

# **Fashioning the Vagina<sup>1</sup> in a Pornified Culture: Young Women's Perspectives**

## **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the growing trend toward fashioning the vagina in the context of the pornification of Western popular culture. It achieves this through the examination of young women's understandings and perceptions of practices associated with female genital modification. Women's relationships to such practices are explored relative to the social pressures, influences and expectations for women. The concept of 'critical respect' provides a theoretical basis for analysis and facilitates the critical situating of women's perspectives within a cultural context. In-depth, qualitative interviews with women aged 18 – 30 years old form the basis of this research. Results demonstrate a perception of pornography as fundamental to the establishment of genital aesthetic ideals. However, pornography was regarded as an indirect influence on female decisions to engage in genital modification; sexual partners, social groups and the mainstream media considered as primary factors in the propagation idealised vaginal norms. These findings enable a deeper understanding of women's perspectives of practices of genital modification, and the associated social influences and constraints.

**Key words:** Genital Modification, Pornification, Vaginal Alteration, Social Norms, Young Women, Vagina, Critical Respect.

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## **Introduction**

Recent studies have suggested an increase in women's participation in practices of genital modification (Braun 2013; Green 2005; Jeffreys 2005; McDougall 2013). Pubic hair depilation is regarded by numerous scholars as a now normative practice, particularly amongst younger women (Braun 2013; DeMaria & Berenson 2013; McDougall 2013; Toerien et al 2005). Australian data indicates 60.9% of sampled women currently engage in pubic hair depilation, 75.5% of sampled women having ever done so (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008). Furthermore, increasing demand for female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) has been documented; McNamara (2006) contending that FGCS is 'the fastest-growing plastic surgery sector in the United States'. According to Medicare data, annual Australian demand for FGCS has grown from 640 cases in 2001 to 1565 in 2011 (Women's Health Victoria 2012). However, as the majority of FGCS procedures are undertaken in the private sector, these figures represent a conservative indication of the prevalence of cosmetic genital surgery (McDougall 2013). Numerous other cosmetic procedures for genital modification exist;

'vajazzaling' and 'merkin' becoming established terms in the popular and media lexicon.

This paper investigates the growing trend towards fashioning the vagina in the context of the 'pornification' of Western popular culture (Jeffreys 2005; McNamara 2006). It does so by examining young women's understandings and perceptions of practices associated with female genital modification via in-depth single person and focus group interviews. It explores women's relationships to such practices relative to social pressures, influences and expectations; Gill's (2007) concept of critical respect providing a theoretical basis for this analysis. The following discussion, unless otherwise indicated, pertains to all practices of genital modification as identified by the participants, including pubic depilation, FGCS and vajazzling.

The participant quotes provided in this paper will provide an understanding of the way in which female genitalia is considered by young women as increasingly subject to normative standards of appearance. The extension of idealised aesthetic standards to the previously hidden domain of genitalia is informed by a culture in which pornographic norms have influenced the public sphere. An acknowledged trend by sociological and feminist theorists (Attwood 2011; Dines 2010; McNair 2002; McRobbie 2008), the pornification of Western culture may be understood as the increased prevalence and acceptance of pornographic imagery, which informs aesthetic and behavioural standards, as perpetuated and celebrated by the mainstream media. The media have promoted practices of genital alteration (Labre 2002); conveying the message that female genitalia is

unacceptable in its natural form, a message that has the potential to have a significant effect on women's relationships with their bodies (Braun 2005).

Previous feminist studies have identified the pressures imposed by societal norms of femininity on women's body hair removal practices (Toerien et al 2005). Research further describes an increased prevalence of genital depilation among women (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008). This literature also identifies an increase in FGCS, considered a potential result of the hairless norm and the proliferation of pornographic images for comparison (Jeffreys 2005; McDougall 2013; McNamara 2006). Given the potential risks associated with practices of genital modification, an understanding of women's comprehension of the practices and associated influences is essential. However, qualitative research incorporating women's perceptions of the practices and social pressures remains largely unstudied, particularly in an Australian context. Whilst practices of vaginal modification have been studied in isolation, research which considers all practices of genital modification, and positions the vagina as a body site necessitating alteration and improvement, has yet to be conducted. As such, this paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature and extend current insights relating to female practices of genital modification, thereby enabling deeper comprehension of women's perspectives of such practices, and the associated social constraints.

## **Methods**

Forming the basis of this research project were qualitative in-depth single person and focus group interviews with thirteen young women, aged between

18 and 30, which explored their perceptions and understandings of practices associated with female genital modification.

Utilization of focus groups was determined as a result of the capacity for focus groups to 'generate richer responses' (Lewis cited in Wilkinson 1998 p. 113) than other interview formats due to the distinctive interaction between the participants, as knowledge becomes 'collectively constructed' (Pini 2002 p. 341). Participation in focus groups has the further potential to benefit participants through 'empowerment of self-expression' in a safe environment (Wilkinson 1998 p. 116) and replicate the effects of feminist consciousness raising groups in establishing female solidarity and awareness of an issue as a result of group discussion. However, the sensitive nature of the research topic required the inclusion of single person interviews given the concern for potentially distorted or misrepresented data due to the interactive and social nature of focus groups (Wilkinson 1998). Therefore, the two data collection methods may be perceived as complementary in the attempt to obtain comprehensive information and provide varying opportunities for participation. Participants were provided with the option of self-selecting their preferred interview format. In total, two focus group and eight single person interview sessions were conducted; a total of 13 women participating in the interview sessions. Whilst the focus group sessions had been designed to consist of up to 5 participants, logistical and recruitment limitations resulted in small group numbers; one focus group comprised of 2 participants, the subsequent group consisting of 3 participants.

All interviews were recorded and selectively transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Selective transcription was utilised given the time sensitivity and human resource limitations of the project and the intensive and time consuming process of verbatim transcription. Transcriptions were subsequently investigated through the process of thematic analysis. For the purpose of clarity, the explanation as provided by Braun and Clarke (2006 p.79) guides this research: 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. Thematic analysis allows for investigation of complex meanings within the data, describing and reflecting the nuances within the entire data set while also allowing for interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2006). Through the process of coding, recognised patterns and themes throughout the transcribed data set formed the basis of the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). Limitations in this study exist primarily in relation to the small sample size and relatively homogeneous demographic of respondents.

The theoretical concept of 'critical respect', as proposed by media feminist Rosalind Gill, forms the conceptual basis for analysis which grounds this research (Gill 2007). In response to Duits and van Zoonen's employment of a liberal feminist epistemological approach which sought to condemn feminist denial of women's capacity for agency, Gill submits the notion of critical respect as a method of prioritising women's perspectives while acknowledging the importance of cultural context. Asserting that 'women make choices...but they do not do so in conditions of their own making' (2007 p. 72), Gill underscores the contextualisation needed in analyses of women's decisions, and questions the validity of investigations which fail to situate the discussion within broader

understandings. Gill categorically states that the process of critical respect 'does not involve "elevating" the feminist scholar above other women' (2007 p. 77) as researchers are positioned within cultural power dynamics. Thus the process of critical respect critically situates women's perspectives and lived experiences within the cultural context whilst engaging in respectful listening and analysis.

## **Discussion**

### **Indirect Pornographic Influences and the Pornification of Culture**

The public positioning of the previously private domain of female genitalia may be contextualised by the pornification of Western popular culture and the extension of idealised aesthetic norms to this new site for bodily improvement (Braun & Kitzinger 2001). Rachael<sup>ii</sup> (25 years old) indicated her perception of the proliferation of pornographic references within the public sphere:

What is pornography? Ultimately its everywhere; it's not just perhaps as explicit as some people would define pornography as, but much more subtle forms are very readily...available and depicted in advertising and in movies...as in, non pornographic movies. Everywhere.

Whilst women were not generally considered as primary consumers of pornography, pornography was regarded by the majority of participants as central in the construction of aesthetic standards of vaginal appearance which were subsequently communicated to women via the mainstream media and

sexual partners. Elizabeth's (27 years old) comment highlighted this understanding:

But mainstream pornography in which they're all hair free, their labia majora... cover the labia minora and the clitoris, and you can't actually see anything except the lips, then no that's wrong because women are going to look at that and think, that's what I should look like...Then the men that they're sleeping with see that and think that's what women look like and so then they put that again onto the female... so they're getting ...this culture telling them that's how they should look but then they also get that being backed up and enforced by what their partners are telling them.

The majority of participants further noted a change in both the 'literal and metaphorical' (McNair 2002 p. 88) display of female genitalia within the public sphere, which was largely regarded as a result of a generational change perceived to encompass a general acceptance of exhibitionism and self-revelation. Moreover, the participants considered the overall positioning of the vagina as a site necessitating alteration and improvement as normative, Susie (18 years old) stating:

I don't think it has to look a certain way, but it has to *not* look a certain way. So I think, this societal norm is now you can't just leave it be, you know, and not do anything. I think yeah the



societal norm is very much against that now and that it has to be:  
something has to be done.

An increased self-awareness of one's genitalia, invoking anxiety in women regarding the appearance of the vagina itself, was evidenced in respondents' accounts. For instance, Danielle (28 years old) and Erica (27 years old) expressed that there is a strong 'expectation' that pubic hair should not be visible when discussing the trend toward revealing swimwear fashions. Erica also identified the potential for women to experience discomfort in relation to the appearance of their genitalia in bikini bottoms, noting some women's resolve to wear board-shorts in an attempt to conceal their physical form. Moreover, the internalization of discourses that consider female genitalia as 'shameful, unclean [and] disgusting' (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 21) was exemplified by the participants' association of cleanliness, hygiene, sexual appeal and confidence with genital modification.

### **Media Influences**

The mainstream media was identified as significant in the communication and perpetuation of cultural standards, as influenced by pornography, and noted by participants for its ability to inform and educate women of (un)acceptable genital appearance. Correlating with Dines' (2010 p. 100) assertion that 'women don't need to look at porn to be profoundly affected by it because images, representations and messages of porn are now delivered to women via pop culture', the participants in this study demonstrated an awareness of the appearance of a 'perfect' and pornified vagina as depicted in pornography,

despite asserting no direct exposure to pornography itself. This is evidenced by Bridget's (29 years old) assertion:

I think there's less pressure to watch porn then there is to you know, read and learn from things said in magazines.

Intensified and prolific discussion and promotion of cultural standards relating to genital appearance in popular media, including magazine articles, television and radio advertisements was discerned by almost all participants. Furthermore, the influence of the media was regarded as a pervasive and pernicious influence, Rachael (25 years old) stated:

I would perceive that that would be kind of like the most influential factor in that perception of what's normal and what's acceptable. Cause it's everywhere. I think it's almost inescapable in a way...Even if you don't choose to engage in it, as an individual you're exposed to those values in engaging with others I think.

This statement demonstrates support for Stuart and Donaghue's (2011) contention that the media is ubiquitous in its influence and promotion of beauty standards, and further highlights the importance of an individual's social group in determining of engagement with genital grooming and modification.

### **Construction of Feminine Identity and the Influence of Social Groups**

Numerous respondents raised the potential influence of social groups on women's practices of genital alteration. Indeed, participants noted regular discussion relating to female genital appearance and practices of modification amongst family and friends; most participants indicating they have discussed their grooming practices with their friends, both male and female. Emma (20 years old), communicated:

Your family, your friends, like just everywhere, if the topic is allowed to be discussed or whatever, everyone is going to have an opinion on it, so then you're just like influenced by everyone else's opinions.

Women's participation in, or identification with, various social groups, lifestyles or subcultures, is frequently reliant on the performance of beauty work given the potential to visually distinguish oneself and embody the required standards of appearance (Budgeon 2003; Kwan & Trautner 2009). As such, fashioning the vagina may be determined, in accordance with participant responses, as the extension of such practice to female genitalia. Erica's (27 years old) statement referring to the necessity of practices of genital modification exemplified this:

I think that in certain subsets or relationships you could almost call it necessary because that is the norm or the social expectation, or within a relationship the expectation. So in some specific situations you could call it necessary if you wanted to belong in that group or in that relationship and stay there.

The respondents further demonstrated an association of genital grooming with the construction of identity given that numerous participants, when contemplating those women who reject the norm and refuse to partake in genital grooming practices, as belonging to a 'hippy colony' (Samantha, 25 years old), or noting the potential positioning as 'one of *those* people' (Emma, 20 years old). This understanding of an individual's identity as associated with (non)practices of genital grooming may be contextualized by the increasingly common perception between femininity and idealized female genital appearance (McDougall 2013; McNamara 2006).

Essential to this successful (re)production of an idealized feminine form is social comparison wherein an individual judges themselves relative to others (Franzoi et al 2011). Erica's (27 years old) comment illustrated this:

For something like that kind of area of the body, which most people you don't share with, makes it very difficult to know whether you're doing it right, or matching everybody else.

Participants noted an absence of readily available visual representations of realistic vaginas, potentially resulting in female comparison to unrealistic portrayals of genitalia, as emphasised by Jillian (26 years old):

I suppose a lot of other people don't see other people's vaginas apart from those that are shown in pornography. It's not really

presented on television or in print form or anywhere apart from pornography... yeah mostly it's just when you see a vagina it's something that's groomed I suppose.

### **Sexual Partners**

Whilst pornography was considered as central to the construction of cultural standards relating to the appearance of female genitalia, these norms were considered as promoted indirectly through male sexual partners. The majority of participants expressed the opinion that male sexual partners who view pornographic imagery may 'expect' a correlating genital appearance from women. Indeed, men were considered to be the primary consumers of pornography; as such, the aesthetic and sexual desires expressed by men, relating to female genitalia, were perceived to reflect, reproduce, and be informed by the genital ideals portrayed in pornography. Susie (18 years old) highlighted the complex relationship between pornography, viewership and female decisions to engage in genital modification:

In my view, a lot of these practices are shaped by wanting to please men, because obviously they, it's like the majority of men watch porn and they're turned on by what they seen on, you know, in these pornos and the women there are completely shaved and so, therefore it's kind of that subconscious, okay,

well I want to be like them because I want to please my sexual partner in the same way.

The influence of male sexual partners on women's decisions to engage in genital alteration was considered by participants as significant. Indeed, McDougall (2013) suggests that women seek FGCS in order to appear aesthetically pleasing to their sexual partners, in accordance with the pornified and idealised standards of a clean, neat and minimised vaginal form. It must be noted that the participants specifically considered male sexual partners as influential in women's decisions to engage in vaginal fashioning, given that overall female viewing of pornography was not considered as normative behaviour. The sole participant identifying as lesbian also noted a trend within the lesbian communities toward genital modification.

### **Agency Despite Influences**

Despite the strong social pressures and influences identified, the participants frequently discussed an individual's freedom of choice to engage in practices of genital modification as predicated on the individual's capacity to withstand such pressure. This may be demonstrated by Rachael's (25 years old) comment:

I think that perhaps it comes back to the individual and their strength of personality and identity.

Invoking post-modern and neoliberal discourse which prioritises the individual and positions the individual as responsible for their yielding to external pressure, the participants often noted that women could not be forced into engaging with practices of genital fashioning; submission to external pressures was considered a choice in itself (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004). This conceptualisation of choice and agency was nevertheless contextualised by an understanding of the social pressures and influences regarding an idealised construction of genital aesthetic norms.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research is to contribute to existing literature and extend current insights relating to female practices of genital modification thereby enabling deeper comprehension of women's perspectives of such practices, and the associated social constraints. Pornography was considered as fundamental to the establishment of genital aesthetic ideals; however this influence was not necessarily direct. In particular, sexual partners, the mainstream media and social groups were considered as significant in the propagation of norms considered to influence female engagement with such practices. Highlighting the significance of research pertaining to the investigation of cultural beauty practices, Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi's (2005 p. 405) refusal to trivialise women's experiences of beauty regimes may be extended to the practices of fashioning the vagina, in which "acceptable" feminine embodiment, ... remains – at the most "mundane" and hence, insidious level – the message that a woman's body is unacceptable if left unaltered'.

**Word count: 3042**

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<sup>i</sup> Whilst problematic, the term 'vagina' has been utilized in this paper to refer to the entirety of the female genital region. It is acknowledged that this term is inaccurate, however the usage seeks to reflect the phraseology employed by the majority of participants. There exists a conundrum posed by terminological decisions of genital reference: the common, yet incorrect application of 'vagina' to denote what is more specifically the vulva results in linguistic circumcision whereby all notion of the clitoris and labia are obliterated (Lerner 1994). Despite the inexactitude of the term 'vagina', acknowledgement regarding the all-encompassing deficiency of 'vulva' is necessitated. According to Frueh (2003), neither term may be aptly applied to refer to the entirety of female genitalia. Etymologically 'cunt' most accurately denotes the complete female sex organ in its entirety (Rees 2013). However, Braun and Kitzinger (2001) highlight the perception of this term as exceptionally derogatory and embroiled with conceptualisations of hate. Further to this, 'pudendum' derived from the Latin term 'pudere', meaning 'that of which one ought to be ashamed' (Kapsalis 1997 p.5). Although 'vagina' anatomically refers to the birth canal (Braun & Wilkinson 2001), popular medical discourse and leading surgeons have also (mis)applied the term 'vagina' in relation to cosmetic genital procedures which frequently seek to specifically alter the 'vulval structures' of female genitalia (Frueh 2003 p. 138). As the 'vagina' is conventionally applied to incorporate all aspects of the female sex organ, Allan and Burridge (1991 cited in Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 28) urge the academic application of the term to reflect ordinary usage.

<sup>ii</sup> All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.



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