2013) study where the participants described their primary reason for pubic hair removal as hygiene.

The men also described how body hair removal was just a matter of hygiene. When referring to their and other men's practices, they stated that trimming was the least they could do. Birgir talked a lot about tidiness and hygiene and said that:

I think that this is just a matter of tidiness. I think so, and all of my mates, both men and women, do this.

When asked whether it was about removing or trimming he added:

The chest hair and underarm hair are trimmed, but in other areas, they are completely ... I personally feel it works best to have a Brazilian wax... it hurts like hell, but it is worth it.

Here Birgir described just how far he is willing to go to be hygienic and tidy but did not acknowledge any societal pressure.

Jóhann, who had acknowledged an experience of pressure, explained how he was also affected by the hygiene discourse, even though he was not experiencing pressure at the time of

the study. He could not shake it off because, of course, everyone wants to be considered tidy and hygienic. He said:

You want to be tidy and you want to look cool, so you put on a shirt and aftershave and, you know... trim your balls.

Jóhann, however, felt that the rhetoric about hygiene was paradoxical:

because we all know that ... body hair helps the body to be clean... so the intellectual arguments are that it is more hygienic to have body hair.

Gatekeepers of the norm

The instrumental case study proved to be a good platform to explore the norms at length. Many of the participants explained the project they were taking on to friends and family. Some of them did so in the beginning but others waited. Who are the gatekeepers of the norms in relation to body hair practices? As it turns out, it might be a mother, as in Kolfinna's case. When she asked her mother what she would think of a woman with a 'full bush' of underarm hair, her mother replied with 'disgusting', not knowing that Kolfinna had not shaved her underarms for a long time. The gatekeepers can also be strangers in the dressing room, as in Ingibjörg's story from her past.

When I was a teenager, in my early teens, I often went swimming with friends. I should mention I had hit puberty and had dark pubic hair. One night, I was coming from the shower area and two girls, maybe two years older, walked passed me and said something about whether I was not going to shave this jungle. This was the reason I first shaved my vagina.

Gatekeepers can also be your friends, who purportedly have your best interest at heart. Sigríður was explaining her body hair project to a good friend. Her friend worried that Sigríður could not go clubbing during the weekend because she might get lucky and meet a possible lover,

and it would not work out to go home with someone all furry. It did not matter when Sigríður explained that:

she was not planning that, nor that she did not care what a possible lover would think of her. The women also did a good job of keeping up the norms themselves and saw the reward in looking feminine. They had been taught from childhood (Leavy et al., 2009) that the rewards are being socially accepted, popular, and desired.

Mundane things, such as going to the gym during the experiment, were very hard for many of the participants in the case study. Not being socially acceptable resulted in them agonising and becoming extremely aware of their bodies. Helena described how she was used to always shaving her armpits before going to the gym. During the experiment, she always had on a long sleeve t-shirt. This was also the case with Þórunn and Sóley; they did not stop going to the gym but dressed differently. Þórunn wore sports leggings instead of shorts so no one would see her leg hair. Swimming was not on their list of activities during the experiment, but some of the women were persuaded to go by friends or family members. They described feeling disgusting, as Kolbrún stated, and feeling extremely aware of their bodies. They felt that everyone was watching them, as Sóley and Þórunn described, and had thoughts of ‘what will people think of me’.

The gym and swimming pools are spaces where gatekeeping of the norm is common and where the body is more exposed than in many other spaces. Social gatherings can also involve exposure of the body, especially the underarms, if dressed a certain way. As it happened during the experiment, there was the annual student association of sociology gala dinner. This was a source of anxiety for some of the participants. Sæunn, for example, shared how she grew more anxious every day over what to wear and how to hide the hideous body hair. At this time, the

shame was so thick that you could almost touch it. Most of the anxious women hid their hair by wearing long-sleeve dresses and thick leggings to avoid the disgusted reactions that might lead to feelings of shame. Some noted that they regretted taking part in the project in that week's journal.

Resistance

The instrumental case study provided the participants with a platform that they had maybe not experienced before; they were instructed to disobey social norms. For the two men in the case study, this was not a big problem, but many of the women welcomed the opportunity to use the excuse of a school project to stretch their given space. Ragna, one of the participants in the instrumental case study, used the gala dinner to resist gendered body hair norms. She decided to wear a sleeveless dress and show off her underarm hair. She contemplated this quite a bit, saying that wearing a sleeveless dress was 'way out of her comfort zone'. She felt, however, frustrated that having underarm hair is an issue for women, and she wanted to do this. When she told her boyfriend, he said, 'you will just have on a jacket', and she agreed. Later in the evening, she took off her jacket. She did not get any comments, but added that people were quite drunk at that time. Ragna also had her friend, who is a photographer, take photos of her underarm hair.

The meaning of that project is to diminish intolerance towards female body hair, make it a part of the ordinary scene. (...) We haven't quite decided on whether to have an exhibition or to publish them on some e-zine or something.

A few other participants decided to resist the pressure from outside or from within. Sigríður was very conscious about her body hair, but decided not to care (or tried not to care) and went swimming. She walked as slowly as she could out of the shower area and reminded herself to not think about others. This was an attempt to resist, but it shows just how hard the young women found resistance. Resistance often took place within, as Kolbrún described.

Up until now, I thought a lot about what other people think of me, but not this time. I just did not care. Somewhere along the way, my attitude has changed, and I am so happy about that. I surely hope that it will stay that way.

Sóley also had the feeling of becoming more aware of the attitude towards body hair. She described how having hair ‘gave me a sense of independence’. Even though many of the women had ambivalent feelings and experiences towards the experiment, they found it exciting. Ingibjörg said that:

I was especially excited about this project because I have thought about this before, “why do I shave and why does everyone expect that?”

Ragna agreed and said that she wanted to

keep on going and resist the norm and have body hair. What I want now is an awakening on this issue, that female body hair is not disgusting. That’s why I did the photoshoot. It is super exciting to try to change the attitude in society yourself.

The instrumental case study provided a space to re-think the ‘unquestioned aesthetic and practice’ (Terry et al., 2017) of young femininity and body hair practice. It remains to be seen if the change was just for the time being or if it will last as a collective act. It did, however, produce a rupture in the pressure to conform to the norm.

Conclusion

The results of this study are in line with other studies (such as Braun, Tricklebank & Clarke, 2013; Fahs, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2016) and show that body hair removal is fairly normal among Icelandic youth, as with young Western people in general. When looking at how the pressure of

this norm is negotiated, the rhetoric of hygiene and choice is strong. However, the pressure women face is substantially greater than that faced by men. This pressure is a part of women's daily lives and is often assumed and unquestioned. However, the pleasure of conforming to this norm is great. Being considered sexy, hygienic, and as a self-governing agentic subject, is better than being 'disgusting', 'dirty', and 'lazy'. The question of choice in an abstract sense of the word, as unattached to social reality, cannot be considered outside of the social order of gender and sexuality and the cultural conditions in which these choices are made.

It is interesting to see that feminist activism in Iceland does not seem to sway the normative body hair practices among young people. The reason might be two-fold. First, the rhetoric of choice and individualism is so strong that feminist activism does not address the pressure of normative body hair practices. Second, the negative affects of disgust and shame that are associated with hairy female bodies are so interwoven into the heterosexual matrix that resistance against these practices, as was seen in the instrumental study, can only be temporary.

The instrumental case study provided a resistance platform for the young women participants and worked as a tool to reconfigure the body as a site of discipline, resistance, and empowerment (see also Fahs, 2011). They were told by some of their friends, partners, or family members that what they were doing was disgusting. This made many of them feel great shame. The realisation of shame served as a transformative force, since shame invited the young women to acknowledge the social structures related to body hair practices. Being able to use the school project as a reason provided certain security; it was not their responsibility but mine as their teacher. This made their resistance less complicated and more doable. In a feminist educational practice, we might conclude that projects such as the instrumental case study in this paper could serve to disrupt the normative notions of body hair practices. Even though the findings here suggest that

results might be limited to the project period, it is important to make space for young women to explore other alternatives.

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