Men’s Body Depilation: An Exploratory Study of U.S. College Students’ Preferences, Attitudes, and Practices

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Abstract

Young men in Western cultures frequently engage in body depilation practices, but little is known regarding how such bodies are perceived. This exploratory study asked U.S. college students (N = 238) to view six pictures of the same male body with different amounts of visible body hair and to indicate which body was most sexually attractive to themselves, to most men, and to most women. Both men and women chose a relatively hairless male body as the most sexually attractive. Women, however, thought men would choose a hairier body than men actually did. Most of the men reduced or removed body hair, especially from the pubic area. Questionnaire responses indicated that men and women had similar attitudes toward men’s body hair, with both hair reduction and hair retention being socially acceptable. Men’s body depilation, while still optional, may be becoming normative, at least among U.S. college students.

Keywords: body hair; body image; body attitudes; men’s body satisfaction
Men’s Body Depilation: An Exploratory Study of U.S. College Students’ Preferences, Attitudes, and Practices

Men’s body depilation practices (the reduction or removal of hair below the head) have been of increasing interest to researchers over the last 15 years. Although a few studies in Western countries have examined the practices themselves, noting an increase in the number of men removing or reducing at least some body hair (Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Immergut, 2010; Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000; Terry & Braun, 2013; Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008), little is known about how men and women perceive men’s body hair nor why men engage in these practices. Using pictures and questionnaires, the current study examined U.S. college students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of different degrees of men’s body hair as well as men’s body depilation practices. In addition, we explored how gender affects these perceptions and attitudes.

Attitudes Towards Body Hair

Whereas research in English-speaking countries has documented that removing body hair for women not only is normative but required in order to be viewed positively by both women and men (Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Terry & Braun, 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005), very little research has examined how people react to body hair on men or what people consider the ideal amount of men’s body hair. The few studies that have examined the amount and distribution of men’s body hair that women find to be most sexually attractive have yielded inconsistent results. For example, Dixson and colleagues (Dixson, Halliwell, East, Wignarajah, & Anderson, 2003) found that young British women rated figure drawings of
nude male bodies with chest and abdomen hair as more sexually attractive than the same bodies without such hair (all had pubic hair). Similar results were found among women in Cameroon (Dixson, Dixson, Morgan, & Anderson, 2007) and Finland (Rantala, Pölkki, & Rantala, 2010). In contrast, young women in the U.S., New Zealand, and China appear to prefer a more hairless male torso (Dixson, Dixson, Li, & Anderson, 2006; Dixson, Dixson, Bishop, & Parish, 2010). Some research finds the preference for men’s body hairlessness primarily among younger rather than older women (Rantala et al., 2010). Whether men in the same culture share women’s attitudes toward men’s body hair is unclear since most studies only used female participants.

Tiggemann, Martins, and Churchett (2008) conducted one of the few studies exploring men’s views about body hair by utilizing an online questionnaire which asked a community sample of Australian men to rate their current and ideal size/shape/amount of body weight, musculature, head hair, body hair (back and buttocks only), height, and penis size. Tiggemann et al. found a significant difference between what men rated as their current amount of back and buttock body hair and the perceived ideal amount. Related to this actual-ideal discrepancy, 62% of participants wanted less back and buttock body hair. This study was limited in its focus (only back and buttock hair), and it did not illustrate different degrees of men’s body hair to ensure that participants were using a common point of reference.

A recent study by Terry and Braun (2013) compared the attitudes and practices of a community sample of more than 500 young adult (aged 18 to 35) male and female New Zealanders regarding body hair removal by both men and women. The study’s findings suggest that whereas body hair removal by women was normative, with a minority (< 25% depending on body site) indicating that body hair on women (except for pubic hair) was
socially acceptable or desirable, body hair on men was viewed in a more nuanced way. For example, male abdomen and chest hair was viewed as socially acceptable by most (66% of men and 81% of women, respectively) even though it was viewed as desirable by considerably fewer (32% and 53%, respectively). Only male back hair was viewed as both unacceptable and undesirable by a considerable majority (66% and 93%, respectively). Most respondents considered pubic hair on both men and women as both acceptable (76% and 79%, respectively) and desirable (60% and 71%, respectively). Interestingly, women were more likely than men to consider hair on certain male body areas (especially the pubic and thigh areas) to be acceptable and/or desirable. Overall, it appears socially acceptable for men to both keep body hair (81% agreed) as well as to remove it (64% agreed), with no significant gender difference in overall attitudes. Thus attitudes toward male body hair appear more flexible and variable than attitudes towards women’s body hair, although Terry and Braun did not examine degrees of acceptability and desirability. Indeed, some young men may have a very negative attitude toward the complete removal of their own body hair (Fahs, 2013). The current study looked at attitudes more dimensionally and also examined both men’s and women’s perceptions of different degrees of male frontal body hair using actual pictures.

Men’s Body Hair Practices

Throughout much of Western history, a hairy body for men was considered not only to be the norm, but a sign of masculinity (Immergut, 2010; Martins et al., 2008). The past 20 years, however, have seen a very different trend (Boroughs et al., 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Martins et al., 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2008), with increasing images of hairless men’s bodies in the media and increasing social messages that men should improve
their appearance by reducing their visible body hair (Dotson, 1999; Immergut, 2010; Pope et al., 2000).

A few studies have attempted to document men’s body depilation practices in the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand (Boroughs et al., 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Martins et al., 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013). In all these studies, the majority of men reported that they had engaged in body depilation practices, with numbers ranging from 64% among college men in southeastern United States (Boroughs et al.) to 82% among gay men recruited from a community in South Australia (Martins et al.) and 84% in the most recent study of college men in southeastern United States (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014). The most common areas of body hair removal or reduction were the pubic area (about 75% of all the men sampled had ever done so), followed by the chest (around 60%), abdomen and back (around 50%) areas. It should be noted that men may be more likely to reduce their body hair through trimming than to remove it completely, unlike women’s depilation practices. The most common reasons men gave for engaging in depilation primarily related to cleanliness/grooming and sex appeal/attractiveness, followed by body definition/muscularity, better sexual experience, and enhanced sports performance (Boroughs et al.; Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Terry & Braun). Boroughs and Thompson (2014) found that men who depilated scored higher on measures of social comparison and drive for muscularity than men who did not, suggesting that these motivations may drive such practices. It is notable that in Terry and Braun’s recent (2013) study in New Zealand, societal norms were cited much less frequently for men’s depilation practices than they were for women’s, again supporting the view that depilation for men is a more flexible and optional practice than it is for women.
Despite the trend toward a relatively hairless male body portrayed by the media and the findings that many men are engaging in body depilation, more research is needed on the degree of hairiness men and women believe is ideal for the male body, as well as people’s actual attitudes toward different amounts of men’s body hair, especially on the torso and pubis, the most common sites of men’s depilation practices. In addition to it being unclear what degree of hairlessness is considered most sexually attractive, it also is unclear whether young men and women have similar views. Some gender differences in body hair ideals and attitudes seem likely given Terry and Braun’s (2013) finding that women are more accepting of male body hair in some body areas than are men. Women also appear to prefer a less muscular man than men do (or think women do) (e.g., Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Grossbard, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2011). Similar gender misperceptions have been found regarding female body ideals (Bergstrom, Neighbors, & Lewis, 2004; Fallon & Rozin, 1985). Internalization of distorted sociocultural ideals may lead to misperceptions of what the other gender actually finds sexually attractive. These topics were the focus of the current study.

**Current Study**

Expanding on previous research, the current study explored both men’s and women’s perceptions of men’s body hair. Participants were asked to choose which one of six images of a man’s torso they considered to be most sexually attractive, which image they thought most men would rate as the most sexually attractive, and which image they thought most women would rate as the most sexually attractive. The six images showed the front of the same male body from the neck to just above the penis with varying degrees of chest and abdomen hair. One picture depicted no pubic hair as well.
Hypothesis 1 predicted a main effect for degree of body hair, with both women and men rating the less hairy bodies as more sexually attractive than the hairier ones. This hypothesis was based on previous findings in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia that less hairy male bodies were rated as more sexually attractive by both women (Dixson et al., 2010) and men (Tiggemann et al., 2008). Hypothesis 2 predicted a gender effect on ratings of women’s preferences; specifically, we expected men would assume women prefer a less hairy male body than women actually prefer. This hypothesis was based on previous research that men predicted women to prefer a more muscular body than women actually prefer (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Grossbard et al., 2011). Hypothesis 3 predicted that men’s ideal amount of body hair on their torso and abdomen area would be less hairy than their rating of their own degree of body hair, based on Tiggemann et al.’s (2008) finding that men rated their actual amount of back and buttock hair as more than their ideal.

Because little previous research has compared men and women’s attitudes toward men’s body hair, no predictions were made regarding gender differences in such attitudes, although it was expected that both men and women would demonstrate positive attitudes toward men’s body depilation given the frequent research finding that both men and women in several cultures consider less body hair on men to be most sexually attractive (Dixson et al., 2010; Rantala et al., 2010; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Terry and Braun’s (2013) study suggests that men may be more accepting than women of male body depilation. Finally, we also documented men’s own depilation practices to add to the scant literature on the topic (Boroughs et al., 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014).

Method

Participants
The sample consisted of 84 male and 154 female undergraduate students from a small private college in northeastern United States recruited through classes and fliers. Fifteen participants who were not from the United States were excluded to omit any potential cultural influences. Of the remaining 223 participants, 82 were men and 141 were women, with an average age of 19.17 years (range: 18 – 22 years), \(SD = 1.04\). Most were first (46.64%) or second (31.39%) year students, with fewer third (15.7%) and fourth (6.28%) years. The vast majority (88.5%) were Caucasian with 5% Hispanic/Latino, 3.7% African American, 3.2% Asian, 2.8% other, and .9% multiracial. Nearly all participants identified themselves as exclusively heterosexual (85.8%) or mostly heterosexual (10.1%), with 3.3% identifying as exclusively or mostly homosexual and .9% as bisexual (rated themselves a 3 on the 5-point scale).\(^1\) There were no significant gender differences on any of the demographic variables.

Measures/Materials

**Stimuli.** Stimuli consisted of six images of a frontal photograph of the same Caucasian male body with dark body hair varying only in the degree of hirsuteness (see Figure 1). The first image contained no hair at all, the second showed pubic hair and some chest and abdominal hair, the third image included pubic hair and more chest and abdominal hair, the fourth image was “moderately” hairy and had more hair than the third image, the fifth image was “rather” hairy, and the final image was “very” hairy (although not completely covered by hair). The degree of hairiness portrayed on the images used in the Dixson et al. (2006, 2007, 2010) studies and several images that were taken of men’s natural body hair (from photographs of college men’s torsos) were used to determine the degree of hairiness created on the images used in this study. Of note is the fact that the pictures varied mainly in amount of torso hair, with pubic hair only being different in Image 1 (no body hair, no pubic hair).
The stimuli were obtained by taking a picture of a hairless male body standing against a black background with arms relaxed by his side. A relatively trim and slightly muscular body type was used since this body type has been found to be highly attractive to young women in previous studies (Dixson et al., 2007, 2010). The photo, taken in black and white to reduce the effect of skin tone and to minimize the visibility of any skin irritation caused by removing body hair, showed the man from below the neck to right above the penis shaft so that his pubic hair was visible. The image was digitally altered using Adobe Photoshop CS 5.1 for Mac to establish six images with varying degrees of hairiness. Eleven students (5 men, 6 women) in a pilot study sorted the pictures correctly by degree of hairiness (i.e., ordered them in ascending order 1 through 6), thereby verifying that the six pictures differed in degree of hairiness in the intended way.

**Body hair preferences.** Preference for men’s body hair was assessed by presenting the stimuli and having participants select which one of the six images they found most sexually attractive. Participants then indicated the image that they believed most women found sexually attractive and the image they believed most men considered the most sexually attractive. Male participants also were asked to select the image that most closely resembled the amount of hair they naturally had on their own body.

**Attitudes towards men’s body hair.** Using the reasons Boroughs et al. (2005) found cited by men who removed their body hair as well as Basow and Braman’s (1998) research on attitudes towards body hair on women, a 20-item questionnaire was created using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *strongly agree* and 5 = *strongly disagree* (see Table 1 for items.) The questions assessed such attitudes as whether participants viewed men’s body hair as unattractive, if having body hair was considered masculine, if men should remove body hair,
and whether removing body hair was good grooming. (The factor structure of this novel scale is reported in the Results section.)

**Depilation practices.** Background information on body hair reduction and removal practices was gathered by asking male participants questions using a modified version of the Boroughs et al. (2005) questionnaire (allowing for more choices of body areas and more choices of hair modification techniques) plus two questions modified from Toerien et al. (2005) (these asked about specific pubic areas from which hair might be removed or reduced as well as about bleaching or dying body hair). Participants checked all of the items that applied (e.g., whether they ever removed or reduced any body hair (yes/no); from which parts of the body they removed or reduced hair (18 areas listed)). These descriptive items were summarized using frequencies. Because depilation included trimming, reduction, and shaving, it was not possible to get separate frequencies for each practice nor to distinguish between current and “ever” practices. The term “depilation” is used to refer to any body hair modification practice.

**Procedure**

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were offered extra credit for psychology and statistics classes for participating in the study, and all were entered into a drawing to win one of five $20 gift cards to a local convenience store. Most students (86%) participated due to the extra credit incentive, with no gender difference in this percentage.

After filling out an informed consent form, participants entered one of 12 cubicles containing a computer on which they completed the online, self-administered, six-part questionnaire in private. Participation was anonymous and students were reassured of the
confidentiality of their responses. Students’ names for the lottery and for extra credit were collected separately and not connected to their responses to the questionnaire. On average, the questionnaire took eight minutes to complete.

In order to reduce demand characteristics and to minimize word-of-mouth to future participants while also preparing students for viewing nude male torsos, all participants were told the study was about “Advertising Effectiveness of Male Models.” They were informed that they would be rating some aspect of a nude male body (assigned “randomly”) to determine how attractive that aspect is. After agreeing to participate, they were given a manipulation check in order to gauge the “averageness” of the “average” figure as well as to support the cover story. Image 3 was presented and participants were asked to rate on a 6-point Likert scale where high scores indicate high (“very”) ratings of how sexually attractive they find the man, how muscular he appears, how big he is, and how hairy he is. All were then told they had been assigned to answer questions about body hair.

Participants were presented with the six images in a row and asked to complete the Body Hair Preferences questions. The following items then were presented in counterbalanced order: attitudes toward men’s body hair, and either one’s own depilation practices (for men) or a filler item (for women) asking about degree of body hair on men they knew well. Finally, all participants answered the demographic questions, two manipulation check questions regarding the realism and naturalness of the images, and an open-ended question asking what they thought the study was about.

As they exited the cubicles, participants were told they would receive more information about the study after all data were collected and they were given contact information of the
authors if they had any questions. Upon data completion, participants received an email explaining the study.

Results

Manipulation Check

Responses to the manipulation check questions relating to Image 3 indicated that on a 1 to 6 scale, participants rated Image 3 as average in sexually attractiveness ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.10$), muscularity ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.86$), body size ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.58$), and amount of body hair ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.07$). Questions at the end of the study indicated that participants considered the images to be fairly natural looking ($M = 6.90, SD = 1.72$ on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being extremely natural) with fairly realistic-looking body hair ($M = 6.61, SD = 1.97$ on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being extremely realistic). For the most part, participants believed the cover story that the study was about advertising effectiveness, although many also said they thought the study had something to do with hair (hair and sexuality, hair trimming norms, etc.).

Body Hair Preferences

All three questions (personal preference, men’s preference, and women’s preference) were examined for men and women using chi square tests. See Table 2 for percentages. Because Images 4, 5, and 6 were chosen infrequently (expected values less than 5), those three categories were combined when assessing personal preferences and female preferences. For these preferences, a 2 (gender) X 4 (degree of hairiness) chi square test was performed. For men’s preferences, Images 5 and 6 were combined and a 2 (gender) X 5 (degree of hairiness) chi square test was performed.
Hypothesis 1 predicted that both women and men would consider the less hairy bodies as more sexually attractive than the hairier ones. A simple chi square test, $\chi^2(5, N = 216) = 200.67, p < .001, \phi = .43$, confirmed that both women and men considered a hairless or nearly hairless male body to be the most sexually attractive (Images 1 and 2 were chosen by 74.1% of the women and 81.3% of the men) with a decreasing number choosing images with greater degrees of body hair (Images 3, 4, 5, and 6). See Table 2. Image 2 was the single most chosen image by both women (44.1%) and men (41.3%) while Images 5 and 6 were the least chosen (3.6% of women, 2.5% of men). Participants’ personal choice of the most sexually attractive degree of men’s body hair did not differ by gender, $\chi^2(3, N = 216) = 4.13, p = .248, \phi = .14$. Thus Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a gender effect on ratings of women’s preferences; specifically, that men would view women as preferring a less hairy male body than women would. Although a simple chi square test, $\chi^2(5, N = 217) = 175.38, p < .001, \phi = .40$, confirmed that the hairless or nearly hairless male body was chosen more than the hairier bodies, the factorial chi square using gender only approached significance, $\chi^2(3, N = 217) = 7.38, p = .061, \phi = .18$. As shown in Table 2, a similar percentage of both men and women chose Image 2 (41.3% of men and 40.1% of women) and Images 4-6 combined (11.3% of men, 12.4% of women), but more men (40.0%) predicted women would pick Image 1 than did women (27.7%), and more women (19.7%) predicted women would pick Image 3 than did men (7.5%) ($p < .05$ based on simple post hoc chi square tests). Thus Hypothesis 2 that men would predict that women would pick a less hairy body than women did was not fully supported.

Although not predicted, a gender difference was found in ratings of the degree of men’s body hair most men would find sexually attractive, $\chi^2(4, N = 214) = 32.03, p < .001, \phi = .39$. 
Men’s choices paralleled their own personal preference ratings, with 37.7% of men choosing Image 1, 31.2% choosing Image 2, 13% choosing Image 3, 10.4% choosing Image 4, and 7.7% choosing Images 5/6 combined. Women’s choices were more equally spread among Images 2 (20.4%), 3 (27.%) and 4 (22.6%), and differed significantly ($p < .05$) from men’s for all images except Image 2. Fewer women (only 10.9%) than men thought most men would choose Image 1 as most sexually attractive, while more women than men thought most men would choose Images 3, 4, and 5/6 (19%) as sexually attractive. Thus, women showed more inaccuracy in their predictions regarding the other gender’s body hair ideal than did men.

Hypothesis 3, predicting that men’s ideal amount of body hair would be less hairy than their rating of their own degree of body hair, was tested using a paired samples $t$-test between men’s choice of the image most closely resembling their natural amount of body hair and the image they considered the most sexually attractive. The difference was significant, $t(79) = 16.74, p < .001, r = .30$, supporting the hypothesis that men preferred a hairless or slightly hairy body ($M = 1.93, SD = 1.03$), but their natural body tended to be closer to Image 3 ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.61$).

**Attitudes Towards Men’s Body Hair**

As shown in Table 1, for most of the 20 statements assessing attitudes towards men’s body hair, the average attitude was close to the mid-point with considerable variability around the mean. Several statements, however, were associated with stronger opinions: participants tended to agree strongly or somewhat ($M = 1.52, SD = .74$) that “it is socially acceptable for men to remove body hair if it improves their performance for a sport.” Participants also said they “somewhat agreed” with the statements “removing body hair makes oral sex for the partner more enjoyable” ($M = 1.90, SD = .90$) and “removing body hair makes a man look
cleaner” \((M = 2.12, SD = .76)\). Respondents indicated they were between “strongly disagree” and “somewhat disagree” towards the statements “men who remove hair are homosexual” \((M = 4.46, SD = .88)\), and “men who don’t remove their body hair should receive social disapproval” \((M = 4.30, SD = .90)\).

Although the internal reliability of the scale was low \((\alpha = .45)\), sampling adequacy (KMO) was good \((.80)\) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, \(\chi^2(190) = 1000.95, p < .001\), indicating that the variables were intercorrelated. A principal components factor analysis with quartimax rotation and Kaiser normalization was conducted; six factors emerged (eigenvalues > 1), as shown in Table 1: Factor 1, accounting for 11.27% of the variance, included four questions tapping social appearance reasons for removing men’s body hair, e.g., “Body hair makes men look like animals” (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .70\)); Factor 2, explaining 11.12% of the variance, included three questions about attractiveness reasons for hair removal, e.g., “Body hair on men is ugly” \((\alpha = .80)\); Factor 3, explaining 10.34% of the variance, consisted of four questions tapping whether hair removal was gender appropriate, e.g., “Lack of hair makes men look more like women” \((\alpha = .65)\); Factor 4, explaining 8.81% of the variance, was made up of three questions tapping whether hair removal was necessary for men, e.g., “Removing body hair is unnecessary” \((\alpha = .50)\); Factor 5, explaining 8.03% of the variance, included three questions tapping functional reasons for body depilation, e.g., “It is socially acceptable for men to remove body hair for sports” \((\alpha = .38)\); and Factor 6, explaining 7.91% of the variance, consisted of two questions tapping grooming reasons, e.g., “Removing body hair is good grooming” \((\alpha = .52)\). The question related to oral sex loaded on both Factors 4 and 5 and therefore was excluded. Because of the exploratory nature of the factor analysis, parallel analysis was performed using procedures recommended by Hayton, Allen, and
Scarpello (2004.) Only the first three factors were retained, a decision reinforced by the low internal reliabilities of Factors 4, 5, and 6.

Factors 1, 2 and 3 were examined for gender differences as well as for their relationship with body hair preferences. Using a MANOVA, men and women did not differ significantly in their depilation attitudes, $F(3,210) = .034, p = .991, \varepsilon^2 = .000$. In contrast, depilation attitudes on all three factors were significantly, $p < .001$, correlated with respondents’ choice of the most sexually attractive male body. There was a significant association between choice of a less hairy figure and more agreement with social appearance reasons, Factor 1, $r(214) = .23$, and attractiveness reasons, Factor 2, $r(214) = .36$, and less agreement that depilation was gender inappropriate, Factor 3, $r(214) = -.33$. Depilation attitudes were not significantly related to predictions of men’s preferences (Factor 1: $r(214) = -.02, p = .78$; Factor 2: $r = .04, p = .598$; Factor 3: $r = -.10, p = .168$) or women’s preferences (Factor 1: $r(217) = .02, p = .825$; Factor 2: $r = .06, p = .407$) with one exception--Factor 3: $r = -.16, p = .019$. There was a significant association between agreeing that depilation was gender inappropriate and predicting that women would prefer a more hairy figure.

**Men’s Depilation Practices**

Of the men who participated in the study, 84.1% said they had ever removed or reduced body hair while only 15.9% did not. The youngest age someone began depilating was 10 and the oldest was 20 years old with the average age being 15.75 ($SD = 1.82$).

Of the men who ever removed or reduced hair, the most popular reasons related to sex appeal/attractiveness (75.4%) and cleanliness (68.1%). Other reasons endorsed were: to make oral sex more enjoyable (39.1%), to make oral sex more likely to occur (30.4%), to create a better sexual experience (36.2%), and to improve definition/muscularity (23.2%). Those who
depilated said they were influenced by talking to someone about it (37.7%) and by overhearing someone else talking about it (26.1%), although 29.0% said they were not influenced by others. Many participants (43.5%) said depilation does not become less important at any time during the year. Those who did feel depilation became less important at times explained they modified hair less when they were not in a relationship (39.1%), when it was colder outside (20.3%), or when they were in the off season for sports (11.6).

The most popular places for men to ever have removed or reduced hair were the pubic area (64.6%), the eyebrows (31.7%), the abdomen (30.5%), and the chest (29.3%). Of those who modified pubic hair, the majority (61.0%) reduced or removed it from the whole pubic area, 25.6% from the base of the penis shaft, and 22.0% from the scrotum. None of the participants bleached or dyed their hair to make it less noticeable. The most common ways to remove or reduce body hair were by using scissors (56.5%), an electric razor (56.5%), a regular razor (55.1%), trimmers (47.8%), electric clippers (34.8%), and by plucking (24.6%). Most participants (97.3%) who depilated allowed for visible re-growth before doing so again.

**Discussion**

The primary purpose of this research was to explore U.S. college students’ preferences for and attitudes toward men’s body hair, and to document men’s depilation practices. We were particularly interested in how gender affects these attitudes and preferences. The most striking finding was that the vast majority of college men (84.1%) had ever depilated, most frequently from their pubic area. Given that, it is not surprising that both men and women considered a relatively or completely hairless male body to be most sexually attractive, and believed that most women thought this way as well, supporting prediction (Hypothesis 1). Men for the most part correctly predicted women’s choice of the most sexually attractive amount of men’s body hair, with the exception of Image 3, which men under-predicted, as
hypothesized (Hypothesis 2). In contrast, women did not accurately predict men’s view of the most sexually attractive amount of men’s body hair, believing most men would choose a hairier body than they actually did. The hypothesis that men would consider a less hairy body than their own as most sexually attractive (Hypothesis 3) was supported. Both men and women demonstrated a mixture of attitudes toward men’s body hair removal with most agreeing that the practice is acceptable but not required.

The finding that women prefer a male body with little to no body hair supports the findings of several other studies with women from China (Dixson et al., 2006), New Zealand and the United States (Dixson et al., 2010), and Finland (Rantala et al., 2010), but not those with women from Britain (Dixson et al., 2003) or Cameroon (Dixson et al., 2007). Although Rantala et al. relate their results to women’s menstrual cycle, the fact that results can vary across cultures and that both women and men rate the less hairy male body as most sexually attractive suggests sociocultural forces at work. Indeed, the trend toward hairlessness on men appears to be relatively recent in the United States and may correspond to increased pressure on men to be (and look) muscular (Grossbard et al., 2011; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). Boroughs and Thompson (2014) recently found that college men who depilated (the majority) scored higher on measures of drive for masculinity and social comparison than men who did not depilate. Men’s bodies have become increasingly objectified and commodified (Bordo, 1999; Pope et al., 2000); as such, body hair may detract from the new male body aesthetic. Given how much evidence exists regarding the damaging effects of objectification on women (e.g., lower self-esteem, increased rates of eating disorders; see Moradi & Huang, 2008), it is troubling to see signs of increasing objectification of men.
Men were able to accurately predict women’s ratings of the most sexually attractive amount of men’s body hair, and their own personal ratings matched those of “most women.” This finding is in agreement with the Tiggemann et al. (2008) finding from Australia that men would personally prefer a body that was only slightly hairy and they believed women would prefer the same thing. Also in agreement with the Tiggemann et al. study, men’s choice of how much body hair they considered most sexually attractive was significantly less than the amount of hair they themselves naturally had. The results of this study thus extend Tiggemann et al.’s finding which focused only on back and buttock hair. These findings may explain why most men in the sample depilated: to create a body that is in better alignment with the body they believe is ideal and that they think women consider most sexually attractive. Men’s predictions of women’s preferences were not completely accurate, however. Although most women considered a hairless or minimally hairy body to be most sexually attractive, more women considered the moderately hairy male body (Image 3) to be sexually attractive than men expected, as predicted. These results are consistent with Terry and Braun’s (2013) findings that women view hair on men in several body areas as more acceptable and desirable than do men. Similar misperceptions have been found with respect to men’s views of what size body women find most attractive (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Grossbard et al., 2011). Men appear to think women find the more idealized male body (large, muscular, hairless) attractive than women in fact do. This inaccurate view of what the other gender finds most attractive parallels findings for women with respect to thinness: women predict that men would find a thinner female body as more attractive than men actually do (e.g., Bergstrom et al., 2004; Fallon & Rozin, 1985). Both men and women may
use media images and gender stereotypes when predicting the other gender’s attitudes rather than their own attitudes.

In the current study, women were more inaccurate than men regarding the degree of male hairiness the other gender considers most sexually attractive, believing men would prefer more body hair than men actually preferred. Although this result had only a moderate effect size and was not predicted, previous research on perceptions of what size body the other gender perceives as most attractive also has found women to be less accurate predictors than men (Bergstrom et al., 2004). The reasons for these gender patterns are unclear. Women may not be aware that most of their male peers remove or reduce at least some of their body hair, perhaps because men are less likely to talk about their bodies and grooming behaviors than are women, and/or because most men are reducing rather than completely removing body hair and hair reduction is less noticeable than removal.

The body attitude questionnaire, although problematic (see limitations below), indicated that women and men hold very similar attitudes regarding men’s body hair, paralleling findings regarding attitudes toward women’s body hair (Basow & Braman, 1998). These results contrast somewhat with Terry and Braun’s (2013) finding that women considered male body depilation to be somewhat less socially acceptable than did men. The different methodology in the two studies (a dichotomous rating of social acceptability in Terry and Braun’s study versus a 5-point scale of agreement or disagreement with 20 different statements in the current study) and the different populations (a community sample of young adult New Zealanders versus predominantly white traditional-aged U.S. college students) make comparisons difficult. Both the current study and Terry and Braun’s study suggest that attitudes toward male body depilation are complex and variable, and that men may have
considerable flexibility regarding how (and whether) to reduce their body hair. Indeed, respondents generally both agreed that male body hair removal (the terminology in the questionnaire) was socially acceptable and disagreed that men who did not remove body hair should receive social disapproval. Such flexibility stands in marked contrast to body hair removal norms for women (Basow, 1991; Terry & Braun, 2013) and may indicate the greater range of options (e.g., money, job status) that men have to obtain value in society compared to women, whose value appears based primarily on appearance (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tan, Shaw, Cheng, & Kim, 2013). The results may also indicate flexibility regarding the degree of depilation viewed as socially desirable. Not surprisingly, participants who agreed that male body depilation was acceptable for social appeal and physical appearance reasons (Factors 1 and 2) and who thought that it was appropriate for men to depilate (Factor 3) tended to view the less hairy male body as most sexually attractive, suggesting that these attitude factors have some external validity.

The study found the majority of men (84.1%) had removed or reduced body hair at some point in their lives, similar to Terry and Braun’s (2013) findings in a community sample in New Zealand, and Boroughs and Thompson (2014) most recent study using a college population in southeastern U.S. These percentages are 20% higher than in previous studies (e.g., Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008), perhaps because of increased pressure to conform to the hairless trend displayed in the media or because it has become increasingly acceptable for men to engage in depilation practices. The responses to the attitude questions certainly suggest the latter. More likely, the current study included body hair trimming and shaping which inflated the number of men engaging in some type of body hair modification practice. Similar to Boroughs and Thompson (2002) and Boroughs et al. (2005), razors were
among the preferred method of hair removal in the current study, although scissors also were used, probably for trimming. As other researchers have found, the most frequent sites for hair modification were the pubic area, the chest, and the abdomen (Boroughs et al., 2005; Borough & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013). Body depilation in these areas may be a way to enhance muscular definition and penis size, a hypothesis supported by Boroughs and Thompson’s (2014) finding that drive for musculature was significantly higher in men who depilated than in men who did not.

The study has a number of limitations, starting with the selectivity of the sample that may limit generalizability beyond predominantly White and heterosexual college students in the United States. Other populations that vary in race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and age need to be assessed to gauge how widespread men’s body hair removal practices are and the factors related to them, although it should be noted that community surveys have found similar attitudes regarding the social acceptability of male body depilation (Martins et al., 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Another limitation of the sample is that respondents self-selected to participate in a study on the “advertising effectiveness of male models” and thus may have been more interested in appearance norms than other students. Thus the external validity of the study’s results may be limited, although again community surveys have found similar patterns.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of variability of the images, especially with respect to pubic hair. Although all six images varied in degree of chest and abdomen hair from none to considerable, the only variation in pubic hair was that Image 1 had none and the other five all had the same amount. Given the frequency of pubic hair removal and reduction among young men, additional images might be used to determine more closely the degree of
pubic hair depilation considered most sexually attractive as well as hair on other body areas, such as the back and the buttocks (as in Martins et al., 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2008) and arms. Similarly, even the presentation of torso hair was somewhat restricted to six variations. Hairier male bodies certainly exist and the use of only six options might predispose respondents to consider Images 3 and 4 (the middle figures) as most average. Although this possible anchoring effect is important to note and Image 3 was indeed rated “average” in hairiness, the fact that most respondents chose Images 1 and 2 as most sexually attractive still suggests a “less-hairy-than-the-average-man” ideal, as do the findings that men reported their natural body hair was closer to Image 3. Different types of male bodies (shape, race) might also be used as well as different types of images (e.g., color stills or videos). Given the wide variety of body depilation practices and the often asymmetrical pattern of natural-growing hair, perhaps future studies can provide participants with a picture of a male body and ask them to draw where they would like the body to have hair to gather a better idea of body hair preferences.

A further limitation of the methodology was the context of the study as one investigating the attractiveness of male models. Although the respondents were asked which image they considered the most sexually attractive, their choices may have indicated “sexually attractive for a male model.” Given the pervasiveness of hairless male torsos in advertising, Images 1 and 2 may simply reflect the norm for male models rather than respondents’ personal views. A replication of the study with a different instructional set might reveal respondents’ personal standards better. Still, the fact that the majority of the male respondents remove or reduce their own body hair combined with the results of the attitudes survey suggest that respondents likely have internalized such standards as well.
The attitude towards men’s body hair questionnaire also needs further development since the neutral average rating of most items, the large variability, the six-factor structure and the poor internal reliabilities (< .70) on four of the six factors suggest that the 20 items may omit important attitudes and/or tap too many different constructs. Unlike research on women’s body hair attitudes, which found either one factor (Basow & Braman, 1998) or two factors (Basow, 1991: feminine/attractiveness reasons and social/normative reasons), attitudes towards men’s body hair may be more complex or different in some other way. It also is possible that women’s and men’s attitudes differ in structure. Additional items should be included to increase the questionnaire’s reliability and examine its validity, and a larger sample used to enable separate factor analyses by gender.

Despite the study’s limitations, the data suggest that both male and female college students consider a male body with little or no frontal body hair to be the most sexually attractive. Not surprisingly then, a large majority of the male participants remove or reduce body hair, especially in the pubic area. Participants’ attitudes toward men’s body hair indicate that removing such hair is socially acceptable even though it may not be a social “requirement” as is women’s body hair removal. Although body hair may appear to be relatively trivial, the finding that men now consider their natural hair growth to be somewhat unattractive likely contributes to the increasing rates of male body dissatisfaction (Olivardia et al., 2004; Pope et al., 2000). Male and female preference for less body hair on men also suggests changing notions of masculinity and male sexual attractiveness among college-aged people (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Peat, Peyerl, Ferraro, & Butler, 2011), a topic that should receive further study.
Footnotes

1Excluding the few self-rated gay and bisexual participants did not change the results; therefore they were retained in the sample.

2The wording of the original question used the term “homosexual,” no longer considered appropriate. Future versions of this question should use the preferred term “gay.”
References


Table 1

Means, SDs, and Factor Loadings for Attitudes towards Men’s Body Hair Questionnaire

(Principal Components Analysis, Quartimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Variance</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor reliability: α</td>
<td></td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body hair makes men look like animals.</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men who don’t remove their body hair should receive social disapproval.</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men need to remove body hair in order to appeal to women.</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair makes a man more professional and attractive</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hair on men is ugly.</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hair on men is unattractive.</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hair on men is disgusting.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men shouldn’t remove chest and abdomen hair.</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men shouldn’t remove back hair.</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of body hair makes men look more like women.</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men who remove hair are homosexual.</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair is unnecessary.</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men’s bodies are fine unshaven.</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hair is masculine.</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is socially acceptable for men to remove body hair if it improves their performance for a sport.</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair improves muscle definition.</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair makes a man look cleaner</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair is good grooming.</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hair is physically uncomfortable.</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing body hair makes oral sex for the partner more enjoyable.*</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scores range from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. Factor loadings in bold were used to create factor scores. *Because item cross-loaded on Factors 4 and 5, it was omitted.
Table 2

Body Hair Preferences and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Image 1</th>
<th>Image 2</th>
<th>Image 3</th>
<th>Image 4</th>
<th>Image 5</th>
<th>Image 6</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\phi$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Preference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women’s Preference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>27.7$^a$</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>19.7$^a$</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40.0$^b$</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>7.5$^b$</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men’s Preference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32.03</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>10.9$^a$</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>27.0$^a$</td>
<td>22.6$^a$</td>
<td>12.4$^a$</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>10.9$^a$</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>37.7$^b$</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>13.0$^b$</td>
<td>10.4$^b$</td>
<td>5.12$^b$</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>13.0$^b$</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note*: Cells in italics were combined for chi square analyses. Percentages with different subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level using simple post hoc chi square tests.
Figure 1

Images of Male Torsos with Increasing Degrees of Hair

Image 1. *No hair.*

Image 2. *Slightly hairy.*

Image 3. *Somewhat hairy.*

Image 5. *Rather hairy.*