MASTER’S DISSERTATION:
THE (HAIRY?) BODY

[In-depth research on the perception of female university students on body hair]

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At the age of 14, the first boyfriend I ever had told me that girls were obliged to shave their legs in order to be considered feminine. A year later, a friend was in tears because she went to a local beauty salon to get her legs waxed but it had gone horribly wrong and the wounds had become infected. At graduation, a girl from our senior class was made fun of relentlessly for having visible body hair on her school picture. Similar experiences have occurred throughout my lifetime and caused me to be aware of having any type of body hair whatsoever. Ever since enrolling in the Gender and Diversity master’s program, I knew that I wanted to do some type of research on how other young women felt about body hair.

I would like to thank my thesis promotor Dr. Rahbari, who has been nothing but kind and who was willing to graciously offer constructive feedback at any given time. Furthermore, I would like to thank co-promotor Prof. Dr. Longman for reading this dissertation and offering feedback as well. I would also like to thank the courageous women who agreed to sit down with me and talk about their body hair. Even though the subject proved to be awkward for them to discuss at times, they plowed through anyways. Without them, this dissertation would not have been made possible. Lastly, I would like to thank my mother for believing in me, for standing by my side through six years of higher education and for being my biggest supporter altogether.
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3 RESEARCH

3.1 ABSTRACT

Objective: This dissertation researches the perceptions of female university students on body hair. This concerning perceptions on their own body hair as well as the body hair of others.

Method: Qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with 14 University of Ghent students who self-identified as being female.

Results: All women reported hair removal practices, had felt insecure about their body hair in the past, and had started employing these practices from a young age. There was, however, a large degree of variation based upon sexual status, depilation techniques, and the frequency of hair removal. Throughout the research it becomes clear that female body hair is still highly problematized and that a hairless female body is still considered the norm by society.

Key words: women, body hair, hair removal, perceptions, gender differences

3.2 INTRODUCTION

Women are being subjected to an ever-increasing amount of body modification practices. Among these practices, the removal and sculpture of body hair may be discerned as some of the most omnipresent habits (Tiggemann, & Hodgson, 2008). Body hair is a natural occurrence which leaves no person untouched and may be accounted for no matter one’s age, ethnicity or gender. However, even though it is a natural phenomenon, it is still often problematized; especially for women. The taboo of a hairy body is even more pervasive for young, highly educated women (Butler, Smith, Collazo, Caltabiano, & Herbenick, 2015). It is because of the aforementioned popularity of hair removal practices that this dissertation focuses on young, highly educated women as the target group.

Even though the general norm has not always been one of hairlessness, it has resurfaced relatively recently as being the most pervasive and has been spreading rapidly around the world. Nearly all young females conform in various degrees and on different bodily sites to hair removal practices (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). The fact that women are under an ever-amounting degree of pressure, because of body hair removal practices, leads to increasing instances of harm and effects the sexual as well as the emotional wellbeing of women (Hamori, 2014). Aforementioned practices remain highly gendered since they are not as prevalent for men. Furthermore, male body hair is not problematized to the same degree as is the case for women (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011).

These pressures are multidimensional and many actors influence females to participate in hair removal practices: “friends (73.1%), family (43.0%), magazines (9.6%), internet (5.3%), and television (16.3%)” (Bercaw-Pratt, et al., 2012, p. 13). However, the reasons given by women for them to participate in hair removal practices are:

“It looks better in a bathing suit” followed by “It makes me feel attractive” […] liking the feeling and feeling “feminine” and “more comfortable” were similarly rated and at a similar level as the one hygiene-related topic “I think it is cleaner” (Riddell, et al., 2010, p. 125).

The removal of body hair might therefore be placed within a larger social norm in which women are expected to be completely hairless, preferably at all times. Women feel pressured to conform to perceived ideal appearances of the female body (Herbenick, et al., 2013). Amazingly enough, even though women are able to identify a number of influencing factors, they often refuse to acknowledge the effect these factors might have on their own hair removal behaviors and maintain the assertion that they do not remove body hair for any other reason than their own benefit (Riddell, et al., 2010).
Although many studies have been conducted on the subject of body hair, most of these studies originate from English speaking countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. In addition to research on the subject being mostly quantitative, it becomes clear that little to no results are available when it comes to Belgium. Previously conducted studies on the matter mostly focus on self- and body image (Fahs, 2014), pubic hair (Burris, & Munteanu, 2015), body hair on men (Terry & Braun, 2016), or investigate the subject from an explicitly feminist point of view (Crann, Jenkins, Money, & O’Doherty, 2017).

The limited amount of Belgian studies on the subject focused on body hair (Verveen, 1979) and hirsutism (Ruberg, 2016) but not explicitly on the problematization of female body hair. This study focuses on just that, in order to try to rectify the existing gap. The need for a qualitative study which explores the perceptions of female Belgian university students arises. In investigating just that, this investigation sheds light on the degree in which Belgian results coincide with, or differ from, international outcomes on the perceptions of young women. The current study also builds on findings of previous research from Belgian and the Netherlands, like the desire for flawless – and hairless – women (Smelik, 2010) and the way BMI effects depilation practices (Crunelle, 2016).

The current zooms in on different aspects that are linked to the subject of female perceptions on body hair. It focuses on the existing literature on body hair by investigating the prevalence of body hair and depilation practices; internal factors of difference between women; the perceptions of men on female body hair and feminist perspectives on the subject. The interview analysis that follows tries to answer the following questions:

~ What are the participant’s perceptions on body hair?
~ Which relation is there between certain bodily sites and the body hair thereof?
~ In which hair removal trends and practices do respondents participate?
~ Which reasons do participants indicate for employing hair removal practices?
~ Were there experiences of harm and injury related to body hair removal?
~ Which factors influence women to refrain from or participate in depilation practices?
~ What are the perceptions of participants on gender and body hair removal?
~ Which level of familiarity of respondents is there with feminist ideas on body hair removal?

In doing so, it becomes possible to form an in-depth and well-rounded insight into the perceptions of Belgian university students, who identify as being female, when it comes to body hair – their own as well as the body hair of others –. With regard to the aforementioned, it becomes possible to discern the prevalence of body hair related practices; the methods of depilation that are being employed; and the motives for removing or keeping body hair. Additionally, the perspective on gender and feminism are both brought into the research by investigating the perceptions of participants on the subject of female body hair.
3.3 Literature review

3.3.1 Body hair

Body hair is a natural phenomenon that occurs in men and women alike. However, it has become subject to an ever-increasing amount of body management that affects mostly women, and that from a young age onwards. Body hair grows on different sites of the body and therefore ‘requires’ different degrees of management (DeMaria, Berenson, 2013). Females start developing body hair when they are in their early puberty and complete development when they are 14 years of age. Whereas men generally reach this stage at the age of 15. The styling and sculpting of said body hair has been a practice that has been performed throughout the history of human civilization (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009).

History of body hair removal

“However, it is neither a modern, nor a purely Western invention; accounts of women’s hair removal come from ancient times and diverse cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Tobriand Islands, Uganda, South America and Turkey” (Cooper, 1971; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, p.333). Prokop states for example that women from ancient Greece partly removed their pubic hair to be considered sexually appealing and that female prostitutes from the Middle East depilated to avoid contracting genital lice (Prokop, 2016). Where women with an ‘unnatural’ amount of body hair have been constructed as undesirable and dangerously sexual throughout history (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003), completely removing body hair only recently resurfaced as the modern norm for women. During the Middle Ages, removing pubic hair was prescribed in order to avoid contracting genital lice; the removal of body hair is nowadays, however, generally practiced for esthetic reasons. From the seventies onward, the public portrayal of pubic hair in the different media outlets has been ever diminishing (Ramsey, et al., 2009). The sudden rise of this body management trend, in the form of a hairless body, may be linked to the following:

Body hair removal practices are relatively new; prior to the 1920s, few women ever removed leg, underarm, or pubic hair. Historians suggest that advertising campaigns from the 1930s— which ushered in changes in fashion (e.g. the revealing flapper girl), obsession with beauty as a status symbol, and widespread use of photography—launched body hair removal as a widespread social norm (Fahs, 2011, p. 454).

The practice of removing body hair came back in full force as a societal norm earlier than most would have expected. In 1870 people began viewing an ‘excessive’ amount of body hair as problematic and as something that required maintenance or even treatment. Hairlessness only became the norm, however, after World War II (Labre, 2002; Herzig, 1999). Even though one might argue that the removal of body hair has been executed by women for a long time, ever more females engage in the practice nowadays for the following reasons:

women who remove some or all body hair are often viewed as clean and attractive, while women who do not are viewed as masculine or less desirable [...] women are also found to have higher levels of self-objectification, body shame and self-consciousness” (DeMaria, Sundstrom, McInnis, & Rogers, 2016, p. 248).

Through a sudden focus on hirsutism, the excessive amount of body hair on women, female body hair became problematized even more. This may be traced back to the 20s of the 20th century. It is furthermore possible to locate hirsutism within a general societal shift from female body hair as part of an evolutionary process, to the link between body hair and perceived hormonal imbalances. In doing so, female body hair became interpreted as eternally excessive and intricately linked to being seen as manly (Ruberg, 2016). The assessment of hirsutism, however, remains largely subjective since it depends on the evaluation of the researcher whether to deem hair growth problematic or not. Other
factors, such as ethnicity, also play an important role in the evaluation of female hair growth. Research by Martin et al. shows that certain ethnic groups: Ashkenazi Jews, Hispanics and Slavics, are more at risk of developing hirsutism (Martin, Anderson, Chang, Ehrmann, Lobo, Murad,... & Rosenfield, 2018).

Throughout history, certain fixed scales, to rate the amount of female hair, were employed. When aforementioned intersubjectivity is taken into account, however, it becomes clear that such scales are not valid measuring techniques. The limiting value as to which excessive hair growth is deemed pathological is very narrow and not consistently accurate (Martin, Anderson, Chang, Ehrmann, Lobo, Murad,... & Rosenfield, 2018). By creating the negative associations between women with body hair and manliness, as well as pathology, a crippling narrative of social control was formed which affects nearly all women, with the exception of those who deliberately go against the prescribed social norms on body hair (Tondeur, 2015).

The normativity of a hairless female body
The fact that a hairless body has rapidly become the new norm, may be contrived from the following statement: “In modern Western culture, body hair has been seen as a sign of masculinity, but recently, body depilation practices, or the removal or modification of body hair below the neck, are increasingly becoming the social norm” (Swain, Tully, Redford, & McGwin, 2016, p. 444). Research by Bercaw-Pratt furthermore shows that among these body modification practices, one is able to discern the removal of body hair as the most common and pervasive example. This should not come as a surprise, as hair removal tools have become more easily accessible. The fact that hair removal also has a more temporary character in comparison to other body management practices, comes into play as well. It is nevertheless remarkable that even though most women report hair removal practices, only a small amount actually reports perceiving their body as being “too hairy” (Bercaw-Pratt, Santos, Sanchez, Ayensu-Coker, Nebgen, & Dietrich, 2012). “The areas of the body where the participants felt there was “too much” hair included the genital area, upper lip and abdomen (Bercaw-Pratt, et al., 2012, p.13).

A hairless body is perceived as more attractive and preferable in regard to hygiene. It is also seen as a manner in which the body may be improved (Swain, et al., 2016). Women who start practicing body hair removal, either by completely or partially depilating, are most likely to keep up aforementioned practices throughout their lifetime. There are several possible methods one might employ in order to remove body hair (DeMaria, & Berenson, 2013): “numerous products and techniques are available, including: shaving (razor/electric), trimming with scissors, depilatory cream, waxing, sugaring, threading/plucking, dyeing/bleaching, electrolysis (the only permanent method of hair removal), and laser” (DeMaria, & Berenson, 2013, p. 226). The removal of body hair does not only include the genital area but also: “eyebrows, upper lip, chin, legs, arms, underarms, and bikini area” (Labre, 2002, p.114).

The removal of body hair, in which ever more women participate, does result oftentimes result in hair removal injuries. However, most of these ‘harms’ might be considered minor. Swain et al. concluded that lacerations make up for half of all contracted injuries. The genitalia and the lower part of the legs proved to be the most vulnerable corporal regions for women. Contracted injuries were most often brought on by a razor, which proves to be the most likely method for the removal of body hair by women. (Swain, et al., 2016). Shaving as a hair removal method for women may in addition also lead to the problem of ingrown hairs, which might become a regular nuisance caused by shaving. These ingrown hairs are also the reported reason some women renounce shaving practices altogether (DeMaria, & Berenson, 2013). Even though hair removal incidents are relatively low and seldom result in hospitalization, it is possible to detect an increase in the amount of contracted injuries. It is therefore important to educate women on how to safely depilate their body, or to at least increase their awareness on possible injuries by launching prevention campaigns (Glass, et al., 2012).
Genital hair removal

One bodily site has specifically come under even more surveillance in comparison to previous years. Where women report removing body hair from their underarms, legs and bikini area for a relatively long time, the removal of pubic hair is something that is a considerably more recent practice. Upon closer investigation of the hit television show “Sex and the City” this may be discovered, for example. In earlier years, the removal of pubic hair was seen as a novelty and an anomaly. By the time the movie came to cinemas, another discourse was discernable as a character was being publicly shamed for not removing her pubic hair. Over the years, the societal discourse and public view on pubic hair has changed (Blinne, 2014) as nowadays:

Women’s genitalia are constructed as a bodily site requiring ongoing surveillance, maintenance and modification to conform to social norms. Women engage in a range of genital health, hygiene and beauty practices, including the use of commercial and homemade vaginal douches, washes, wipes, sprays and pubic hair removal, to modify their bodies (Crann, Jenkins, Money, & O’Doherty, 2017, p. 510).

Female genitalia appear to be a socially constructed site of the body subjected to ever-changing modification trends. This is translated in the discernable appearance of body management trends such as genital steaming. Hereby, hot water is used to ‘clean’ the female reproductive system. The research conducted by Vandenburg and Braun distinguishes different categories that may be linked to genital modifications: the female body that is seen as deteriorating and dirty. The research also focuses on genital modifications that are regarded as an optimization of the life quality of women and of female health in general (Vandenberg, & Braun, 2017). Genital ‘enhancements’ such as genital waxing are in this regard constructed - mainly in Western culture - as accessible, inexpensive and not very time consuming. Aforementioned consequently generates the image of body modifications as becoming available to nearly anyone (Gillen, & Dunaev, 2017). “It therefore becomes possible to see: the construction of idealized (Western) genitalia as hairless, odorless and free of discharge, and ‘natural’ female genitalia as problematic through the mobilization of normative femininity and (hetero)sexuality discourses” (Crann, et al., 2017, p. 510).

The arrival in the West of the Brazilian Wax in 1994 announced the start of yet another new beauty craze. During this procedure, wax is applied to the genital area and remaining hairs are afterwards removed by tweezers handled by the beauty technician. This leaves the exposed area vulnerable for infections. Antiseptic lotion is applied afterwards in order to decrease the risk of attracting this kind of bodily contractions. The small portion of pubic hair that remains, is groomed into a particular shape. This method of hair removal has been promoted by many media outlets over the years. What the media notably left out in this regard is that this procedure does not increase the ‘cleanliness’ of women by any means (Labre, 2002). The Brazilian wax procedure is not only prevalent in Western Europe and North America. It is also wildly popular in South America, as it originated from Brazil (Ramsey, et al., 2009). After the Brazilian wax came the Hollywood wax. Here all body hair is removed and no body part of the body that is typically associated with body hair is allowed to remain ‘hairy’ (Smelik, 2010).

Given the aforementioned – and growing – scrutiny female bodies are currently under, it comes as no surprise that many women harbor negative emotions towards their vaginas, and often describe them as something that needs to be ‘kept in check’. The removal of pubic hair can also be inserted into this specific discourse of the dirty vagina, as hair removal is seen as a way to keep the genital area clean. The assumption that a vagina needs to be hairless in order to be clean is an idea that has been internalized by many women. When they do not have a shaven or otherwise hairless vagina, women feel as if they are exposing others to something dirty (Fahs, 2014).

By removing all body hair from the genital area women might, therefore, be pursuing the ‘designer vagina’, which is hairless and childlike in appearance. The pursuit and achievement of this designer vagina leads to a more positive attitude towards their own vagina, as women conform to the societal
norm by doing so (Herbenick, Hensel, Smith, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2013). A study by Butler et al. from 2013 indicates that 96% of the female participants indicated to have partially or entirely removed their pubic hair in the past month (Butler, et al., 2015). The idea of ‘sexiness’ comes into play here as well. Women tend to feel better about their bodies when they are clean-shaven:

On days that women removed their pubic hair, they were more likely to report sexual interest, the use of genital hygiene products, the use of creams on the genitals, to have sex with a casual (rather than a relationship) partner, and to report engaging in vaginal fingering and finger–clitoral stimulation (Herbenick, et al., 2013, p. 682).

Consequences of hair removal
There is a, female based, perceived preference for hairless genitalia by others that is linked to the ever-increasing amount of hair removal injuries females acquire, as these injuries are increasing. Young females between 19 and 34 are, according to Swain et al., predominantly vulnerable to attracting injuries related to hair removal in the genital area. These injuries are however consequently underestimated by the women themselves. The actual prevalence of injuries is probably way higher than what is estimated by research since most injuries are minor and only a marginal portion requires medical attention (Swain, et al., 2016). Most generally these genital injuries consist of: “itching, rashes, and genital pain” (Butler, et al., 2015, p. 56). The use of creams is also higher for women who remove pubic hair, this to soothe the skin after the attraction of razor burns or chafing as the protective layer of pubic hair is being removed (Herbenick, et al., 2013). Apart from accidents, hair removal is also linked to attracting sexually transmitted infections (STI) more often. There appears to be a clear link between grooming pubic hair and contracting STIs (Osterberg, Gaither, Awad, Truesdale, Allen, Sutcliffe, & Breyer, 2016).

Possible factors that influence women when removing their body hair can be linked to the fact that the removal of body hair has become a normative social construction in which females are only considered to be attractive when they are hairless. Media have always played an important role in this regard as they represent and depict the societal shift to the portrayal of hairless females (Riddell, et al., 2010). Nude bodies may be observed in several media sources, from objectivizing adverts to explicit pornographic imagery (Glass, et al., 2012). The presence of the internet, advertisements and magazines in which women are increasingly being depicted naked provides a certain imagery that promotes the ideal of the hairless female (Herbenick, et al., 2013). Technology has advanced in such a way that the – hairless – ideal body has become a virtual possibility. Programs like Photoshop depict bodies in such a way that the achievement of a hairless body no longer seems like a fantasy (Smelik, 2010).

The media are partly to blame for the fact that this hairless norm has become so pervasive, as media outlets are responsible for the ever-increasing portrayal of the female body in an unnatural – hairless – state. Female genitalia are, additionally, being misrepresented since the public is not made aware of any surgical and/or digital modifications the photographed vagina in question has undergone. An ideal is consequently broadcasted by the media of the female body with a minimal amount of pubic hair (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011):

Women’s conception of the average or typical appearance of female genitalia may be rooted largely in media images, which may be detrimental to women’s genital perceptions to the extent that such media images exhibit a restricted or unrealistic range of genital appearances (Schick, et al., 2011, p. 75).

This portrayed ideal of a hairless vagina also provokes increased visibility of the entire genital area, which may lead to increased insecurities where female genitalia are concerned. The number of women who undergo cosmetic surgeries of the genital area is ever-increasing. Where the area used to be protected by hair, as well as from prying eyes, the intensifying amount of scrutiny causes the rising of genital ‘reconstructive’ surgery by women (Hamori, 2014).
The practice of removing body hair has not, however, only resulted in negative effects. Research by Ramsey et al. states that the near disappearance of pubic lice, for example, has largely coincided with the introduction of the Brazilian wax (Ramsey, et al., 2009). However, the positive outcomes are small compared to the inconveniences the practice of body hair removal brings about. The female body and particularly the female genitalia are under an intensifying amount of scrutiny. Body hair removal practices are conducted more often, more rigorously and on more sites of the body.

3.3.2 BODY IMAGE

The way in which women perceive their bodies has pervasive repercussions for their mental health, severely impacts their everyday lives and consequently impacts their body image as well. Body hair plays an important role and may influence women’s overall wellbeing. The effect of body hair on the body image is therefore being investigated in the following part of the research.

While all human beings tend to be influenced a great deal by the way they perceive their bodies, women especially experience an enormous amount of societal pressure to maintain their bodies a certain way. In this regard, many factors come into play. Body hair and the way bodies are groomed become important predictors of wellbeing and sexual functioning of women (Hamori, 2014). As unrealistic body ideals are increasingly being embraced and internalized by women, the risks this norm entail, amplify as well. Straying from the physical ‘ideal norm’ may lead to a negative spiral in the body image and self-esteem of women. Since there is a daily exposure to outlets that portray unrealistic female bodies, a disturbance may have a pervasive effect on women. The body image as well as the sexual health of many might therefore be at risk (Schick, et al., 2011).

A satisfactory body image is important since women who have a positive relationship with their bodies in general and their vaginas specifically tend to have a, as described by Berman and Windecker, a positive Genital Self Image (GSI). A positive GSI leads to a positive outcome for all areas of female sexual health, of which sexual energy and stamina are only two examples. The most significant factor in this study proves to be one’s vaginal odor. Women who perceive their vaginas as ‘smelly’ most often have a negative GSI (Berman, & Windecker, 2008). These negative feelings about female bodies and their body hair may be brought on by public reactions to said body hair. When images or stories about women with body hair begin to circulate, they are often met with very negative reactions by the media as well as the public (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). This further explains why the majority of participants in the study of Terry and Braun viewed female body hair as unacceptable (Terry & Braun, 2013).

It is possible to state that women are under a permanent state of social surveillance and feel pressured to conform to the hairless norm to which they are subjected by society and their peer group (Fahs, 2011). Reaction of others becomes very important in this regard. Not only friends and family influence women, the reactions of strangers and society as a whole play an important role as well as: “hairy women are rated as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women” (Basow & Braman, 1998; Fahs, 2011, p.: 454). It is also very important in this regard to acknowledge intersections between ethnic background and gender. Women from ethnic minorities who do not comply with hairless beauty standards tend to face even harsher criticisms from their peer group than white women, which may lead to an increase of the pressure on them to conform and practice hair removal (Fahs, 2011). It is important in this regard to keep in mind that forms of privilege come into play here. Some women are able to afford it more to keep their body hair than others.

Even though most research centers on the negative outcomes, as was previously mentioned, it becomes apparent that a positive body image is a possible outcome as well, even though academia primarily tends to focus on a negative body image as a consequence. When females appreciate their body, it becomes more likely for them to be able to employ their own protective measures and to resist the pervasiveness of the unrealistic beauty ideals from nowadays (Gillen, & Dunaev, 2017).
Furthermore, females with positive body attitudes pursue signs of uniqueness more often. This tendency is more likely to be linked to Western women, as they are part of a culture that is focused on the so called ‘development of the self’. Results might greatly vary when research is conducted in societies where a group mentality is considered to be the dominant approach (Gillen, & Dunaev, 2017). It becomes apparent that the body image of women and their feelings about their body hair play an important, be it negative or positive, role in their wellbeing.

3.3.3 Younger women

There are no conclusive results that make it possible to deduce what age women tend to be when they start engaging in hair removal practices. At a growing rate, adolescents begin engaging in these practices from early puberty on, a trend that seems to be accurate for the entirety of Western Europe (Fahs, 2011). However, women who have not been sexually active yet, are more often reporting a natural growth of their pubic hair than is the case for sexually active women. The age at which females begin undertaking body hair removal practices is often linked to the age at which they consider themselves becoming a woman. It seems that young women view the initiation in body hair removal practices as being the next step in becoming a, possibly sexually active, adult. Furthermore, it seems that the removal of pubic hair is starting around the same age as the removal of other types of body hair. (DeMaria, Sundstrom, McInnis, & Rogers, 2016). Even if it is not entirely clear from what age women start engaging in hair removal behaviors, a study from Riddell et al. shows that by the time women are in their twenties, 75% has already engaged in these practices (Riddell, Varto, & Hodgson, 2010).

Adolescent women as well as female young adults are, as could be predicted by the previous, more likely to partake in a complete or partial removal of the body hair. This is mostly done in a weekly fashion (Herbenick, et al., 2013). Most young women typically tend to remove all their body hair but do so on a more casual than religious basis (Butler, et al., 2015). Additionally, research has shown that for younger women some hair removal practices are more negotiable than others. This means that especially visible areas of the female body like legs and armpits are subject to persistent hair removal practices. There is more room for personal negotiation in areas that are typically hidden like the toes and the genital area (Terry, & Braun, 2013).

Apart from these general trends in the management of young women’s body hair, a new tendency towards alternative methods of keeping body hair is discernable. Ever more young women engage in producing new forms of body hair management like applying shapes and color to their body hair, most often this trend is located in the pubic area. One of these trends is the ‘vajazzling’ practice the study of Turney speaks of: pubic hair is removed and replaced by placing jewels on the genital area (Turney, 2016). Other trends, such as shaping and dyeing are discernable: from episodes of the popular hit show ‘Sex and the City’ to pornographic images in the mid ‘90, these trends have become ever more normalized (Blinne, 2014). These tendencies also entail that pubic hair is not always completely removed by these young women, as shown by the study of DeMaria and Berenson, in which 12% of the college aged participants reported trimming their pubic hair (DeMaria, Berenson, 2013).

Another study by DeMaria et al. found that young women notice generational differences when discussing body hair practices with their parents, who tend not to understand why they would want to remove their body hair. This research also proved that even though young women discuss pubic hair with friends as well as family, and feel that they are being influenced by media, they ultimately feel like it is their own choice to partake in hair removal practices and that they ultimately do it for themselves and not for others (DeMaria, et al., 2016).

However, not only generational trends influence women. It is important to take into account the impact contemporary media play in the lives of young women. The exposure of young girls to the
managed and permanently flawless bodies of celebrities influences them to the extent that they often start body management from the age of 13 and onwards (Trekel & Eggermont, 2017). Even though the influence of exposure to flawless celebrity bodies is profound, new trends are noticeable when it comes to the body hair of famous people. Popular contemporary singer Rihanna (Figure 1) has been the latest celebrity to share a photo of her body hair on social media. The campaign of Adidas (Figure 2) where a female model is pictured with visible hair growth on her legs is another example of the growing visibility of body hair in media and pop culture1. Even though these images were met with various degrees of support, many explicitly positive reactions from the public were discernable as well. It is too soon to rapport a change in celebrity body hair management behaviors and certainly too early to investigate which impact these photographs have on young girls. It is, nevertheless, important to note that societal changes might be afoot.

3.3.4 MALE PERCEPTION OF THE FEMALE BODY

The subject of men and their perspective on body hair might be approached from two angles: How do men actually feel about female body hair? And how do women think men feel about their body hair? In order to answer these questions, it is important to realize that the norm on body hair is becoming increasingly more pervasive for everybody, not just women. Research shows, however, that women are more prone to body modifications and cosmetic alterations than men, and that men are generally more content with the way their body looks than women (Gillen, & Dunaev, 2017). Body hair for men is deemed more acceptable than for women, unless the male body hair in question is located on the back (Terry, & Braun, 2013). Even if an excessive amount of body hair is no longer tolerated by women either, men are still given a greater amount of agency and choice in the matter (Terry & Braun, 2016).

In order to answer the first question, one needs to investigate the effects of the gender relations. It was, from an evolutionary perspective, more desirable for men to prefer hairless women, as these individuals are generally linked to a decreased risk of contracting parasites. This preference lead to the sexual selection, described by Prokop as “ectoparasite avoidance hypothesis”, of hairless females. It is the desire for disease-free individuals that was more likely to be pervasive over possible sexual disgust towards ‘hairy’ women (Prokop, 2016). Men who have a preference as to how they would like female genitalia to look, tend to prefer them to be completely naked or at least to have trimmed pubic hair (Horrocks, Iyer, Askern, Becuzzi, Vangaveti, & Rane, 2016). There is, however, no single fashion men would like the body hair of women to look like, contrary to popular belief. Most men, more than half, do however have a preference for hairless women. This does leave almost half of men who prefer women who do not or only partially remove their pubic hair (Butler, et al., 2015). Yet most young men feel most aroused when there is no pubic hair discernable (Burris, & Munteanu, 2015). Where many males prefer females with groomed pubic hair, most feel negatively about ‘reconstructive’ genital surgeries (Horrock, et al., 2016). These preferences for hairless women do decrease over time. Older men are less likely to reject females who do not engage in hair removal practices (Prokop, 2016).

The second question delves deeper into the assumed preferences of men when it comes to the body hair of women, as women assume that men prefer females who are depilated. Women sometimes go as far as to deliberately forgo shaving before going out as a precaution to make sure they will not engage in sexual activities since men, in their opinion, do not like body hair. So by not shaving they are able to prevent themselves from engaging in sexual activities (DeMaria, et al., 2016). They are correct in their assumption that men prefer women not to have hair in the armpit and leg regions, as they perceive clean-shaven women as more sexually attractive (Prokop, 2016). Men rate women who do not remove armpit- and leg hair as: “less attractive, less sociable, less intelligent, and less hygienic (Riddell, et al., 2010, p. 122).

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1 The photographs in question may be found in the annexes.
The expected preference of potential sexual partners comes into play as well (Herbenick, et al., 2013), they are the ones who women imagine coming into contact with their body hair or lack thereof most often (Terry, & Braun, 2013). “Women were far more likely to groom if their partner also groomed and if their partner preferred that they groom. This finding is important because it highlights the role of sexual relationships as being a strong predictor of grooming” (Rowen, Gaither, Awad, Osterberg, Shindel, & Breyer, 2016, p.1112).

These ideas that men harbor, or that women suspect them to harbor, have a profound effect on women. Females might even feel obliged to ask for their partner’s permission or approval before discontinuing hair removal practices. A study by Fahs uncovered that the men who influence this decision do not even need to be in a particularly close relationship to the female. They were affected by men with whom they shared a close relationship, like partners or close family, as well as male acquaintances, like workplace associates. It is clear that women fear men will view them as homosexual for not removing their body hair. This points to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity as well as heterosexism and its relation to body hair (Fahs, 2011).

3.3.5 FACTORS OF DIFFERENCE IN WOMEN

Not all women comply with the hairless body norm to the same degree. Several important factors on which females might differ, can therefore be distinguished: “younger age, self-reporting as white, and having a sexual partner(s) emerged as a significant predictors of total hair removal for both men and women” (Butler, et al., 2015, p. 57). Furthermore, the removal of body hair is also linked to women who have followed higher education and generally have higher incomes as well (Rowen, et al., 2016).

Sexual or romantic involvement, as mentioned before, appears to be an important factor of difference. Women who are sexually active tend to be more prone towards shaving their body hair than women who are not, even though most women report shaving practices regardless of having a partner or not (Bercaw-Pratt, et al., 2012). It does not matter in this regard whether the reported relationships are heterosexual or homosexual in nature, partnered women remove body hair more consistently than women who are not romantically or sexually involved (Fahs, 2011). Women who are not engaging in sexual relationships and are therefore single, divorced or otherwise not involved, report removal practices less often. This brings about a possible relation between the expectations of having sexual relations and the removal of body hair (Rowen, et al., 2016).

The second important factor that comes into play is the age of the female in question, as younger women report more frequent body hair removal than their older counterparts. It might be for their fluidity in sexual partners as well as the mediated pressures that they are under, that younger women are most likely to remove body hair (DeMaria, & Berenson, 2013). Age might therefore serve as an important predictor for the amount and regularity of body hair removal practices as middle-aged women are less likely to remove body hair (Toerien, et al., 2005).

The intersection between body hair and ethnic background is an important third factor, as it produces significant differences. Black, as well as white, women are more reared towards spending time and effort on their bodies than other ethnic minorities (Gillen, & Dunaev, 2017). They also start grooming their body hair from an earlier age on. Hispanic woman also tend to depilate their body rigorously (DeMaria, & Berenson, 2013). It is becoming clear that hair removal practices are more and more becoming adopted by women of all ethnic backgrounds, contrary to previous beliefs of it being a practice primarily executed by white women (DeMaria, Flores, Hirth, & Berenson, 2014). However, all of the aforementioned groups of women, which did not self-identify as being white, reported less hair removal practices than was the case for white women (Rowen, et al., 2016).
On the other end of the spectrum, it becomes possible to discern other factors of difference. Insights into why women are not complying - or not complying as often - with normative hair removal practices, are being investigated more often in recent years. This trend is discernable in research by Fahs as well as DeMaria et al., for example. One of these indications of "resistance" is in the act of claiming an explicit feminist identity. Hereby, refusing to comply with hair removal might be seen as an act of rebellion. An outspoken lesbian identity may also furthermore indicate decreased hair removal (Fahs, 2011). In addition it also becomes possible to account for hair removal by women who are of normal weight or underweight. These practices are, however, less frequent in the case of obesity (DeMaria, et al., 2014). These factors of difference play into the various degrees of depilation and the degree of compliance to the socially acceptable norm on body hair.

3.3.6 Feminism and Body Hair

Body hair, same as nearly every subject in life and feminism alike, is not cause for unity but for division and opposing perspectives. The stance of feminists on the issues therefore greatly varies. Because of these divides, only the most important perspectives are highlighted in the following part. The two largest opposing stances differ on agency and influence. One might approach the issue of body hair removal as being a site of agency and individual choice. Others believe that women are, when it comes to body hair and body management, are constantly influenced and monitored by society and others alike.

Radical feminists have long since criticized the notion of body management and the pervasive nature of these practices on women:

In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered, no feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement... from head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female role differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting, and deodorizing herself (Dworkin, 1974, p.:113-114).

Radical feminists promote the idea that there is a considerable need for the promotion of female bodies in their natural state. This in order to go against the current idea that the female body needs to be in a constant state of maintenance in order to be considered attractive.

Not removing body hair might nowadays be seen as a form of feminist resistance to the current beauty norms, as women with feminist attitudes are considered to be more likely to accept body hair. By partaking in hair removal practice, radical feminists state that the female body becomes: docile, a commodity, childlike. It also reproduces the idea that the female genitals in their natural – hairless – state are dirty (Labre, 2002). The female body has become a site of constant surveillance, as noted by Foucault, whether women are trying to resist the norm or not. The assumption prevails that the female body may, in turn, be transformed through rigorous grooming and discipline (Foucault, 2012). This while the time spent on ‘pleasing men’ and following the societal norm, by grooming body hair, might be spent otherwise:

Body hair removal is a significant component of the routines of beautification in which women engage to fulfill the traditional female role of attracting men. For women, the removal of body hair is a constant, repetitive, never ending practice demanding time, money, and energy that could be channeled into other pursuits, such as educational and career goals (Labre, 2002, p. 123).

One might wonder which effects the constant exposure to the hairless norm induces. It is for this reason that radical feminists state that the removal of body hair has been promoted by media outlets as being part of a regular beauty routine in which women need to partake. It is normalized as a natural
part of one’s routine, almost like the brushing of one’s teeth. The norm for women to be without body hair is extremely pervasive, as most women partake in hair removal practices and do so for multiple sites of their bodies. By doing so, women play into the idea of being sexually objectified. They also create similarities between the image of their hairless bodies and childlikeness (Labre, 2002).

The previous stance on body hair is not the only possible view on the matter, however. Another branch of feminism claims body hair as being a site of agency and individual choice. This, more neo-liberally oriented group, focuses on the perspective of women who claim to partake in hair removal practices solely for themselves (DeMaria, et al., 2016). Women who remove body hair often create narratives of choice and agency. By doing so, they claim to be the masters of their own bodies by owning their own, personal, unique form of hair removal (Li & Braun, 2017).

From a post-feminist perspective, compliance to hair removal norms may be seen as the execution of one’s own choice to do so. Women may, for example, deliberately choose to conform to beauty norms in order to be able to gain power by using their hair to do so. This power might originate on a professional or sexual level. Hair is furthermore used by woman to convey political messages or to assume specific identities, by sporting a specific hairdo for example (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). In this regard, hair removal as a practice is being reclaimed by these feminists. These endeavors are then seen as: “enjoyable, self-chosen and skilled feminine pursuits” (Lazar, 2011, p.37). From this postfeminist perspective prevails the idea that women should be able to do whatever they want with their body hair and that it is a matter of personal and agentic choice (Terry, Braun, Jayamaha, & Madden, 2017).

Previously mentioned perspective may be linked to cosmopolitanism and liberalism. Shows like Sex and the City and Girls promote the idea of women as being the agents of their own lives. Improvements in the form of plastic surgery, shopping and grooming practices are not necessarily seen as negative. They are the results of a female identity that is continuously evolving and is constructed by these women themselves (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014).

However, not all women agree with the idea of the free, self-made woman that is being portrayed by post-feminism. The study by McRobbie states, for example, that there is a societal ‘post-feminist masquerade’ (McRobbie, 2007) in which the free market has replaced patriarchal structures. Given the fact that women have become important consumers in a capitalistic society, this entails that a very narrow frame is emerging in which only a few women are able to fit (McRobbie, 2007).

As the previous paragraphs reveal: these perspectives might be located on opposing sides of the perspective-on-body-hair spectrum. It becomes clear that there is a middle ground as well, as many women are aware of possible influencing factors but ultimately state that body hair removal is their own choice (Terry, et al., 2017).

### 3.3.7 Research from Belgium or the Netherlands

In recent years, body hair has become the subject of many blogposts, opinion pieces and articles. Body hair has been labeled a fashion statement lately and an increasing amount of pictures of women sporting body hair are posted online, this in spaces such as social networking sites and advertisements. These trends are discernable in Belgium as well as the Netherlands. However, academic research in Dutch speaking countries is lacking in this regard and is often outdated where the topic of body hair is concerned.

In the academic world, female bodily practices, including body hair practices, have been the subject of many studies. With some of the earliest investigations dating back to 1979, the research by Verveen is one example of these early studies. In this research, body hair is not seen as unhygienic, the only instance that is considered ‘dirty’ in the study is periodically abstaining from washing the genital area.
The research only mentions that hairless skin has an odor that is different from ‘hairy’ skin. However, no judgement on the value of either option is made whatsoever (Verveen, 1979). Other Dutch studies, like the one by Ruberg, focus on the body hair of women. In this study, the way in which female body hair becomes problematized through hirsutism is at the center of the discussion (Ruberg, 2016).

Research in this regard often includes literature reviews. Smelik’s investigation from 2010, for example, focuses on the ideal of merging the female body and the cyborg. Here, a flawless – and hairless – ideal woman is brought forward as the norm as well. Research additionally postulates that body hair is becoming increasingly more of a taboo and that this sense of secrecy came to Europe from the United States. Smelik furthermore states that in the seventies, whether someone would shave or not would be based on their feminist beliefs. This has changed since, nowadays, body hair has become ‘a lost cause’ for feminists. The most prevalent conception being that it would be impossible to return to a societal state of a more natural female body (Smelik, 2010).

Even though the subject of body hair has been researched in Belgium and the Netherlands, this often happens in an informal – and mediatized – way. Where academic research is concerned, the need for further quantitative as well as qualitative research arises. Most of these studies are furthermore conducted from a medical or feminist frame of reference. The medical point of view focuses, for example, on the way in which one’s BMI influences the growth of their body hair (Crunelle, Neels, Maudens, De Doncker, Cappelle, Matthys, F., ... & Covaci, 2016) or how body hair might be restored (Rose, 2018). Based on the aforementioned it becomes clear that further investigation is required that focuses on body hair practices and perceptions of Belgian and Dutch women.
3.4 Method of research

This research is qualitative in nature and is carried out by manner of semi-structured interviews, conducted with 14 participants, all of whom are students. The interviews all approximately lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. All of the respondents identified themselves as being female and are studying at the University of Ghent², be it at different faculties.

The sample of participants was approached from a theoretical standpoint. In doing so, theoretical insight is generated. This way, it becomes possible to study a sample that will provide in-depth insight into the subject matter. The researcher collects data and analyses them by employing key concepts. By adopting a method of snowball sampling, it becomes possible to reach a more diverse sample population. By employing different, heterogenic, points of entry, the risk of reaching solely homogenous groups remained limited (Roose, & Meuleman, 2014). A message was broadcasted through social media and via a youth group for homosexual students. Another point of entry consisted of referrals through respondents who knew or knew of young women who were willing to share their perceptions on body hair.

The main theoretical themes of which the interview questions came about through the examination of scientific recourses. The relationship was mutual, however, as changes to the literature review were made after multiple respondents brought up themes such as seasonal depilation, which therefore needed to be theoretically researched. The coding process of the interviews was furthermore an important factor in the analyses. The manner in which this process was conducted was one of open coding. Hereby, interviews were recorded with the informed consent of interviewees and were later on transcribed by using an online tool. Using highlights, broad concepts and categories were distinguished. Aforementioned concepts formed the base upon which the rest of the analyses was built.

The interview questions were set but the interview itself could vary, making it semi-structured in nature. In order to make respondents feel as comfortable as possible, they were allowed to lead the conversation to a degree of their own choosing. In doing so, the structure of the interviews vary depending on the focus of the participant. However, all questions were posed to all participants but the level of comfort and willingness to talk about the subject varied. The participants were also in charge of deciding on the location. Some respondents preferred sitting down within the privacy of their home while others preferred a public location to talk about the subject.

Even though all participants self-identify as being female and having the Belgian nationality, they are greatly different in other aspects of life. The respondents vary in age between 20 and 25. Where the ethnic identification is concerned, a degree of variety is detectable as well. Ten participants identified themselves as being white, one responded saw herself as being an inhabitant of Ghent. The others identified themselves as: Flemish-Moroccan, Belgian-Zambian and Angolan-Congolese.

The interviewees also originate from different fields of study, all of which are taught at the University of Ghent. One History major, two students from the Multilingual Business Communication program, a bachelor of Laws student, one Conflict and Development major, one person who follows the Business Economics program, one student who is completing the master of Social Work, two Languages majors, someone who is studying to become a business engineer, two students who are following the linking program for the Gender and Diversity master and one Gender and Diversity major.

² Ghent is the capital of the Eastern region of Belgium and is known for being a college town. Many institutions for higher education are located there, among which the University of Ghent.
There is a great diversity within the group of research participants when it comes to relationship status, sexual preference and level of sexual/romantic experience. Two participants identify as bisexual, two as lesbian and ten as heterosexual. Six participants are single while seven are in a relationship. One respondent is not yet certain about the status of her relationship but is involved with someone. The level of sexual experience also varies from two students who are not yet sexually active to three of the respondents who are living together with their partners, one of whom is a mother of two.

Participants differed on sexual orientation, ethnicity and age. An intersectional approach to the matter at hand was accomplished as much as possible by trying to assemble a diverse group of respondents. However, the researcher is aware that all the women who participated in the investigation are middle class and on track of gaining master’s degrees. It is furthermore also important to note that all the women who were interviewed are able bodied. Other perspectives might be brought to light if there would have been more diversity within the group based on the demographics of able-bodiedness and class.

The quotes from the interviews that are used in the analysis were translated in English for the benefit of this research. These translations are not, however, literal, as this would bring about a loss of meaning. Where literal translations for certain Dutch words or proverbs were unobtainable, a footnote with a close translation was included. Respondents were asked to pick an alias in order to protect their identities and to make sure that their answers would remain completely anonymous.
3.5 Analyses

3.5.1 Perceptions on body hair

The first part of the analysis focuses on female perceptions on body hair and will therefore investigate whether or not body hair is a subject respondents feel comfortable discussing; how students feel about their own body hair as well as the body hair of others; if they ever feel insecure about their body hair; how their feelings on pubic hair vary from their feelings on other types of body hair and whether or not the participants think their feelings on body hair might change towards the future.

**Talking about the body and body hair**

Although not strictly related to body hair, it is interesting to note firstly that respondents often experienced difficulties in saying the word vagina and often gestured or employed other terms to refer to the vaginal area: “Yeah, it’s a taboo. You notice it, don’t you? We are in public so when we are talking about that [vaginas], we start to talk more quietly.” (Esmeralda) This can be linked to the fact that respondents were often even less willing to talk about pubic hair than other body hair: “It’s one of those areas we don’t talk about. Just because it’s kind of private. But, on the other hand, it just isn’t discussed a whole lot.” (Zoë)

The willingness to talk about a societal taboo like body hair often depended on how well the interviewees know the interlocutor in question: “In the beginning of a friendship or relationship not as much.” (Margo) and “It really depends on the person.” (Charlotte) Betty cited that people who do not have a distinct opinion on body hair, one way or the other, are also easier to talk to. However, some, like Jadis and Yasmina, stated that they felt comfortable discussing body hair with nearly anyone. Others, like Yoshi, had never explicitly discussed the subject with anyone else before. The surrounding circumstances also appeared to matter greatly: “I wouldn’t start discussing it when I’m at the pub, for example.” (Hanne).

Even though body hair is often constructed as a taboo subject, respondents indicated that the process of talking about it during the interview alone was enough for them to open up about the matter. Isolde, for example, felt that it would be easier for her to discuss body hair in the future after participating in the interview. Many also cited that it became easier with age:

“Now I feel comfortable, but I didn’t for a long time because I’ve had many negative experiences with it. […] I’ve had bad experiences with the hair on my head, with my eyebrows, with those three hairs I have above my lip, with my pubic hair – many bad experiences –, the hair on my legs, my armpit hair, always.” (Lilith)

Jadis states that she used to be more prudish about the subject but that coming of age helped her a lot in this regard. Yasmina and Esmeralda also cited something similar: “I used to be insecure as a teenager but I notice young girls in my surroundings are even more insecure.” (Yasmina), “Now I just think: just do whatever, but I used to be really startled when I was little.” (Esmeralda)

When a partner is concerned, many respondents stated that they felt it became easier to discuss the subject of body hair after being together for a certain period of time. Given the fact that many did not feel particularly comfortable discussing the subject with others, many respondents tended to conform to the hairless norm when they were not in a committed relationship, ‘just to be sure’. Body hair might, in this sense, be the cause for many insecurities in the beginning of a relationship. However, this tended to changed overtime, as it became easier to talk to a partner and gage their reactions in order to come to an agreement as to what was considered acceptable by both parties. Some interviewees: Zoë, Lily and Lilith, were asked explicitly to remove their body hair by sexual partners, which made them even more insecure. Especially in combination with the pressures already experienced from
society. These findings are consistent with findings from the research by Rowen (2016) that women are more likely to depilate if their partners prefer body hair to be groomed.

Many participants, on the one hand, never talked about body hair with primary caretakers, as it was not considered a discussable subject: “It’s a real taboo at home [...] I got a lot of advice and a lot of input, but never the advice: you have a choice” (Lilith). Zoë stated that her household was quite reserved when it came to the topic of body hair. Others, on the other hand, cited that the subject actually was quite discussable at home. Participants were often even less able to discuss pubic hair with their relatives, as this was considered a more private subject. Respondents therefore felt that pubic hair was less socially acceptable than other kinds of body hair: “If somebody is in a bikini, or if I’m in a bikini and your pubic hair is showing than that’s viewed as worse because it’s ‘unkempt’. (Betty)

This comes as no surprise, given the fact that pubic hair – and the removal thereof – are closely linked to being sexually active:

“I had shaven my pubic hair for the first time because I had become sexually active and I was in the bathroom and I remember thinking: Oh no, do they know that I’ve done something or that I’m about to do something? So, it’s different from shaving your legs.” (Charlotte)

This coincides with the research from DeMaria et al. (2016) which reports that women are likely to start depilating the vaginal area when they become or expect to become sexually active.

Feelings on body hair

Respondents generally did not feel differently about the body hair of others. Body hair on others did not conquer up negative feelings, some even saw it as a form of empowerment or comradery to notice other women with body hair: “I’d think to myself: Oh, wow. It’s cool that you dare to do that.” (Betty)

Respondents mostly had no opinion on the body hair of men. Some wanted it to be maintained, most did not even have a preference. This is at odds with the study of Terry and Braun (2013) in which participants found female body hair to be unacceptable and also with the study of Gillen and Dunaev (2017) which claims that women find hair on the back is unacceptable for men to have.

Even though almost every respondent cited being aware of the fact body hair is only a natural phenomenon: “It’s just natural” (Isabelle), many have a negative relationship with it: “I’m deadly afraid of it” (Lilith), “It feels like it shouldn’t be there” (Zoë), “it’s annoying” (Esmeralda), “It’s really uncomfortable” (Lily), “It’s really a burden to me” (Isolde). Even respondents like Isabelle, who said that body hair was a natural phenomenon, were still very focused on maintaining it a certain way. As long as body hair was not visible, however, respondents do not feel negatively towards it. They are not even contemplating to depilate locations such as the arms, since the body hair is not dark on such locations and are not considered visible. These sites are therefore not a cause for insecurities. This is corroborated by the aforementioned Terry and Braun study in which it is stated that there is more room for personal negotiation when it comes to bodily sites that usually remain hidden (Terry & Braun, 2013).

All participants have felt insecure about their body hair at some point in life. Betty, for example, was told in high school that she should remove the hair on her legs. This made her insecure to the point that she was only recently able to feel a small amount of liberation from these insecurities. Jadis stated that she is very aware of her body hair and Zoë felt that her body hair is something she ponders a lot. Lily stated the following:

“It’s a source of insecurity for me. I just think it’s a shame because I would want it not to be but I always see body hair on myself, it’s everywhere. I’ll see hair and think: that has to go. It’s better than it used to be, however. [...] But it limits me. It limits my freedom and I think that’s a shame.” (Lily)

This endorses the statements from Hamori (2014) that negative feelings on body hair gravely effects the emotional and sexual wellbeing of women.
Those who identified as having a neutral relationship with their body hair, might still be caught using phrases like: 'It’s there, there’s nothing to do about it.’ (Yoshi) Not having a negative relationship with body hair may be strongly related to the hair not being very visible, which is the case for Charlotte and Isolde. Because their hair is of a light color, body hair on visible sites does not tend to be black for these women. Others who claimed to have neutral feelings towards their body hair tended to be respondents who conformed rather strictly to the hairless norm and did not encounter many harms while doing so.

Days on which respondents performed hair removal practices were either considered not to be very different or created conflicting feelings. Herbenick et al. (2013) came to the conclusion that women felt better about themselves after removing body hair. In this research, respondent Lilith cited that she likes to see her vaginal area hairless but this also creates anger directed towards herself for once again conforming to the norm, as was the case for Jadis who indicated being upset at times for once again removing body hair while actually not wanting to do so at all. It came as no surprise that many would like to evolve towards a situation in which they feel more comfortable with their body hair and in which everyone would be able to do as they please: “If you remove your body hair, so be it. If you leave your body hair, so be it.” (Jadis)

Even though many respondents claimed to feel neutrally about body hair and to be the instigator of preferring a hairless body for themselves, the removal thereof was still considered to be time consuming and requiring a lot of effort. This may be linked to a discourse of: ‘we don’t have any choice’ and ‘better get it over with quickly’. Body hair furthermore remained a taboo subject that, for many, was still not discussable. To conclude, it is important to once more draw attention to the fact that body hair is often a source of insecurities and that it leads to respondents conforming to the hairless norm even if they are doubtful or afraid of the reactions of others, which once again highlights the pervasiveness of the normative hairless ideal.

3.5.2 Bodily sites and body hair

This section of the analysis will firstly focus on the question: should women have long hair in order to be considered feminine? Secondly, this part investigates if women keep body hair at all and whether or not there are sites of the body that remain untouched. After answering the aforementioned, the question rises if women would ever change the way in which they keep their body hair? Lastly, the research will zoom in on the relationship between the participants and their body hair.

Grooming and cutting of hair on the head

Respondents were asked about the perceived relationship between body hair and femininity, more specifically hair of the head. Although no participants thought that women should have long hair in order to be considered feminine, many stated that this was the societal notion related to the issue: “I think long hair is seen by society as a sign of femininity but I think that it should be a matter of personal choice. It’s a shame that those associations exist.” (Lily) Isabelle also felt societal pressures in this regard: “When I see others with short hair then I think that that’s really beautiful but I don’t like short hair on myself. […] It’s like I feel less feminine with short hair.” (Isabelle) Esmeralda additionally cited that she was very impressed by Jada Pinkett, the wife of Will Smith, because she reacted very positively when her daughter decided to shave her hair.

In regard to short hair, it is important to note the assumptions that are brought on. Jadis, for example, stated that short hair is often linked to manliness by others, especially in lesbian relationships:

“My girlfriend has short hair now but used to have long hair and people would come to us and say: ‘You must be the guy in the relationship. […] It gets associated with manliness instantaneously and that’s wrong and absurd.’” (Jadis)

Previous statement highlights the pervasiveness of homo-sexism that exists towards non-hetero relationships. These kind of exclamations are related to prejudices against homosexuality (Hansen,
1982). Based on stereotypes, society makes suppositions about an assumed link between having short hair and attributing male characteristics, in this case lesbians are especially being targeted.

**Extent and frequency of body hair removal**

The respondents with a light hair color, Isolde and Charlotte, cited that their body hair tended to be generally very light as well: “I’m lucky that I have blond hair so you can’t really see it on my legs. But if the sun is shining brightly, then it glimmers.” (Isolde) “Again, I think that because you can’t really notice it, since it isn’t black or anything, I’m not as bothered by it.” (Charlotte) It was for this reason that these women only removed body hair that is darker, such as armpit hair. The lightness of Charlotte’s hair was often seen as a trump card or at least a source of curiosity, as she is oftentimes asked by men if: “the carpet matches the drapes.” (Charlotte), which makes her feel quite uncomfortable.

Participants furthermore indicated several reasons for not removing their body hair methodically: laziness, the removal being too much of an effort, examination periods, wintertime, body hair not being very visible and their current mood were cited most often. There are also several sites on the body where interviewees did not remove body hair: most respondents did not remove the hair on their upper legs or only depilated them sporadically. Facial hair was mostly left alone, with the exception of the depilation of the eyebrows. Only three respondents periodically left their pubic hair be. All interviewees cited having natural body hair on their arms, only Zoë indicated having bleached these hairs in the past. Pubic hair did not get removed as often as other bodily sites as participants oftentimes indicated that it had a protective function and was there for a reason: “It all has a function so I’m a bit hesitant to remove it all, from a medical point of view. Because I contemplate the use and the impact of hair removal.” (Esmeralda) These results refute findings by Bercaw-Pratt et al. (2012) that stated the upper lip, genitalia and stomach as the sites of the most rigorous hair removal.

Even though body hair was often constructed as being only natural, all respondents participated in hair removal practices in some shape or form. Respondents who tended to conform to the norm appeared to be generally more content with their body and body hair alike. Participants who felt insecurities or who encountered complications while removing body hair did not feel as positively (Jadis, Lily & Lilith). However, many respondents, like Isolde and Esmeralda for example, felt that body hair is an annoying occurrence of which they would rather be rid. It also became clear that respondents systematically assumed that their body hair would be more visible than it actually was and were very aware of their body hair, even though passersby might not even be able to see it: “I have two little hairs in my neck that always return [...] I don’t think people notice it as often as you might think. I don’t think anyone has ever said: there is something in your neck, while I look in the mirror in the mornings and think: it’s back.” (Zoë). This may be linked to the discourse of women who removing body hair because they are influenced by others and do not want to expose people to their ‘hairy’ bodies (Fahs, 2011).

Furthermore, participants noticed a societal shift as well as a personal one when it came to the extent and frequency of body hair removal practices. Hanne noticed, for example, that she became more comfortable with her body hair by discussing it more often. Respondents also noticed that they that they felt less anxious about body hair than when they were young. Still, many hoped that they would become more comfortable with their body hair in the future: “It’s been a process of becoming aware that I’m trying to go through, in hopes of not to caring as much about it in the future.” (Lily) Betty also noted that she is becoming stronger when it comes to what others have to say about her body hair, a sentiment that was repeated by many other participants as well: “If someone were to impose something on me then that would be the type of person that I wouldn’t want in my life anyway.” (Betty)

The women also did not expect others to be perfectly free of hair at all times. There was a discourse of maintenance that seemed to be more prevalent than one of hairlessness: “It depends, as long as they are not able to braid it ... But girls have armpit hair and leg hair so it’s not that when I see it I’m going to think like: hm, you should shave.” (Charlotte) Even if others did not tend to notice body hair,
most participants still depilated most common areas like eyebrows, legs and the vaginal area. Interviewees furthermore notice that people from their social circle, who are part of previous generations, tend to be more lenient towards their body hair and are also less likely to remove their body hair. All of the above makes body hair removal practices more prevalent in younger generations.

Participants cited a notable difference for women in other parts of the world, however. Isabelle indicated that nobody participated in hair removal practices in Congo and that it was interpreted as beautiful to have body hair. In Somalia, Esmeralda cited, body hair is also seen as beautiful as well, which is why her Somalian husband prefers her with natural body hair. Yasmina said the following: “My parents are originally from Morocco and they didn’t care about these beauty ideals. Women were just allowed to have hair.” (Yasmina) When on holiday in India, lastly, Betty noticed that all women had natural body hair growth and that nobody minded. It is important to note, however, that the statement of Yasmina might be indicative of a generational difference instead of a regional one and that Betty’s account concerned fleeting impressions gained from a touristic experience.

It becomes clear that the hairless norm is mostly prevalent in the West, even if practices are spreading and are becoming adopted by more countries over time, as was confirmed by Braun Tricklebank & Clarke (2013). Aforementioned norm is, however, only applicable to sites of the body where the hair is visible and darker than body hair on the arms, for example. It is interesting to note that even though participants claim to remove body hair for their own benefit and because they themselves feel more comfortable when it is removed, they only do so when they know that their body hair will be visible. At one point in the interviews, every respondent also indicated feeling negatively, or at least ambivalent, towards body hair removal practices.

### 3.5.3 Hair Removal Trends and Practices

How do participants remove their body hair? At what age did they start these practices and how did they come to know about them? Further on, the investigation also focuses on the perspective for hair removal in the future, how participants felt on days on which they have partaken in hair removal practices and how they learned about hair removal.

The sites on which body hair was most often removed were legs, vaginal area, eyebrows and armpit region. Few respondents removed body hair of the facial area and the upper legs were also seldom subjected to body hair removal practices. Some, like Lily and Lilith, removed every hair on their body that was black: “my eyebrows, my lip, my chin, and my nipples, anything that is black.” (Lilith) The vaginal area was the only site that was sometimes trimmed or not completely depilated. These findings are corroborated by research of Terry and Braun (2013), where the depilation of non-visible areas of the body is more negotiable than visible sites.

**Method of hair removal**

Respondents indicated that during their lifetime they already experimented with several hair removal methods, waxing (Hanne, Lisa, Esmeralda, Zoë, Jadis, Lilith), hair removal creams (Hanne, Isabelle, Yoshi, Zoë, Lilith), hair removal products advertised on television (Lisa), epilating machines (Lisa, Esmeralda, Zoë), shredding3 (Zoë), everyone shaved at one point in time and Yasmina was the only one to have permanently lasered certain areas of her body.

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3 “Threading involves the use of a fine cotton thread and great skill by the practitioner. The thread (50–70 cm long) is held between the teeth and the non-dominant hand, with the index and third fingers of the dominant hand placed inside the loop. The size of the loop can then quickly be modified by changing the distance between the index and the middle finger and as such placed around a single or several hair shafts, which are subsequently pulled out with brisk, deft movements in rapid succession” (Litak, Krunic, Antonijevic, Pouryazdanparast, & Gerami, 2011, p. 1052).
Most respondents indicated shaving to be their primary method of hair removal. Lisa waxed in the summertime because this caused body hair not to return as quickly, Lilith reported waxing to be the main practice of hair removal she employed and Betty epilated her body hair. Yasmina was the only respondent who went to the beauty parlor to permanently laser her body hair. The only sites she did not laser were her legs and armpits, these sites were shaven.

There were several reasons that were reported by participants for using their preferred method. Most of them were linked to shaving being inexpensive, easy and it oftentimes became an automatism. Shaving had also become a routine practice for many and was preferred because by employing one method, respondents were capable of removing all body hair. It being painless was also brought up as an important motivator. However, many complained about shaving as a method of depilation as it often lead to body hair returning rather quickly (Margo), it ruining the health of their body hair (Lilith), disposable razors being bad for the environment (Isolde) as well as shaving cream being very environmentally damaging (Lily), and shaving making it [the skin] worse than it was before (Jadis). Research by Swain (2016) also indicated that many women employ several hair removal techniques before settling for shaving. Bercaw-Pratt et al. (2012) researched the popularity of hair removal and found that the temporary character and easy access are seen as two important motivators.

Waxing, in contrast, was often deemed too expensive, as it required respondents to pay up to 50 euros on a monthly basis. Interviewees were also hesitant towards this technique as it was believed to be painful: “I’m afraid of waxing, because it hurts so much” (Isolde), “I tried waxing but it really, really hurt so I stopped” (Yoshi), “You need to leave the house to remove your body hair. And then you lay there for an hour and a half, in pain.” (Jadis) It was also considered to be an annoyance because, according to Hanne, it was not as easy as shaving. Some were, however, hesitant towards permanent depilation: “It’s sketchy. Because I’m like, it’s natural so if it’s gone? Your body is so used to producing it, so what happens when it’s gone?” (Isabelle), “I know people who’ve done it and body hair keeps coming.” (Lisa) And depilating machines were, furthermore, also regularly deemed painful and time consuming.

However, many instances of dissatisfaction with body hair removal practices were recorded throughout the interviews: “it takes a lot of time” (Isabelle), “I prefer short term pain then” (Lisa), “It’s annoying when it’s coming back” (Esmeralda) “It’s not like I get really excited, because I had to put in a lot of time after all” (Zoë). Yasmina, in turn, described the pain of permanently removing her body hair by laser:

“Yeah, it’s really painful. It’s done with a machine, so I removed my entire bikini area and it really burns. It happens really quickly but it’s a burning sensation... I had to scream because it hurt so bad... But afterwards, the results are there and that gave me the courage to return.” (Yasmina)

Habits of body hair removal
When it came to the frequency of body hair removal, it turned out that there was a great degree of variation: Hanne indicated shaving at least once a week as it has been this way for her since high school; Isolde, Charlotte & Esmeralda reported no specific regularity, most likely dependent upon chance. Most likely when they “felt like it” (Esmeralda) or “when it’s time” (Charlotte); Margo, Jadis & Yoshi cited shaving in the shower; Lisa mentioned shaving regularly and consequently, except in wintertime; Isabelle said that she shaves when she feels her body hair is “becoming too long” (Isabelle); Betty regularly removed her body hair in the summertime and half as often in the wintertime, during which it might have taken up to 6 weeks for her to once again remove her body hair; Zoë, to conclude, reported removing body hair every two weeks or so, even though it used to be more frequently when she was younger. It furthermore depended on which occasions presented themselves that particular
week. The study by Butler et al. (2013) also stated that all participants in the study had removed their body hair in the past month.

The age at which respondents started to deploy body hair removal practices varied between 9 years old (Lilith) and once they started attending university (Charlotte). Most were aged between 12 and 15 when they first started engaging in depilation methods. Many, although not all, started depilating their legs and armpits earlier than their vaginal area. Some respondents, furthermore, indicated that they started engaging in hair removal practices without knowing how to properly partake in them, leading to many instances of harm. However, others like Isolde and Margo indicated that they were taught the proper way by primary caretakers: “Mom explained what I had to do. She explained how I had to shave my armpits.” (Isolde) These results indicate that depilation practices are usually taken up when women are young teenagers (Fahs, 2017) and that they are even more prevalent than indicated by studies like the one by Riddell et al. which indicated that 75% of respondents had partaken in hair removal practices by the time that they turned 20.

When asked about the reasoning behind their first engagements in hair removal practices, the primary arguments were the experienced pressure from peers and physical education lessons in school which resulted in having to strip in front of peers. Interviewees, like Margo, indicated that they only started removing their pubic hair when they became sexually active: “I only started doing that from the moment I started having sex.” (Margo) Esmeralda also started depilating as soon as she had a romantic interest. Hanne, additionally states that she started pubic hair removal because of swimming lessons at school. Isolde, in turn, indicated that going on her senior trip was the most important reason for her to start removing her pubic hair.

In regard to the future, respondents indicated that they planned on attaining a more extensive routine of hair removal. Isolde indicated that she was planning on visiting a beauty salon in order to get her eyebrows into a certain shape and also cited the following: “I think I’d be more methodical. I notice this already by getting older.” (Isolde) Charlotte shares this train of thought:

“If you go to work and you need to look good every day, then I’ll put on make-up more often. Now I don’t care when I’m going to class. If I’d go to work I would do that, for example, and I think it would be the same thing for my legs.” (Charlotte)

Many, like Hanne and Lilly, also mentioned that they would seriously consider permanently removing body hair by laser. Often the motive of money was what stopped them from attaining a permanent depilation. In contrast, respondents like Margo stated that they would probably shave less regularly in the future.

Participating in hair removal practices, generally, did not make respondents feel special: “It feels differently when you crawl into bed […] it’s just a normal day.” (Lisa) However, some indicated feeling better on days on which they engaged in hair removal practices. Hanne, for example, stated that she felt a degree of satisfaction. This because shaving was linked to maintenance practices in her train of thought. Isabelle and Yoshi reported liking the feeling of their legs being soft but not feeling particularly different when other parts their bodies were depilated. Charlotte felt more comfortable on days on which she shaved because: “you know that if something [sex] were to happen, you’ be on point.” (Charlotte) Others, like Lily and Esmeralda, report feeling explicitly better on ‘depilation days’:

“I love it […] I’m a mom. Sometimes I don’t even have time to take a shower because I’m so busy and tired. For me it’s just: I’ve got time to shower. If my husband is there then it’s time to shower and for him to take the kids and for me to shower. For me, it’s just a ritual that is linked to showering.” (Esmeralda)

These findings are corroborated by the study of Herbenick et al. (2013) which indicated that respondents tended to feel better about themselves on days on which they had partaken in hair removal practices.
Learning about hair removal

Respondents were able to pinpoint several entities that were responsible for them learning about body hair and body hair removal practices. A multitude of these factors were overlapping in the stories told by respondents. Out of the fourteen participants ten cited that they learned about body hair from their closest friends; eight pointed to their mother; five indicated advertisements on television as their main source of information; four students learned about body hair through media; three indicated the internet to be a teacher on body hair; two indicated close family as well as teenage magazines such as Joepie⁴, and finally, one single person indicated the aisle in the supermarket where body hair removal appliances are displayed was indicated by a single person as an educational source. However, four respondents indicated that the subject of body hair or the removal thereof was never talked about in their home environment, which led to them not being taught or informed by their primary caretakers on the subject of body hair. One respondent vaguely remembered the subject of body hair being touched upon in school.

The manner in which women learn of body hair and/or the removal thereof was very important for respondents, as they deemed it important to broadcast the right message. They indicated that it would be important to show girls the possibilities of body hair removal as well as natural body hair and that it would be important to integrate the matter of choice. It would also be important to do so in a non-stereotypical way to make sure that the normative idea of body hair removal would not become embedded even further. Talking about body hair as a natural occurrence could make young girls feel more confident and could reduce the threshold of bringing up the subject afterwards. “Girls should be made aware of the fact that it doesn’t matter whether you have hair or not. It’s just a beauty ideal that has become the norm and that’s just total bullshit.” (Yasmina) Participants also felt that it was a shame that not everyone was able to ask their primary caretakers any questions on the matter: “At my home it was something to talk about openly but I can imagine that that’s not the case for many people. [...] I think it’s an important part of your body and learning to deal with your body.” (Yoshi)

Lily stated that she thought it very important to employ the right strategy of bringing up the issue of body hair to young girls and doing so by broadcasting body hair as being something children should not have to worry about.

“It doesn’t get talked about enough at home and you read about it on the internet or magazines or hear about it through friends. Those aren’t the most reliable sources and distort your image. And during high school it’s something you are constantly aware of and only when you arrive at the university you’ll start to think: that wasn’t necessary at all, to be bothered by it so much.” (Lily)

It becomes clear that all respondents participate in hair removal practices in some shape or form. Although the frequency and sites that are under governance greatly vary, it is possible to distinguish certain similarities. Most participants felt pressured by others to start removing their body hair. The fact that many, furthermore, only started depilation of the pubic area when they became sexually active indicates that body hair only becomes problematized when others become ‘exposed’ to these hairs. Even though interviewees often created a narrative of being in control and being willing to remove their body hair ‘for themselves’, it is clear that they all experienced an amount of discomfort and harm in employing removal practices that cannot be ignored. Lastly, it should be noted that participants did not feel the need to remove hair during the wintertime or during examination periods. This once again relates to body hair only being a problem when it is visible to others and indicates that the aforementioned hygiene-argument is not the primary reason for removal, as participants would otherwise continue depilation during examination periods.

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⁴ Joepie is a magazine for youths that primarily focused on segments about showbiz, health and lifestyle.
3.5.4 Reasons for employing hair removal practices on sites of the body

In this part of the research, further investigation leads to the uncovering of several reasons for the removal of body hair, cited by the respondents themselves. It is hereby important to keep in mind that many respondents originally started maintaining or removing their body hair because of Physical Education, swimming lessons at school or when they noticed that peers had started to do it and felt pressured to participate in removal practices as a result: “Not that people said anything about it. But you still had this feeling: Yes, I need to do this.” (Hanne)

Special occasions like family gatherings, New Year’s eve, a night out, made for body hair removal instances and were all cited by respondents: Just because you feel like: “I’m all good to go out.” (Lily) Notably, participants like Isolde stated that they sometimes felt insecure about their body hair but also mentioned that they removed body hair for special occasions and that they felt better on such days. Participants even tended to participate in more extensive body hair removal practices than was the case on ‘regular’ days. Their train of thought here was that they felt good because of the occasion they were about to go to, and not because they removed their body hair. Others indicated personal comfort in this regard as a reason for the removal as many respondents felt insecure when they have not removed their body hair: “Also, as I said before, I do it before going to a party because I know I’ll feel better then. Or at least won’t worry about whether you can see my leg hair, armpit hair or not, and feel more comfortable.” (Lily)

This is in correspondence with the aforementioned Herbenick et al. (2013) research that indicated respondents feeling better about themselves after engaging in depilation practices.

Sexual encounters or dating opportunities were also considered important factors in hair removal. Respondents indicated that they removed body hair if they were expected to go on a date (Isolde), were predicting to engage in sexual encounters that evening (Hanne & Charlotte) or when they were in a relationship (Lily & Zoë). Hair was also removed more frequently when participants were single: “Just to be safe, if I were single, I think everything would be hairless.” (Esmeralda) They also indicated that the preference of their potential partner might potentially change the way they maintain their body hair: “I think that I would personally be more like, if this partner says: I really prefer it this way, then I could conform once in a while as long as I feel comfortable.” (Hanne) Similar results were generated in the study by Fahs (2011) where respondents were more likely to report grooming practices if this was what their partners preferred.

The removal of pubic hair was also closely linked to sexual activity. It often happened that respondents started shaving their legs earlier than starting to employ hair removal practices in the vaginal area. Charlotte, for example, only started removing pubic hair when she became sexually active and reports: “For potential sexual encounters I feel better. I think you always feel better if you’ve put in an effort. A bit more comfortable.” (Charlotte) Research by DeMaria et al. (2016) also indicated that the age on which respondents start engaging in depilation practices might vary among different sites of the body and that respondents more often reported having pubic hair before engaging in sexual activities. Even though, respondents reported deplating the vaginal area, even if they were not expecting to engage in sexual relations (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2012) it was considered more likely for vaginal depilation to take place when there was a sexual partner (Butler et al., 2015).

If respondents were expected to go swimming, to go to the beach or to walk around in a bikini for a certain amount of time, they would often make sure that all body hair was removed and would pay extra attention to the removal of pubic hair, as respondents seemed anxious that their pubic hair would be visible for bystanders. Engaging in other sports where body hair could be visible was also cause for hair removal: “Part of my knees because I know that will be visible during football.” (Lisa)
Body hair removal was also very much a seasonal occurrence. Participants engaged in hair removal practices more often and more consistently in the summertime as they were expecting to go outside with bare legs. If they decided to wear a dress, they would remove their body hair: “If I don’t feel like shaving my legs in the wintertime, I won’t do it and I’m not worrying about it either. But I wouldn’t go out like that, for example.” (Hanne) Wearing tops with spaghetti straps, which would most likely expose the armpits, was also a reason for hair removal: “If I were to wear a dress or walk around in a top I would really make sure that my armpits and legs are shaven.” (Isabelle)

Hygienic reasons were often brought on as a reason for shaving. The combination of sweat and body hair made for an uncomfortable feeling for Isolde. Heat was for many a reason for removal as it felt cleaner to be shaven. This discourse of hygienic body hair removal was especially prevalent for armpit hair and pubic hair: “It feels cleaner, if that doesn’t sound weird, yeah more hygienic I think.” (Yoshi) Margo, among others, furthermore indicated that feeling more ‘fresh’ when she had removed her body hair “I can really enjoy it because it feels like total self-care”. (Hanne) There was a discourse of self-care\(^6\) that was closely related to the hygiene argument and was very prevalent among respondents. Respondents indicated that they did not engage in hair removal practices for the sake of others but just for themselves because they found it important to present a maintained appearance, which included being hair-free or at least having trimmed body hair: “Nowadays I remove it when it is becoming too long, not for someone else but for myself. [...] I find that it comes across as more maintained [verzorgd].” (Margo) Throughout the interviews it became clear, in this regard, that women were more likely to maintain their pubic- and armpit hair very frequently, as these were the sites most often considered to be unhygienic if not maintained. DeMaria et al.’s (2016) research generated similar results: women with body hair were not considered attractive or clean, while women who depilated their body hair were and Fahs (2011) found that women who had not shaven felt dirty.

Shaving on regular days was also often a matter of opportunity. Isolde shaved when she realized that it had been a while; Esmeralda removed body hair when she was able to take a moment for herself without her children; Zoë indicated that she is not always methodical and that the amount of depilation is dependent on her mood at the time; and Betty engaged in hair removal when she was able to take a moment for herself. This was also the reason Yasmina engaged in permanent hair removal as she did not want to spend a considerable amount of time in the bathroom anymore and wanted to avoid negative reactions of others. These reactions of others were also an important motivator for Jadis:

“This week the weather turned good all of a sudden. So I had to remove my hair. And then you start to think about it. I really thought about it: why do I actually have to do this because I’m so sick of it and it is so time consuming.” (Jadis)

Lilith also cited the reactions of others as her initial reason to start removing body hair: “I was nine when I first started shaving my armpits because we were on holiday and my brother made fun of me.” (Lilith)

The visibility of body hair was an important factor in the removal thereof. Isolde and Charlotte started removing the hair on their legs as it would glimmer when brought into contact with direct sunlight. Additionally, Margo noted the following: “During the exam period when I’m just by myself I won’t just start shaving or something.” (Margo) It is important to note that in these – previously indicated – cases, body hair only became problematic for respondents when it was visible for others: “If I know that I’m not going to be dating anyone or if I’m not going for a swim, I don’t bother.” (Isolde) Another important thing to note here is that they did not seem to mind having body hair, as long as it was not visible.

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\(^5\) Frisser
\(^6\) Verzorging
3.5.5 BODY HAIR REMOVAL AND EXPERIENCES OF HARM AND INJURY

The concept of harm is further investigated in this part of the research. Did respondents ever experience discomfort? Did participants ever attract accidents while removing body hair? And finally, when was a practice considered to be harmful or an even as an accident?

All respondents had at some point in time encountered lacerations brought on by shaving. Some stated that these accidents were mostly happening at the beginning of their hair removal practices but some cited that wounds were still fairly common. It should also be brought to attention that the first instances of harm were often brought about by a lack of education on how to properly use hair removal appliances and were most common with shaving practices:

“There was hair stuck in the razor and I wanted to remove them so I went along the blades with my finger. My entire finger was bleeding profusely and it hurt like hell. But, I was never taught how to properly do so.” (Isolde)

Swain (2016) indicated that most instances of harm were on the legs and vaginal area and that they were most likely to be brought on by shaving.

Many, eight to be precise, acknowledged discomfort after removing body hair. This generally in the form of itchiness or the stubbles that would prick and sting when the body hair was growing back. More than half of the participants stated that they regularly faced these issues. It was, furthermore, also cited by half that they experienced unpleasantness when removing body hair and applying deodorant afterwards.

Razor burns were also very prevalent among respondents, as half of the respondents cited this form of discomfort. This soreness was often treated by applying some type of cream or talcum powder to sensitive areas. It also appeared to be lessened by using shaving cream. However, for some participants, this was not possible: “If I shave with something like shaving cream my vaginal balance is totally askew and this can bring about dryness or itchiness.” (Esmeralda) Zoë applied another method to relieve discomfort:

“I try to scrub, softly. With a soft toothbrush, that helps. Or so I’ve heard. I had heard it on Youtube. Apply oil or something to relieve the skin. But it doesn’t always help because the amount of time in between shavings is not enough to relieve the sensitivity.” (Zoë)

Ingrown hairs were also a common annoyance many participants had to face. These hairs also often led to infections. In order to prevent or solve this problem, respondents used tweezers to remove these hairs. Jadis uses a special roller the beauty technician gave her, which made the skin peel off so the ingrown hairs were able to reach the surface of her skin, as she was confronted with ingrown hairs very often: “Yeah, it’s really annoying because it is really very sensitive. Just big red dots and ingrown hairs. [...] But, yeah, sensitivity and ingrown hairs. Constantly. Always. Every time.” (Jadis)

Respondents often chose to shave because they were afraid of the pain that practices like waxing would bring: “If you wax, there is inevitably more irritation.” (Hanne) And remarkably, participants who did not experience razor burns never experienced sensitivity towards deodorant after shaving or ingrown hairs either. It seemed that these discomforts would either come as a package, or would not be prevalent at all.

That removing body hair is not without risk became clear by the fact that all respondent had, at some point, encountered harm because of hair removal practices. The following quote by Lilith summed it up perfectly:

“Everything you can think of. I’ve encountered it. I’ve burnt myself on the chemical stuff. Shaving cream has a PH value that ruined my vagina so I contracted a giant yeast infection, waxing in my hometown was getting burnt while the beauty technician was making a phone call.”
call during the wax. Cutting my pubic hair and accidentally cutting away a giant piece of my pubic area. Many burns while waxing, waxing until I bled. Ingrown hairs that hurt soooo much, gigantic boils…” (Lilith)

Apart from the horrific stories about harm caused by body hair removal, it was also stated by Jadis that she should better just leave the hair because she felt that she was damaging the skin by removing it, by Zoë that her skin looked injured in sensitive areas because of the frequent hair removal and Lilith stated that she would not be able to leave her body hair to grow naturally anymore as it had become permanently damaged by repeated hair removal.

Notably, the participants often only acknowledged lacerations to be harmful and only recognized other forms of harm after being explicitly asked about them. Furthermore, it became obvious that cuts were often seen as something that was an inevitable part of body hair instead of a damaging side effect of body hair removal practices. Harm was therefore systematically underestimated by these young women: “I have a cut once in a while. But really major accidents? Those are all small things that heal quickly.” (Hanne)

3.5.6 Factors that influence women to refrain from or participate in depilation practices

This part of the analysis focuses on the factors that may or may not influence decisions and perceptions concerning body hair. It is also brought into question who influences certain decisions the most and to what degree factors influence said decisions. However, it is important to understand certain developments within a specific timeframe and that the perspective that is linked to this is subject to change, as was cited by Esmeralda: “Right now it’s considered hip not to shave your pubic hair, but that’s a fad.” (Esmeralda) It should furthermore also be noted that not all participants were influenced by the same factors or to the same degree and that this segment is therefore highly subjective and interpersonal.

Social media

Firstly, there was the influence of social media. As true children of their generation, social media highly influenced participants. Accounts of body hair and the way people reacted to it were often an important part of their discourse:

“It was a clip of a girl who was dancing and she had armpit hair and the caption read: tag someone who dances like this. So fundamentally, the clip wasn’t even about armpit hair but still people reply thing like: haha, nice armpit hair. That makes you stop and think: maybe it’s not ok to have it, on a societal level, after all.” (Lily)

They noticed that the reactions to articles that attempt to normalize body hair are mainly negative. Isolde furthermore stated that she was surprised to see that a great amount of these reactions were posted by women and that these reactions greatly influenced her since she only removed body hair when she was aware that others might see it. These statements coincide with the Ramsey et al. (2009) study which indicated that many women are influenced to partake in depilation practices because media outlets do not show women with natural body hair anymore and the study of Toerien and Wilkinson (2013) which cited negative reactions to natural body hair on media platforms.

Influencers like celebrities were important in this regard as they have become more ‘accessible’ through social media, but then again, so do reactions to campaigns like, for example, the one where Gigi Hadid was depicted with armpit hair. The reactions to these campaigns were mainly negative, as stated by Isabelle. Charlotte cited a similar thing about the relation between fame and society’s influence: “If you see stars who are completely hair-free, you are influenced. But that’s the case with everything, these people show how it is done.” (Charlotte) However, actions that are being undertaken by celebrities and influencers to promote natural body hair did not go unnoticed by the participants.
and were a source of positive influence for Jadis and Lilith, among others, who stated that they liked to see these changes and that it made them feel more at ease. Jadis explained that she would like to have a similar influence but that the reach celebrities have is more extensive and that they are not as often criticized for not conforming to the norm as the everyday woman. Trekels and Eggermont (2017) found in their study that the exposure of young girls to flawless – and hairless – celebrity bodies has a profound effect on their wellbeing.

Media outlets
Other types of media, secondly, were also cited as influencing factors. Isolde stated that people’s view is distorted by the fact that women in magazines, in films, on television are always portrayed hairless. Charlotte mentioned Sex and the City in regard to these aforementioned movies. She noted that the infamous scene in which Miranda is shamed for having pubic hair is a representation of what was considered to be normative by society. The prevalence of advertisements of firms like Gillette also endorses this ideal. Teenage magazines were furthermore cited to regularly address the subject of body hair:

“The questions were: what do boys like or what should I do, that type of stuff. The answers were more like: keep it clean. That you should properly maintain it but that you should mainly do what you wanted to do.” (Yoshi)

Another way in which women were influenced nowadays was through Photoshop. Yasmina noted that the pressure to conform to these unobtainable bodies was even greater for the next generation – who are no longer considered millennials –, such as her niece.

Society
The third factor was the pressure imposed by society that was felt by all respondents or: “What people think is normative.” (Hanne) It was also the main reason why most of them did not leave the house without shaving their legs and armpits. All respondents were aware, however, that these developments had only become normative in recent years: “It’s weird that people have such a negative image since this wasn’t the case in history. It just became imposed by the beauty ideals of the fifties.” (Isolde) Each and every one of the respondents had, at one point in time, felt the social pressures that are linked to body hair:

“I don’t mind conforming to the norm. But if the norm would all of a sudden completely change, in ten years or so for example, then I think that the tendency to conform to this new norm would be very high.” (Hanne)

This pressure is so prevalent that it often became internalized, as was mentioned by Zoë and research by Fahs (2014) alike.

The way society and others tend to react to body hair made it a taboo subject that was seldom discussed. Margo, for example, was convinced that bystanders would still eye women who did not conform to the hairless norm. Or that there was a lot of gossip behind women’s backs about their body hair. However, a societal change was felt by many: “I think it could become a possibility but I don’t feel like it is possible just yet. [...] But there is already more of a change than there was during other periods in time.” (Margo) Lisa also stated, for example, that the taboo surrounding body hair had become less pervasive in recent years. It is also becoming more acceptable to show the bodies of regular women:

“Not everyone is super smooth, you get what I mean? Same thing with stretchmarks, if I see something like that on tv then I’m not like: eew. Because it has always been the ideal portrayal, and that is finally being challenged.” (Isabelle)

Social network
One’s social network, fourthly, was also made up of vital influencers. This in the form of close relatives on the one hand and friends as well as lovers on the other. Primary caretakers influenced these young women in vastly different ways. It became clear that many parents did not understand why they felt the need to engage in hair removal practices and often attempted to delay them undertaking such
practices: “Mom did not allow me to shave my legs.” (Isolde) Which made it clear that there are vast generational differences when it comes to engaging in body hair removal practices: “You know that your grandma didn’t use to shave back in the day. But things have changed.” (Margo) Yasmina cited something to the same effect: “If I look at my family: my parents, my aunt ... they don’t care as much.” (Yasmina)

However, body hair removal practices were to some degree learned behaviors and it was in this regard remarkable that respondents whose parents would partake in hair removal practices were likely to use the same methods, as it often became a – learned – habit. Caretakers sometimes imposed body hair removal practices on their daughters. Isabelle’s mom, for example, told her that she needed to maintain her pubic hair so it would not become a “wild bush”. (Isabelle) Lilith was given a razor by her mother after her brother had made fun of her body hair and Yasmina was also ridiculed by her nephew because of her body hair and even compared to a gorilla.

Friends also influence respondents a great deal. They were able to influence them in a positive way:

“If I would want to let my body hair grow naturally and I had a friend who did the same and I know about that or I see it, I would be positively influenced. Like: she does it, why not me?” (Margo).

Hanne furthermore thinks that by talking to a supportive network of friends, one might be affected less by the hairless norm. However, it was also possible for friends to influence participants in a negative way: “If you have a group of friends who always talk bad about each other than you might be influenced by that.” (Lisa) Yasmina was also influenced by her friends who told her that she should just go to the beauty parlor already, to remove her body hair.

A partner, as mentioned before, is able to influence a participant’s take on body hair. They did, however, cite the importance of their own choice. They were willing to conform to their partners wishes only if they felt good about them too. They noticed that this choice was not available for all women, however: Zoë, Lily and Lilith all stated that they were asked explicitly by sexual partners to remove pubic hair and that these partners even refused to perform sexual activities while the pubic hair was not removed. This influence did not always entail hairlessness however. Esmeralda’s husband would rather see her more often with pubic hair. But as she did not feel comfortable with pubic hair, this seldom happened. That not all men prefer hairlessness was also cited by Charlotte: “I think hairlessness is the societal standard but if push comes to shove, guys won’t stop [having sex] because they don’t care that much.” (Charlotte) The idea is corroborated by Butler et al.’s (2015) study in which only half of the male respondents preferred women to be hairless. However, women in this research and the one by Fahs (2011) alike still often felt the need to ask their partner for permission before changing depilation behaviors.

**Surroundings**

Seeing others with body hair was oftentimes initially a source of anxiety and disgust. But over time, many noticed a change in their own stance on body hair, like Charlotte. It was mentioned by multiple respondents that it was sometimes even regarded as empowering to see someone with body hair: “I think it’s rather brave, even though it’s ‘only’ something natural, but still. It takes courage to be able to do that, I think.” (Zoë)

The place of residence also appeared to be an important influencing factor, as many respondents cited becoming less anxious about their body hair and less methodical in removing body hair since they had moved to Ghent: “I frequented different surroundings, Ghent is a city with an open character. It’s not like I’m going to a small village where the norms are still very stereotypical.” (Betty) Going to university also brought on changes, this was the case for Jadis:
“By going to university, by being able to be myself, I started to feel like people did not comment on it as often [...] and that I could be more like myself and could start to think: I could leave my hair be once in a while.” (Jadis)

Another factor was the influence of religion. Yasmina noted that she was not allowed, as a Muslim, to depilate or shape her eyebrows and Esmeralda, a Muslim woman mentioned being subjected to Islamic commands. The issue of body hair also came into play in this regard:

“In the Islam, arm hair or things like that are not talked about. But pubic hair... I can’t just put verses to it but I think you are meant to shave or maintain your body year every certain amount of time, I think it’s forty days.” (Esmeralda)

Finally, it is significant to highlight that while women often cited that it was their own choice to remove body hair, they were often able to highlight a number of influencing factors from others. It was difficult for them to admit that they might be influenced in some way but the participants did not have issues in indicating possible factors of influence for other women:

“It’s hard for me to admit because rationally you know that everyone is being influenced, not just when it comes to body hair, and there are so many things and so many ways that influence you. But still it’s hard to admit because it is not totally my own choice.” (Lily)

It also seemed easier for women who did not consequently conform to the norm to indicate which factors influenced them exactly because as Hanne stated: “You might say that you chose to do certain things but meanwhile you’ve grown used to doing things a certain way and certain things are learned behaviors.” (Hanne) This may be linked to the fact that these women tended to experience insecurities when they did not consequently removed body hair. This in turn might have led to them being able to pinpoint more precisely which factors influenced their body hair depilation behaviors.

3.5.7 Perceptions of Participants on Gender and Body Hair Removal

The gender relations are called into question in this part of the analyses. How did the participants think the gender relations are positioned where body hair is concerned? It also delves deeper into the sexual aspect of body hair: the way participants preferred the body hair of potential partners and how they thought potential partners preferred their body hair in return.

All women firstly felt that there was a double standard in society when it came to gender relations:

“Women hairless and men with body hair” (Betty); “If women have it, it’s considered gross. While men have armpit hair too” (Jadis);

“They expect us to have the perfect body. That we have nothing [no body hair] on our bodies. While men can have body hair everywhere and it doesn’t matter. No, sorry, that’s ridiculous. But still, we end up doing it anyway.” (Yasmina)

Charlotte indicated something to the opposite effect:

“My dad shaves his armpits when we’re on holiday. But the fact that I think that that’s strange indicates the double standard of boys don’t and girls do and if my dad does it, then it’s weird.” (Charlotte)

Other young women in their surroundings were also almost always conforming to the hairless norm:

“if I saw the mound of Venus of a girlfriend, it was hairless.” (Lilith)

The male expectations were, according to participants, as follows: “My friends really prefer hairless women.” (Jadis) Yasmina furthermore indicated that she was sure that men preferred hairless women, as it was the societal beauty ideal, Zoë also cited that she would be very surprised if she were to find out that men preferred women with body hair over hairless women. Not all men preferred the hairless norm, however. Esmeralda’s husband, for example, prefers women with natural body hair. Betty and Charlotte also intercepted men stating that they preferred women with pubic hair, as hairless women
looked – in their opinion – like small children. Many respondents stated that preference was just a personal and individual matter and therefore differed.

Many of the young women were explicitly asked by men in their lives to conform to the hairless norm and told worrisome stories about the pressures they were put under by men: A sexual partner of Lilith told his friends about the fact that she had had pubic hair during their one night stand and they confronted her about it, she was also told by multiple men that they would not perform oral sex as long as she had pubic hair. The men who commented on body hair were not always partners, however. Yasmina was told by her nephew that she had to shave as she supposedly looked like a gorilla. She also recounted a story she heard about an acquaintance: “She was told by her husband’s mistress that she couldn’t possibly please him because the man had told her that she did not remove her pubic hair.” (Esmeralda) Zoë also told a similar tale: “My ex explicitly said: I feel like you should put in the effort. So it became very clear that he thought it to be very necessary.” (Zoë) Lily told a similar story: “It’s absurd that men think they can force something like that on someone. [...] There was this guy once who said that he would not go further than kissing as long as I had pubic hair.” (Lily) Hanne lastly had another interesting account in this regard:

“I was playing this game and you had to guess what the other person’s response would be. It was a question on body hair and how the guy felt about it. I expected him to answer that girls who did not always depilated their legs were confident. He answered that girls with hairy legs were ‘eew’. I thought guys would not expect girls to be shaven at all times. I think that’s a crazy expectation, it is just unrealistic. After the quiz he told me that he did not think that it was ok for girls to have hair on their legs.” (Hanne)

The pressures were not always explicit. Lilith’s former boyfriend, for example, was ecstatic every time she performed body hair removal practices, which made it harder for her to defy normativity as she knew that she would hereby disappoint her partner. Zoë also felt that the preference for hairless women was not always made explicit by men, but she nevertheless still felt like hairlessness was the norm. Many women felt so much pressure to conform to the hairless ideal that they would not even go out without shaving:

“I sometimes have these moments that I don’t feel like shaving my legs so then I need to start thinking about what to wear. Like, ok, I can’t wear pants that are too short because what will people think of me then?” (Yasmina)

Even though many interviewees had lived through explicit as well as more subtle modes of pressure to conform to the hairless norm, many constructed a narrative of acceptance. They hoped that potential partners would not mind if they were not hairless all the time and would like them for who they were and not for how methodically they followed normative body hair removal guidelines:

“I don’t think that I’d focus on that as much. [...] I don’t think I’d be that person who would say: you need to shave your armpits, for example. I don’t think I’d be that person because I wouldn’t want him to say the same to me.” (Isabelle)

Charlotte additionally also felt that men did not truly care as much about body hair as women think. She cited that men did not tend to care about body hair when they were engaging in sexual activities, for example. She went on to state that men would rather have sexual intercourse than stop because a female has body hair.

Lilith noted that there is a significant difference between men with a lot of sexual experience, and men who are near virgins. As they tended to be: “just happy to have sex” (Lilith). She also noted the influence of feminism as well as porn, in this regard. She thought that many men were heavily influenced by the imagery they see in porn. However, her current boyfriend became very open towards the idea of her having pubic hair and only sporadically removing this after reading feminist literature and learning that pubic hair was just: “one of the many things” (Lilith). Within a relationship, participants also thought that body hair became a more discussable subject and that they were able
to stray from the norm more. However, many stated that they maintained their body hair more when they were in a relationship and that they would be willing to change their body hair to a certain degree, as body hair was often removed for a partner (Lilith) and depilation was also seen as making an effort towards a partner (Betty).

What was striking was that for these men, it often did not seem to be a possibility to conform to hair removal practices themselves:

“He said: your pubic hair stings me. While he had a beard that stung my clitoral area. So it didn’t feel nice at all when he went down on me because he was stinging me. But it’s not like he was going to remove his beard because he was stinging me. He was just going to stop pleasing me orally.” (Lilith)

This was also the case for Yoshi, who indicated that her former boyfriend had refused to engage in oral sex if she had pubic hair. She furthermore noted that the men who had made her feel most negatively about her pubic hair were also the men who maintained their own pubic hair the least. Interviewees indicated that men tended have positive associations with their own body hair: “He really has positive associations with the fact that you can have body hair, because it’s ‘cool’” (Lilith) and that men who did not conform to the norm, because they are cyclists for example, were not judged as harshly based on this breach of normativity, which was most definitely the case when women did not conform to their hairless norm.

However, all women noted not to particularly care very much about the body hair of a potential partner: “I really don’t pay attention to that.” (Charlotte) Lilith noted that body hair on men serves as a turn-on for her and even explicitly preferred men with pubic hair. Yasmina furthermore said that she preferred men to have body hair as well. Others, like Yoshi, just preferred the body hair of potential partners to be maintained to a certain degree. Zoë as well as Yasmina indicated that they notice that hair on the chest and back are not always appreciated by women. Participants also noticed a mounting level of scrutiny for men as well:

“I have mostly heard thing from guys like: my girlfriend wants me to remove my chest hair because it looks better. Or the other way around: I want to remove my body hair because I’m a fitness guy but my girlfriend doesn’t like that.” (Lisa)

Respondents who were involved in lesbian or bisexual relationships painted a very different picture, however. Betty, Jadis and Lisa had never experienced negative reactions of sexual or romantic partners. They even stated that there was a mutual understanding between themselves and their partners that there was no pressure to conform to a certain norm whatsoever. They only expected pubic hair to be maintained to a certain degree, this in relation to the previously mentioned hygiene discourse. Betty did not care whether her girlfriend had body hair growth or not. She did indicate, however, that she would be anxious about the reactions of others when they would go to a family gathering together. She felt that others would hereby be exposed to the body hair of her girlfriend. Lisa indicated that none of her previous boyfriends or girlfriends had ever explicitly brought up the subject of her body hair.

Betty and her partner preferred that the other would be hairless, but indicated not to mind if this would not be possible to do at all times. She also indicated that she would never force someone to maintain their body hair a certain way and would not appreciate it if someone would try to do so the other way around. The amount of body hair did not matter for Jadis and her girlfriend either. They just preferred it to be maintained as it proved more difficult to engage in sexual activities with natural pubic hair. Jadis consequently felt more comfortable in a relationship than when she was single. Jadis furthermore indicated that the pressures men put on women might find its root in the fact that they do not know what it is like to go through the process of routinely removing body hair time and time again.
Gender relations are, in conclusion, considered to be very much askew by participants. Not only did they notice a double standard for men and women, females were under much more scrutiny than men at all times. Women were also under constant pressure to conform to a hairless norm. These pressures might be implicit as well as explicit, as was noted in the accounts of participants. It is only logical to conclude that, even though pressure on men is perceived to be mounting as well, women have less expectations than is the case the other way around.

3.5.8 Level of familiarity of respondents with feminist ideas on body hair removal

The following chapter delves deeper into whether students are familiar with feminism and furthermore zooms in on the perceived level of a connectedness between feminism and body hair. How did students feel about feminism and which stance did they take in the feminist debate on body hair?

Through the analysis of the interviews, it became clear that feminism was still strongly associated by participants with not removing body hair in any capacity. This idea was iterated several times by multiple respondents, which highlighted how deeply rooted this idea still is.

“It [body hair removal practices] limits the freedom of women and I think feminists just think: ‘f**k it, we’ll leave our armpit hair and we’ll leave our pubic hair because we want to be free and to be able to choose for ourselves.’” (Isolde)

Upon being asked whether she was familiar with the feminist debate on body hair, Charlotte said the following: “Not really. Is it with armpit hair and stuff? That girls can just walk around like that without shaving?” It therefore seemed that respondents often only considered someone to be a “true” feminist when they did not participate in body hair removal practices.

However, respondents who considered themselves to be feminists often contested this idea:

“I think there is a strong connection between body hair and feminism. I’m thinking of people who don’t know a whole lot about feminism. They seem to be leaving their body hair in order to become more of a feminist. I think that this is the superficial idea.” (Margo)

This idea was reiterated many times. Participants were annoyed by the notion that feminism and not taking care of body hair were aligned and that feminism still had a negative connotation: “Ah, feminist? So you leave your body hair be? Then I think to myself: oh god, such a cliché.” (Yasmina) From their point of view, it did not mean that one was less of a feminist by conforming to the normative discourse on body hair or that one was automatically taking a feminist stance when not conforming to the norm on body hair. However, some respondents felt pressured by feminists not to shave their body hair as they felt that some feminists still broadcasted the idea that natural body hair is the only way to go for feminists: “But if a feminist should dare to tell me that I am not being a good feminist because I shaved my legs today? I would give them a lecture on what feminism really is about.” (Lilith)

Students who were familiar with feminism or who identified as being a feminist saw a change in their beliefs on body hair by researching the issues more closely from a feminist perspective:

“If you see someone with dark hair on their legs than the first thing you do is tell your friends. Kind of like: look, she didn’t shave her legs. But I’m starting to feel differently now since I began to investigate the feminist thoughts and stuff.” (Isolde)

Lilith started to see a change in the thought process of her social network after reading feminist literature, which transformed their view on the world: “After reading things like: OMGYes and feminist articles it became clear that pubic hair was just one of the many things.” (Lilith)

Upon being asked whether they were being influenced by the feminist debate on body hair, many stated that they were not influenced whatsoever. Margo, for example, said that she believed that feminist discussions on body hair could help her when she would not want to conform to societal
norms, as she thought that the debates would give her the courage to choose not to participate in hair removal practices. Zoë stated something similar:

“Images of a lot of armpit hair and pubic hair and so on. And that it’s now more acceptable to do so. So I think you’re being influenced by the way in which people strongly promote it.” (Zoë)

It was important, in this regard, to state that participants often hoped that the norm would change when body hair was concerned and that in order for this to become reality, they assigned feminism a vital transformative role: “the norm might be more one particular thing at the moment, but it might transform into multiple possibilities, ever broader, so people can give their own interpretations. And I think that feminism can play a role in this as well.” (Hanne)

The perceived transformative power of feminism did not end there, however. Being a feminist was often seen as taking a stand against things that limit the freedom of oppressed people or placed them under societal expectations. Body hair was seen by Hanne as well as Esmeralda as an important factor in this discourse: “Feminism is fighting for women’s rights and taking a stand against oppression, which you need to constantly re-evaluate.” (Esmeralda) Feminism was furthermore also seen as navigating and becoming aware of societal pressures while still maintaining agency and empowering others: “I think you are always influenced, but it’s the way you handle it that matters.” (Lisa) Feminism, according to respondents, might play an important role in transforming the normativity of hair removal:

“The norms of family, friends, and media... that all influence people... advertisements, advertising... can be changed because people fight to make sure that some way, at some point, people will think differently about these subjects.” (Hanne)

She went on to state that agency and individualism were important but that nobody was ever entirely independent when it came to making a decision. In this, participants thought that feminism might play a role in uncovering influencing factors and gender differences.

Only Lily identified with the radical feminist body of thought when asked about which stance to take on body hair. She did not think that it was possible for women to have agency where body hair was concerned and that females are facing all kinds of influencing factors, which made it impossible for them to exert any amount of agency: “So, no, I don’t think that it [body hair] is a form of agency. It’s not because you smear some glitter on your naked vagina that you are agentic all of a sudden.” (Lily)

She did however still feel that it should still be a woman’s own choice whether to conform to the hairless norm or not and did not agree with imposing a ‘hairy’ norm on anyone.

As opposed to Lily, Hanne, Jadis and Yoshi, leaned more towards the arguments of liberal feminists:

“It’s just a choice of what to do with it. I’ve never had the feeling that I was forced to do it. I just think it’s annoying when I haven’t done it. I don’t like the feeling but I’ve never had the feeling that I was being forced by anyone.” (Yoshi)

Jadis emphasized the importance of the aspect of choice: “Everyone should just be able to choose what they want to do without anyone criticizing them.” (Jadis) Lilith shared their view as well and highlighted the importance of multiple views on femininity and how these should all be valued equally.

Yet another position was taken by respondents like Lisa and Isabelle, who identified as being neutral. Acknowledging influencing factors as well as agency:

“We are subconsciously being influenced so that we are subconsciously saying: I’m shaving for myself but it’s actually just because other people do so as well. But I get the other side too, the one that says that it’s one’s own choice. Because I know women who don’t do it. So, yeah, I get both points of view.” (Isabelle)

Lastly, the argument was brought on by Isabelle that body hair should not be linked to feminism in the first place. Yasmina also said that feminism was about a whole lot more than just body hair: “I think it is bullshit that there should supposedly be a relation. [...] feminism is about a whole lot more than leaving your body hair be. If only it were that simple.” (Yasmina)
It became clear that the idea of ‘the feminists with natural body hair’ was still very prevalent because it was on the one hand broadcasted by some feminist and iterated by women who are not familiar with feminist debates on body hair the other hand. Still, participants stated that feminism had the power to change their point of view and to transform the societal norm. And that it had an important, transformative, part to play in the future. Finally, it should be noted that while most respondents claimed agency or to agree with liberal feminists, they were able to identify a number of influencing factors throughout the interviews.
3.6 Discussion

The analysis of the interviews generated many very important findings. Not only did it become clear that respondents still perceived body hair to be highly problematized and hairlessness to be the norm, it also highlighted the fact that this caused participants to harbor insecurities or at least ambivalent feelings towards body hair even if instances of harm and discomfort were prevalent.

The interviewees differed on important factors such as the frequency and method of hair removal as well as the thoroughness of depilation. Participants additionally tended to start engaging in depilation practices between the ages of 9 and 20, this because of the mounting societal pressure from puberty onwards. Other important perceived dissimilarities were based on generational and gender discrepancies, as younger women experienced more pressure to conform to the – hairless – norm and were under more scrutiny to do so than men. There was, however, no substantial difference discernable in depilation practices between women in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Still, women in homosexual relationships tended to feel less pressured by partners to conform to normative depilation behaviors.

Furthermore, it became clear that even though many respondents were able to pinpoint perceived factors that tended to influence the decision of others whether to participate in hair removal or not, most still maintained that depilation was their own choice and that they themselves were not being influenced whatsoever. This discourse of agency is in stark contrast, however, with the fact that participants generally tended to depilate sites of the body on which body hair would be visible for others and with the reality that many respondents did not tend to depilate during exam periods. It is therefore impossible to claim that these young women were not influenced by their social networks or society as a whole. It was important to notice that this discourse of choice was most often broadcasted by women who tended to closely follow normative hair removal behaviors. Those who did not experience many instances of harm in removing their body hair were also more likely to see hair removal as an agentic choice. Others were more tempered and acknowledged influences as well as choice and some stated that hair removal was only a matter of influencing factors. All, however, acknowledged to know some women who were being forced by certain actors to at least partially remove body hair.

The findings of this research were mostly corroborated by international research which states the level in which body hair is being problematized, even if it is only natural (Schick, Rima & Calabrese, 2011). And that this seems to be especially the case for young women (Herbenick, et al., 2013). The only sites of body hair on women that are not problematized, are the ones where body hair is considered to be virtually invisible, like hair on the arms. Respondents with light colored body hair, or those who did not have a lot of body hair to begin with, were therefore considerably more comfortable with their body hair. Sites that are most often depilated, according to research, are the genital area, legs, armpits, the upper lip, chin and bikini area (Labre, 2002). This mostly coincided with the answers of participants. They reported frequent depilation of eyebrows, legs and armpits and periodical depilation of the genital area but did not often comment on removing hair from their facial area. Even though the genital area is also increasingly being depilated (DeMaria, et al., 2016) there was still a greater sense of it being a taboo subject than on other forms of body hair, as was indicated by many participants not being able to say vagina, but gesturing or using other terms instead.

All respondents, furthermore, indicated that body hair was only natural and that women should be able to do whatever they want, but they still engaged in the removal thereof. They also cited at some point during the interviews that they did not particularly liked to engage in these hair removal practices as they were considered painful, time consuming and annoying. However, they still depilated frequently and these practices also prove to be costly. It seems that depilation had become such an intrinsic part of the lives of participants that it became a vital element of their regular routine.
Participants therefore expected body hair to be removed fully or partially in order to perceive someone as hygienic. It becomes clear that there is much at stake, as body hair seems to have become an inevitability for these young women that influences their sexuality, wellbeing, social life and general routine.

It seems that the case for agency is not very compelling when it comes to body hair and the removal thereof. Post-feminism broadcasts a crippling and unrealistic ideal of the hairless women who chooses to conform to hair removal practices, while young women spend time and effort on painful hair removal techniques. There does not seem to be a lot of room for free choice left when one harbors insecurities because of society’s influence. This analysis therefor provides an insight into the perceptions of young university students in the city of Ghent, which largely coincides with existing research. It is, however, interesting to notice that the narrative of hairlessness is ubiquitous and does not seem to decrease in the least.

Given the qualitative nature of this dissertation, it became possible to generate in-depth insights but not to draw broad conclusions for all Belgian women. It would therefore be interesting for future research to be of a quantitative nature. It is furthermore important to note that all respondents came from a similar socio-economic background and that they were all able bodied. Future research would therefore be more representative if the focus would be more intersectional.

An increasing amount of images of women with body hair are being spread once again in media, which makes participants indicate that it has become easier not to conform to the norm. Factors as coming to Ghent, joining a more open-minded society, and seeing celebrities as well as influencers broadcast more images of natural body hair are considered very influential. If one interprets this in the most favorable light and not as a ploy of the capitalistic market to use commodification of a body of thought in order to increase profits, this is a sign of social change. It therefore seems as if an important countermovement to the normative ideal female body might be afoot. One can only hope that this movement will be as effective in influencing and altering the behaviors of women as previous discourses of hairlessness have been.


5 ANNEXES

5.1 PHOTOGRAPHS OF BODY HAIR IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

5.1.1 RIHANNA

Figure 1: Instagram selfie Rihanna, Retrieved from “When you can’t wait for summer.”, Rihanna, 02/05/2018, (http://www.instagram.com/p/BiSKCKiDFt7/?utm_source=ig_embed).

5.1.2 ADIDAS

Figure 2: Instagram photograph Arvida Byström, Retrieved from “the Adidas Originals’ Superstar campaign”, Adidas originals, 25/09/2017, (http://www.https://www.instagram.com/p/BZd1cbNggu7/?utm_source=ig_embed)
5.2 **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

5.2.1 **INFORMED CONSENT**
Participants are informed about the nature and objectives of the research. They are asked explicitly for their consent in participating in the Master’s dissertation study. Participants are at any given moment allowed to terminate the interview to guarantee that their involvement is entirely voluntarily (Roose, & Meuleman, 2014).

5.2.2 **IDENTIFICATION**
1. Age (leeftijd)
2. Nationality (nationaliteit)
3. Field of study (studierichting)
4. Gender identification (genderidentificatie)
5. Relationship status (Relatiestatus)
6. Ethnic identification (etnische identificatie)

5.2.3 **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**
1. Do you think women should have long hair?
   ➢ Denk je dat vrouwen lang haar zouden moeten hebben?

2. Do you feel comfortable discussing body hair?
   ➢ Voel je je comfortabel bij het bespreken van lichaamshaar?

3. How do you feel the gender relations are positioned where body hair is concerned?
   ➢ Hoe denk je dat de gender relaties liggen wat lichaamshaar betreft?

4. How do you feel about your own body hair? Do you like/dislike it?
   ➢ Hoe voel je je bij/over je eigen lichaamshaar? Sta je er positief/negatief tegenover?

5. How do you feel about the body hair of others? (Partner, close friends, others)
   ➢ Hoe voel je je bij lichaamshaar bij anderen? (Partner, vrienden, anderen)

6. Do you ever feel insecure about your body hair?
   ➢ Voel je je ooit onzeker over je lichaamshaar?

7. Do you personally keep body hair? (Where? In what way?)
   ➢ Heb jij persoonlijk lichaamshaar? (Waar? Op welke manier onderhoud je dit?)

8. At what age did you start maintaining your body hair? Why then?
   ➢ Op welke leeftijd begon je lichaamshaar te onderhouden? Waarom toen?

9. Do you remove your body hair at this moment in time? Where there periods in your life when this was different?

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7 Since the interviews were conducted in Dutch, a translation of the interview questions is included in the annexes.
Verwijder je momenteel lichaamshaar? Waren er perioden in je leven wanneer dit anders was?

10. Hoe kwam je te weten over haarverwijderingspraktijken? Heeft iemand het je geleerd?

11. Heb je ooit ongelukken opgelopen bij het verwijderen van lichaamshaar? (Vanaf wanneer bechouw je iets als een ongeluk?)

12. Zijn er plaatsen op het lichaam waar je lichaamshaar laat staan?

13. Aan welke haarverwijderingspraktijken neem je deel?

14. Hoe voel je je op dagen waarop je hebt geschoren?

15. (Hoe) Word je beïnvloed om je lichaamshaar op een bepaalde manier te onderhouden?

16. Op welke manier prefereer je het lichaamshaar van een potentiële partner?

17. Hoe denk je dat een potentiële partner jouw lichaamshaar prefereert?

18. Wie beïnvloedt deze beslissing het meest? (Partner/familie/vrienden/media)

19. Zou je ooit je lichaamshaar veranderen? Wanneer? (Heb je er ooit al aan gedacht het te veranderen/heb je ooit je huidige manier bekritiseerd?)

20. Zou je de manier waarop je je lichaamshaar onderhoudt graag veranderen?

21. Hoe sta je tegenover schaamhaar? Verschil dit tov je gevoelens bij lichaamsbeharing?

22. Heb je hier al neveneffecten ondervonden? (razor burns, itchiness, discomfort)

23. Denk je dat je gevoelens over lichaamsbeharing zouden kunnen veranderen in de toekomst? (welke omstandigheden/ welke mensen hebben invloed)
24. Are you content with your body?
   - Ben je tevreden met je eigen lichaam?

25. Are you familiar with feminism? The feminist debate on body hair?
   - Ben je vertrouwd met feminisme? Ben je vertrouwd met het feministisch debat over lichaamshaar?

26. Which relationship do you think feminists have with body hair? Are you in any way affected by these discussions?
   - Welke relatie is er volgens jou tussen feminisme en lichaamshaar? Word je beïnvloed door de discussie?

27. How do you feel about radical feminists who criticize body management?
   - Hoe voel je je bij radicale feministen die kritisch zijn ten opzichte van lichaamsmanagement?

28. How do you feel about feminists who see the maintenance of body hair as a matter of personal choice and agency?
   - Hoe sta je tegeover feministen die het onderhouden van lichaamshaar zien als persoonlijke keuze en vorm van agency?

29. Do you think everything was covered in the interview? Would you like to add something?
   - Denk je dat alles besproken werd gedurende het interview? Zou je graag nog iets toevoegen?