

How can a heterosexual man remove his body hair and retain his masculinity? Mapping stories of male body hair depilation

Victoria Clarke & Virginia Braun

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Edited by Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Hannah Frith & Naomi Moller

Victoria Clarke, Centre for Appearance Research, Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. Email: Victoria.clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Virginia Braun, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Āotearoa/New Zealand.

Email: V.braun@auckland.ac.nz

Corresponding author:

Dr Victoria Clarke

Associate Professor in Qualitative and Critical Psychology

Department of Health and Social Sciences

Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences

University of the West of England, Bristol

Frenchay Campus

Coldharbour Lane

Bristol BS16 1QY

UK

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

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About the Authors

Victoria Clarke is an Associate Professor in Qualitative and Critical Psychology in the Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. She is co-author (with Virginia Braun) of *Successful qualitative research* (2013, Sage), co-editor (with Virginia Braun and Debre Gray) of *Collecting qualitative data* (2017, Cambridge) and is currently writing a book on thematic analysis with Virginia Braun for Sage. She regularly tweets about thematic analysis and qualitative research: @drvicclarke

Virginia Braun is a Professor in the School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She works around gendered bodies, sex/uality, and health, as well as writing about qualitative research. She is co-author (with Victoria Clarke) of *Successful qualitative research* (2013, Sage), co-editor (with Victoria Clarke and Debre Gray) of *Collecting qualitative data* (2017, Cambridge) and is currently writing a book on thematic analysis with Victoria Clarke for Sage. She tweets qualitative research and other things @ginnybraun.

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Abstract

This study explores the (gendered) body hair removal norm and the meanings of male body hair by examining young people's sense-making around male body hair removal. The novel technique of story completion was used to collect data from 103 psychology undergraduates. They were presented with a story 'stem', featuring a young man (David) deciding to start body hair removal, and asked to complete it. David was most often portrayed as a young heterosexual man who was excessively hairy, in the 'wrong' places, was often subject to teasing and bullying, and was concerned about his diminished sexual capital. Hair removal did not always end 'happily ever after' for David. While in some stories he 'got the girl', he was punished for his vanity and foolishness in others. These different endings arguably reflect currently ambivalent meanings around male body hair depilation. The production of a hairless, or less hairy, male body is both desirable and a potential threat to masculinity. The data spoke strongly to the power of social norms surrounding body hair practices and suggest that story completion provides a useful tool in interrogating the discourses that sustain these norms.

Keywords: Metrosexual; projective techniques; qualitative research; story completion; story mapping; thematic analysis

The complete removal or reduction of hair on certain parts of the body is a social norm for women in many Western countries, including the UK (e.g. Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2003),

Australia (e.g. Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998), New Zealand (e.g. Terry & Braun, 2013), and the US (e.g. Basow, 1991). This body hair removal norm may have a generational element, with most research suggesting younger women are more likely to remove or reduce their body hair, and more likely to remove *more* body hair (e.g. Herbenick et al., 2010; Terry & Braun, 2013; Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2003). For men, the picture is more complex. In a gendered dichotomization, body hair has strongly been coded as masculine (Basow, 1991; Synnott, 1987), but several Western-country studies from the last decade or so report significant proportions of men do remove or reduce their body hair (e.g. Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Boroughs, Cafri & Thompson, 2005; Gaither et al., 2016; Martins, Tiggemann & Churchett, 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013).

Whether removal forms a dominant masculine ideal (cf Immergut, 2002) is unclear – partly due to the methodological limitations of existing research. One limitation is the conflation of body hair removal (i.e. the complete removal of body hair from particular body parts through for example shaving or waxing) and body hair reduction (i.e. reducing the length or amount of hair on particular parts through trimming) in most studies. Some studies use term ‘body hair depilation’ which encompasses “body hair reduction or removal below the neck” (Boroughs et al., 2005: p.637). Also problematic is the conflation of ‘ever-depilated’ (i.e. participants having removed or reduced hair at least once in their lives) with ‘regular depilation’ (i.e. participants currently removing or reducing hair on a, for example, weekly or monthly basis). Also problematic is only measuring ever-depilated, and the use of convenience, rather than nationally representative, samples, mostly consisting of younger men (often university students).

These methodological caveats acknowledged, research that has measured frequency of depilation indicates that rates of 'ever depilated' are higher than rates of regular or current depilation (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Martins et al., 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013).

Furthermore, men seem more inclined than women to just *reduce*, rather than fully remove body hair (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014). Comparisons of gay and straight men show that gay men are (slightly) more likely to remove body hair (Gaither et al., 2016; Martins et al., 2008), perhaps partly the result of a more 'appearance potent' gay male sub-culture (Jankowski et al, 2014). Whether younger men are more likely than older men to remove body hair is not clear, but seems likely. Studies with younger aged samples (e.g. university samples) report high rates of body hair 'depilation' (Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Boroughs et al., 2005; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013). One of these studies reported age of first depilation as being around 15 years old (Basow & O'Neil, 2014). A study with a nationally-representative US sample, also suggested pubic hair 'grooming' was more common in younger aged males (Gaither et al., 2016).

The most common sites for depilation seem to be groin (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Boroughs et al., 2005; Gaither et al., 2016; Martins et al., 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013), chest (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Boroughs et al., 2005; Terry & Braun, 2013) and abdomen (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Boroughs & Thompson, 2014; Boroughs et al., 2005). Two common reasons given for hair removal are increasing sex appeal and perceived cleanliness (see Basow & O'Neil, 2014; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Boroughs et al., 2005; Martins et al., 2008; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013). Basow and O'Neill (2014) argued that most of the men in their sample depilated to create a body that is 'ideal' and that they think women consider most sexually attractive. Influences on male body hair removal include social norms (Terry &

Braun, 2013), pornography (Terry & Braun, 2013), friends/others (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2013), media (Boroughs et al., 2005; Terry & Braun, 2013), and a sexual partner (Terry & Braun, 2013). Some men also report no influences on their decision to depilate (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Boroughs et al., 2005)¹.

Any decision to remove hair takes place in a context where body hair (and its removal) carries meaning. *Women* with body hair tend to be perceived (primarily) negatively (Basow & Braman, 1998; Basow & Willis, 2001; Fahs, 2014). Hairy women have been perceived as, among other things, 'unclean', less sexually and interpersonally attractive, less intelligent and sociable, and possibly as unfeminine and feminist/lesbian (Basow & Braman, 1998; Basow & Willis, 2001; Crann et al, 2017). By contrast, the meanings of male body hair may be in transition (Terry & Braun; 2016), and perceptions and meanings of male body hair/removal are potentially more complex and contradictory than for women. (White) male bodies with little or no torso hair have been rated as most attractive by two samples, the first with (heterosexual) women (Dixson & Rantala, 2016) and the second with (mostly heterosexual) women and men (Basow & O'Neill, 2014). These findings contrast with an earlier study in which men with torso hair were rated more attractive by women (Dixson et al., 2003), and support the argument that the male body ideal now includes having little or no torso body hair (Tiggemann, Martins & Churchett, 2008; see also Basow & O'Neil, 2014). Despite this, there seems to be acceptance of a range of body hair practices for men. Basow and O'Neill (2014) found that both men and women viewed body hair reduction *and* body hair retention (i.e. not removing or reducing body hair) as socially acceptable for men; Terry and Braun (2013) similarly found that both body hair removal (64%) and retention (81%) were perceived as socially acceptable for men, although only about one third agreed that

back hair on men was acceptable, and less than 7% rated it desirable (see also Terry and Braun, 2016)². It seems that the 'hairy' male body remains a socially acceptable embodied masculinity, but not *the only* acceptable embodied masculinity, or even the (most) desirable one. Contrasting two actors from the James Bond film franchise – Sean Connery and Daniel Craig – illustrates this. Both embody iconic masculinity, but Connery's embodiment conformed to a more traditional acceptable 'hairy' masculine image (chest hair, but no undesirable back, neck or upper arm hair), whereas Craig's embodiment is more suggestive of a 'metrosexual' ('feminised') hairless masculinity (Terry & Braun, 2013). Metrosexual masculinity has been described as an 'ambiguous masculinity' (Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith & Hansen, 2012) and (at least initially) a departure from *traditional* masculinity (Connell, 1995) in that it centers on an increased investment in appearance, fashion and grooming, and engagement in conspicuous consumption (de Casanova, Wetzel & Speice, 2016).

Fahs (2012, 2013) shed light on some meanings around male body hair depilation through an undergraduate women's studies class exercise in the US, in which male students removed body hair for 12 weeks and recorded and reflected on the experience (data on sexual identity was not collected directly, but most of the men who mentioned a partner in their reflections mentioned a female partner). The men reported social penalties from other men for removing their body hair, including homophobia and the questioning of their (straight) sexual identity (in general, they reported acceptance by other men to be more important than acceptance by women). Some found ways to 'masculinise' the experience through using 'manly' methods of depilation and reframing their participation in the exercise as an expression of their autonomy and individuality. Frank's (2014) analysis of representations of male body hair and depilation in *Men's Health* and *Esquire* similarly evidenced attempts to reframe and 'masculinise' hair removal. In these magazines, body

depilation was presented as increasing men's sex appeal to women and allowing them to assert *control* over nature and themselves (see also Immergut, 2002). Depilation also provided men opportunities for 'individual expression' (see also Hall, 2015), and for displaying class privilege through inscribing wealth and power on their bodies – men who remove body hair have time and money to 'groom and consume'. Although body hair depilation is a conventionally feminised activity, Frank concluded that in men's lifestyle magazines, it has been reframed in ways that perpetuate rather than undermine patriarchy, and privilege white, middle class heteromascularity.

In this paper, we interrogate the discursive, sense-making context around men and hair removal in the UK, in relation to ideas and enactments of modern masculinities (e.g. Frank, 2014; Gill et al., 2005; Hall, 2015). The paper is one from a broader project that aimed to explore representations of body hair in relation to femininity and masculinity, and particularly representations of women and men who engage in (broadly) non-normative body hair practices – retention for women and removal for men. Data were collected in the UK and Aotearoa/New Zealand (see Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018, for an analysis of the New Zealand data) using story completion. As this is a novel method, a secondary aim was to explore different ways of analysing story completion data, including thematic analysis both as *commonly* used (Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018), and in a more *structured* way (Clarke & Braun, 2018). In this paper, we describe and explore a technique we call 'story mapping' (see Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Method

Data were collected using story completion. This method gathers information indirectly, rather than using the direct self-report techniques that dominate qualitative research (Frith,

2013): participants are provided with the opening sentence of a story (the story 'stem'/'cue') and asked to complete it. Until very recently, story completion was a little used and rarely discussed data collection method in qualitative research (but see, Clarke, Braun & Wooles, 2015; Frith, 2013; Wood, Wood & Balaam 2017). It was adapted from its earlier use as a psychoanalytically-informed projective test (Rabin, 1981), and as a research tool assumed to reveal unconscious 'truths' about the story writers (e.g. Horner, 1972), by feminist psychologists Kitzinger and Powell (1995; see also Braun & Clarke 2013; Braun et al, 2018; Clarke et al., 2017). These researchers situated story completion as producing data that can be read using a social constructionist lens, and theorised as capturing contemporary discourses pertaining to the topic at hand. Stories reflect available ways of making sense of topics in the social world, the resources that pre-exist, and constitute the subjectivities of participants (Frith, 2013; Walsh & Malson, 2010). Our take is that story completion offers a tool for exploring dominant (and potentially alternative) sociocultural discourses through which the meaning of male body hair and body hair depilation are constituted.

We chose to focus on the representations of *young* people, because they are the age group that evidence suggests are the most likely to remove or reduce body hair and are therefore at the 'sharp edge' of depilation pressures (e.g. Terry & Braun, 2013). A convenience sample was recruited through the University of the West of England psychology participant pool. This provides access to first and second year undergraduate psychology students who choose to participate in several research studies, in return for a small amount of course credit. Our initial sample consisted of 103 stories. In line with a lack of consensus on sample size in qualitative story completion (see Clarke et al., 2017), we ceased data collection at that point, after review revealed a rich and nuanced dataset. Excluding four stories under 50

words, which lacked sufficient detail and richness for analysis, produced a final sample of 99 stories. The 97 participants who provided (some) demographic data were mostly aged 25 or under (mean: 20 years), female (83 women, 14 men), and mostly identified as white, heterosexual, middle class and able-bodied. This reflects the demographics of psychology students at the university.

Inspired by Fahs' (2012, 2013) classroom exercise, we designed a short third person stem: 'David has decided to start removing his body hair...'. The wording of the stem implied that the protagonist had previously conformed to the traditional male norm for retention (the undesirability of male back hair notwithstanding). Using the third-person stem may allow for more socially undesirable, and thus a wider range of, responses than a first-person stem, because the author is situated *outside* the story – there are no connotations of *personal* experience or viewpoints (see Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Participants completed the story online via the *Qualtrics* survey software. In the participant information sheet, participants were told to not spend too long thinking about what might happen next and write about whatever first came to mind – with the aim of capturing 'readily available' meaning. They were instructed to 'please read and complete the following story', and to spend at least 10 minutes completing the story. A review of the first seven stories showed two were very short (three or four words in length), so we amended the participant instructions to ensure a *story* was told, thus increasing the likelihood of depth and richness of data. Participants were subsequently instructed to write a story that was at least 10 lines or 200 words long. Clarke et al. (2015) recommend that researchers provide information on story length, as one indicator of data 'quality' – the stories in our final

sample ranged from 50 to 444 words (mean: 239 words), resonant with published story completion work (see Clarke et al, 2018).

Some stories were relatively short and prosaic, describing only the process of hair removal. A few 'refused' the task – people wrote stories in which David did not remove his *body* hair (e.g. he shaved his *facial* hair) or stories of no relevance to body hair (e.g. a story in which David became a vampire). For the most part, however, participant stories related to body hair removal – sometimes all over, sometimes at particular sites (chest, back, and legs were most commonly referenced). Participants wrote relatively detailed stories that characterised David in particular ways, provided rationales for his hair removal and ended with a more or less definitive resolution, some of which oriented to the convention of concluding a story with a 'moral' lesson (Hoffman, 2010).

One limitation of a fairly standard thematic analysis approach, as used in much published story completion research, is that the narrative character of the data – the temporal sequencing of causally related events, often involving some kind of (moral) evaluation of the story events (Hoffman, 2010) – is not retained in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2013) proposed a story mapping technique, which aims to capture patterns in the temporal, causal and evaluative organisation of the stories, and particularly in how the central character is depicted, and the story (moral) resolution or coda. After following typical thematic analysis data familiarisation and coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we noted clear patterns in the depiction of David, and in the telling of the stories. Moreover, there seemed to be some clear story 'types,' each with a number of common 'story events'. We continued to code the data, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) version of thematic analysis, with the aim of identifying the distinctive story types and the common

events of each type, and mapping how each story type temporally and causally developed, and resolved. As previously noted, our interpretation of the data was underpinned by a constructionist approach to story completion (e.g. Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010), and informed by feminist and queer scholarship on male body hair depilation and the construction of modern masculinities (e.g. Fahs, 2012, 2013; Frank, 2014; Immergut, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2016). In the excerpts of data presented, spelling and typographical errors have been corrected and the extracts are denoted by participant number (e.g. P1).

Analysis: Can a heterosexual man remove his body hair and retain his masculinity?

David – perhaps unsurprisingly given the age of the participant group – was most often presented as a teenage boy or young adult, with references to school and university. Given the sociocultural association of gay men with appearance investment (Clarke & Smith, 2015), and (somewhat) higher rates of hair removal than straight men (Gaither et al., 2016; Martins et al., 2008), we were surprised that only one story depicted David as a gay. Where his sexuality was evident, David was almost always presented as heterosexual, or at least as sexually attracted to women (and he was almost uniformly cisgendered; only once was ‘he’ depicted as a trans woman). We had anticipated that depicting David as gay would provide a common way of making sense of his hair removal. There are three possible explanations for why David was not depicted as gay: 1) participants wanted to avoid the appearance of stereotyping (see Hayfield, 2013); 2) participants were ‘thinking straight’ (Ingraham, 2006) when writing the stories, and it did not occur to them to depict David as anything other than heterosexual; 3) hair removal no longer evokes gendered, sexual stereotypes.³ The final option is slightly undermined by the analysis (see also Jennings, Braun and Clarke, 2018),

which suggests we (unintentionally) gave participants a quite specific challenge or dilemma: writing a story that permitted a (straight) man to remove his body hair – to engage in a ‘feminised’ activity – while maintaining his masculinity (Hall, 2015). Such a dilemma has similarly been captured around (straight) men using cosmetics (Hall, Gough & Seymour-Smith, 2012, 2013), and companies who market and advertise such products (Harrison, 2008).

Across the dataset, a dominant story ‘type’ (David as ‘excessively hairy’) reoccurred – many stories featuring some or all elements of this narrative – and so we primarily focus on that story, analytically. Two other story ‘types’ (David as athlete; David as hero) reoccurred, albeit less commonly; many of the more detailed, less prosaic stories (also) had elements of one or both of these. David was sometimes depicted as an athlete (typically a swimmer) who decided to remove hair to improve his athletic performance and/or ‘fit in’ with his fellow athletes who already depilate, usually after prompting from an external source (his friends/fellow athletes, the media).⁴ This story often co-existed with the main story.

Removal of body hair by male athletes to improve athletic performance has been regarded as an acceptable exception to a retention norm for men (Fahs, 2013). Improving athletic performance, something associated with physical prowess and thus masculinity (De Visser, Smith & McDonnell, 2009), ‘compensates’ for an otherwise feminised activity. David’s masculinity was not diminished in such stories – and that his team mates all removed hair normalised the practice (David was the ‘odd one out’ in retaining his hair), creating a localised norm *different* to wider society. That hair removal in this context had a practical purpose also allowed David to accumulate the valuable capital associated with *doing* something masculine, as opposed to merely *looking* masculine (De Visser et al., 2009), and

distanced him from notions of vanity and appearance investment (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005).

The other less common story depicted David's hair removal as somehow heroic – either in a fantasy scenario (e.g. David plucking his monobrow released an energy beam that destroys an alien attacker) or a realistic scenario (e.g. David shaved his head hair in solidarity with his sister who was undergoing chemotherapy and to raise money for his sister to buy an expensive wig). Through constructing David as heroic, these stories framed his actions as strongly 'macho' – as protecting or saving the world, and vulnerable others. At the same time, they situated male hair removal as *far* from an everyday activity.

The dominant narrative: depilation bringing David into normality

In the main story type, David was often presented as 'abnormally' or 'excessively' hairy. He was described as having particularly thick and/or dark, and sometimes long, body hair (the latter denoted through references to 'horse manes' and 'tumbling locks'), or body hair that grew quickly, or started growing early in life. Abnormality was also signalled by having hair in the 'wrong' places on his body, primarily his "carpet back" (P18) (see also Terry and Braun, 2016). The stories often contained extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986), rhetorical tools that evoke extreme points of description, when describing the extent of David's body hair – such as "vast amount of thick, dark hair" (P27); "masses of body hair" (P91); "incredibly hairy back" (P21). These emphasised an *excessive* nature for David's body hair (see also Terry and Braun, 2016). David's hair was also constructed as excessive through references to it being "scruffy" (P17) and unclean (e.g. in one, David's excess of hair resulted in body odour; see Immergut, 2002). This construction of excess or abnormality (see Terry &

Braun, 2016), provided a clear justification for removal that did not (necessarily) threaten David's masculinity.

The framing of hair as excessive was also achieved through describing it as animalistic or monstrous, or in ways that evoked a wild, uncultivated nature (see also Frank, 2014; Immergut, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2016). There were references to animals such as gorillas, monkeys, bears, wolves, horses, and fantasy creatures (e.g. werewolves) and fictional characters (e.g. Wolverine, a hirsute comic book and film character), and to David's "untamed", "overgrown" (P78), and "forest"-like (P100) hair (see Frank, 2014; Immergut, 2002). Perhaps unintentionally mirroring the term 'manscaping', David's body hair was described in ways that suggested an uncontrolled natural landscape, or a 'primitive' (not evolved, not [fully] human) nature and a 'brutish' masculinity (Terry & Braun, 2016). There was reference to Simon Cowell, a UK public figure known (and both admired and mocked) for his visible/displayed chest hair, and to David's 'world record breaking' (P89) levels of hairiness. In one story he starred in horror movies after receiving the title of world's hairiest man (with echoes perhaps of the circus 'freak' show). David's excess hair was also presented as evoking disgust in David and actual or imagined/feared disgust in others (Immergut, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2016), which again provided a rationale for removal – and indeed rendered retention, an otherwise normative act, accountable (Hall, 2015).

Many stories described David as being teased and bullied for his excess hair, or (male) friends or a girlfriend commenting negatively on his excess hair, and this having a negative impact on his psychological well-being (self-confidence/esteem were commonly referenced). This again, provided a clear (externalised) justification for removal that did not necessarily compromise David's masculinity:

His friends were saying that it looked bad and scruffy to have all that body hair (P7)

David got bullied from the age of 12 due to having developed excess hair on his back and chest. David was called Wolverine by his class mates for the three years after this (P51)

He couldn't handle being bullied at school anymore due to the vast amount of thick, dark hair on his body... 'Oh look, it's gorilla boy' (P27)

The 'Simon Cowell' jokes kept repeating over and over in his head. Maybe the abnormal amount of hair on his chest was what was putting all these women off? The models on TV and magazines never seemed to have any chest hair and David assumed this is what ladies would prefer (P19)

Depilation was presented as a tool for managing bullying, and was thus positioned as a rational response (see also Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018). In the stories, David was presented as 'taking action' and 'finding a solution' in response to bullying and negative comments – an appropriately 'masculine' (non-'passive') response (see Brotheridge & Lee [2010] on men's 'active' and women's 'passive' coping strategies in response to workplace bullying).

It was not just bullying that motivated David to depilate – he was presented as wanting to be normal and 'fit in'. Sometimes he was depicted as influenced by male friends' body hair removal; other times, by media images of (sexy) hairless men:

He looked at several pictures that came in magazines, such as *Men's Health* magazines, and he realised that he was quite a bit hairier than the men in them. He

looked at the pictures of the men that were considered to be the 'sexiest man' and he noticed that nearly all of them shaved their body hair off (P13)

Such stories constructed David as having diminished sexual capital. Sexual capital captures the sociocultural notion that sexual attractiveness is a personal asset that confers power on those who possess it, and by investing in our physical appearance we can gain a sexual capital advantage (see Michael, 2004). With virility integral to masculinity, diminished sexual attractiveness potentially diminished David's *masculinity*. Furthermore, as David was often depicted as school- or university-age, and thus as having limited access to ways of maintaining or increasing his masculine capital that older, working age men might have access to (e.g. economic success; Connell & Wood, 2005), increasing his sexual capital through hair removal offered a way for a younger man to demonstrate his masculinity.

David was positioned as being aware (or assuming – sometimes incorrectly!) that women in general prefer, or a particular woman (or man) preferred, less hairy or hairless men; this led to insecurity about his appearance:

He'd recently noticed that the typical men portrayed in the media (that all the girls seem to find so attractive) are very well groomed and tend to have less bodily hair.

Since this realisation he'd become self-conscious; overly aware of his hairy chest and back (P26)

The gap between David's actual hairy embodiment, and normative or his own ideal embodied-self, presented a problem that *needed* resolution. In these typical stories, David decided to remove his body hair to stop the bullying, to boost his sexual capital, to close the gap between his actual and ideal embodied-self, and/or to conform to (his perception of) the (new) masculine embodied ideal. Because attracting women has been important to

traditional masculinity, framing David's body hair depilation as centred on increasing his sex appeal to women served to construct hair removal as normative and hetero-masculine (Frank, 2014), and warded off the potential for David to be perceived as gay (Hall, Gough & Seymour-Smith, 2012). Furthermore, by framing depilation as taming and controlling wild, out-of-control nature, David asserted control and discipline over his body, and by proxy nature (Frank, 2014; Immergut, 2002), in line with traditional notions of masculine control and domination. These narrative details effectively allowed David to retain masculinity while engaged in what has otherwise been constructed as a feminised body practice. Frank (2014) suggested a classed element to similar narratives – middle class men distance themselves from the savage 'caveman' and reframe body hair depilation as part of a modern day *middle class* masculine body project. However, we found few overt (or even implicit) references to class/socioeconomics in the data, although the David depicted in the stories could afford to pay for men's lifestyle magazines, hair removal products and salon treatments.

In some stories, David was presented as uncertain, or experiencing mixed emotions (e.g. fear/anxiety and excitement) about hair removal, and as weighing up various potential gains (e.g. sexual capital, normality) and losses (e.g. masculinity, individuality). David needed to tread a fine line between the gains of normality and 'fitting in' with his friends, and the losses of independence and individuality associated with succumbing to peer pressure and conforming to (media) trends (Gill et al., 2005). Hair removal was presented as something shameful for David, and men in general (see also Jennings et al., 2018). David removed his hair in secret (e.g. locking the bathroom door), sometimes after weighing up the different options for removal and choosing "the 'DIY' option" to avoid the "embarrassment of walking into a beauty salon" (P24). If David went to a salon, he felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. He rarely talked to anyone other than a female friend or relative before removing his hair. In

stories where David eventually confessed his depilation secret to a male friend, that friend revealed that “loads of guys shave their legs” (P05), both normalising David’s depilation and underscoring the fact that the ‘first rule’ about male body hair depilation is that you do not talk about it, for if men talked about depilation, David would have known it was ‘normal’.

Some stories contained echoes of Fahs’ (2012, 2013) participants, who framed certain depilation products and packaging as too feminine, too threatening to masculinity, for men to use (in the story quoted below, David was overwhelmed by the range of products available to women, thus implicitly framing men’s ideal grooming products as utilitarian and universal, ‘one-size-fits-all’), and hair removal as an alien practice for men, something men are not very good at, initially (see Fahs, 2013). Relatedly, we were struck by a regular construction of David as not *knowing* how to remove body hair (see also Jennings et al., 2018) – though as he was virtually never described as bearded, we can normatively assume facial hair removal. In the stories, David had to gain knowledge for hair removal, researching online for ‘how to’ advice, reading men’s magazines (which do contain articles advising men on hair removal, Frank, 2014), or seeking advice from knowledgeable others, such as female friends or relatives:

He had already poured over the articles on his *Men’s Health* magazine about best ways to do some body pruning, and after hearing that shaving the whole of your front is a bitch when it grows back, waxing isn't something he'd consider... he decided to go with what seemed the least painful, *Veet*. Now the reason these products are not meant for men is because they have too many categories to consider, soft skin, dry skin, fruity smell, no smell, thick hair, thin hair, it’s enough to fry a man’s mind. So he

grabbed the least offensive looking bottle and didn't smell like a tart's handbag and quickly put it in the shopping trolley... (P18)

In depicting David's ignorance, body hair was implicitly constructed as essentially *different from* facial hair – indeed, a lack of accounting around (any) facial hair removal across the dataset reinforces this curious distinction.

These details clearly framed body hair removal as a feminised practice, with David positioned as not possessing feminine capital in knowing about or doing body hair removal.

In the extract from P18's story, reference to a "tart's handbag" works to both disparage (certain) feminised body practices – alongside certain women – and demarcate feminine and masculine body work: if David has to do it, it must be perfunctory and nothing more.

Furthermore, the construction of masculinity underlying these details is that masculinity (unlike femininity) should not be a production or an achievement, or at least should not *appear* to be a production; masculinity just *is* (Hall, 2015). Correspondingly, one of the potential traps of masculine body work centred on appearance is appearing weak and vain and not appropriately masculine (Hall, 2015). Thus, as noted above, the practice of male body hair depilation was recuperated into masculinity in various ways. One of the stories delightfully reiterated Fahs' (2013) finding that some of the male participants in her study found ways to masculinise hair removal by 'shaving' with utility knives – here David went to the local hardware store and bought oil and sandpaper to remove his body hair (P70).

The stories ended in different ways and no one type of ending predominated. Some stories, where there was a clear resolution centring on an evaluation of the story events, were morality tales: David was *punished* for his vanity and hubris, with hair removal unsuccessful in some way.

Soon after he starts to have an allergic reaction to the hair removal cream. David's face and hands start swelling up to twice their size. David is panicked and doesn't know what to do. He rushes out of the corridor completely naked and passes out on the landing. His parents hear a thud and rush upstairs, they discover him naked on the floor and quickly call an ambulance. He makes a full recovery from his allergic reaction but decides to never try and remove his body hair again. He realises that worrying about what other people think of it is pointless and it is not worth the hassle of removing it (P43)

He now looked like a 10 year old... those abs [he'd] been trying for months to get, didn't look any different hairless or not! (P18)

David was in complete disbelief as to what he had put himself through, as his suffering had led to nothing but the opposite to what he had expected. Body hair WAS attractive to him [David's boyfriend], he wasn't sickened by the hair! Hairy men are attractive to some! From that day on David realised that he really had found a relationship he had waited for, and all he should have done was trust that who he was with liked him for himself and didn't care about body hair (P85)

In such stories, the anticipated positive outcomes, or the premise of the action (e.g. increasing sexual capital) were shown to be false, and David was sometimes teased, subject to shame and/or desexualisation by his actions. The stories where David was depicted as slavishly following trends, treading over the fine line between a desire for normality and succumbing to trends or peer pressure, or being overly invested in appearance, we read as 'punishment' for failing in authentic autonomy. David had not valued 'what's on the inside', not been 'true to himself', not asserted *his* individuality and autonomy (Gill et al., 2005)

(David's body hair removal was sometimes depicted as the start of a pathological obsession with his appearance, one of the potential risks of appearance investment, Gill et al., 2005.)

In other stories, hair removal was successful and the desired results achieved. The 'payoff' for David's body work was social and psychological well-being, 'looking good and feeling good' (Hall, 2015). His sexual capital increased and he got the/a girl:

David has a new-found confidence that he never expected, he was able to go out without worrying about his hairy back (P21)

That the same broad story type produced remarkably different endpoints evidences perhaps ambivalent and in-flux meanings around modern (hetero)masculinity (Terry & Braun, 2016). What underpinned *all* the story types was an emphasis on David retaining his masculinity, despite engaging in a feminised appearance-centred (with the exception of the athlete stories) body project, or through reframing hair removal as a masculine body project (Frank, 2014; Hall, 2015; Hall & Gough, 2011). Even in stories in which David was punished for losses to masculinity and individuality, he typically 'learnt his lesson' and the loss was framed as temporary.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the stories evidenced what Terry and Braun (2016) described as the ambivalent and transitional meanings around male body hair. Although underpinned by sociocultural coding of body hair as masculine, and depilation as feminised (predominantly) appearance-centred body work, these stories of male body hair removal were more complex than a simple equation of masculinity and body hair, and appearance investment with femininity. Body hair could undermine masculine capital if it were 'excessive' – a hairy man could be both

masculine and not masculine, not least due to inadequate or absent sexual capital. Although disgust (typically associated with women's body hair) featured, again this related to excessive – dirty, animalistic, brutish – hair (see also Terry & Braun, 2016). As Terry and Braun (2016: p.20) argued, “the language of excess... [is] a tool... to understand the balance between men's hair being simultaneously ‘natural’ and also ‘unpleasant’ – an invisible (and subjective) line divides hair into attractive and unattractive [disgusting]; appropriate and inappropriate”.

There were hints of the idea that ‘manscaping’ represents a modern masculinity project, a way for middle class men to inscribe status and privilege on their bodies, as Frank (2014) argued. Removal of body hair, particularly ‘non-disgusting’ hair, appeared to be aligned with a ‘metrosexual’ masculinity a “new, narcissistic, media-saturated, self-conscious kind of masculinity” (Simpson, 1994). Understood perhaps as an ‘ambivalent masculinity,’ this was sometimes construed as vain and foolish, because it was associated with investment in the production of appearance (and masculinity), and a loss of individuality and ‘sheep-like’ conformity (Gill et al., 2005). However, in other stories hair removal was linked to more conventional masculine attributes like sexual prowess, effectively ‘masculinising’ such ‘metrosexual’ activities (Hall & Gough, 2011). Removing body hair to increase sexual capital was framed – for the most part – as acceptable, particularly when David was prompted to do so by an outside influence. The variability of these stories aligns with existing arguments that metrosexual masculinity is a precarious form of masculinity, and not *entirely* socially acceptable or normative (De Visser et al., 2009). It is an ambivalent (still emerging) form of masculinity, acceptable and privileged in some contexts, unacceptable in others (de Casanova et al., 2016; Hall, Gough & Seymour-Smith, 2012). Altogether, the data suggested that male appearance concerns are understood by contemporary British youth as legitimate

if they increase sexual capital and (thus) masculinity. However, these stories suggest removal of body hair is not yet a dominant social norm for men, and therefore (also always) potentially threatening to masculinity.

There were strong resonances between these stories and existing research on male body hair depilation – including survey self-report data, particularly Terry and Braun’s (2016) qualitative survey data, from classroom exercises (Fahs, 2012; 2013), media analyses (e.g. Frank, 2014) and other analyses of popular cultural texts (e.g. Immergut, 2002), and existing research on the construction of modern masculinities more broadly (e.g. Gill et al., 2005; Hall & Gough, 2011). This suggests story completion *is* useful in capturing socially prevalent sense-making.⁵ It is notable that classed and raced dimensions of male body hair depilation, highlighted in previous literature (Frank, 2014), were virtually invisible in stories. Explicit references to class or race were almost entirely absent (only one story referenced David’s [“bright pink”] skin colour, and class was only referenced obliquely through middle classed consumption, Frank, 2014). Story completion, as a stand-alone method that requires participants to engage in a pre-determined and fixed story writing task, has limited potential to access such details if participants do not make them relevant. An alternative stem could be designed to evoke such details – not least through the name(s) used (Braun et al., 2018). Supplementing the story completion task with open-ended questions designed to elicit such details, using techniques from qualitative vignette research (see Gray, Royall & Malson, 2017), could also be a way to access this. We encourage researchers using story completion to consider how to evoke things that are potentially invisible to, and uninterrogated by, the participant group (e.g. the heterosexual imaginary; Ingraham, 1994).

This is the first published paper using story mapping technique (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As a technique, it highlights certain elements in the data, telling a different story to a 'standard' thematic analysis (for an example from the same project, see Jennings et al., 2018). We see story mapping as something akin to a 'vertical' thematic analysis – because our emphasis remains on patterns, but in the stories and their *unfolding* – rather than a more conventional ('horizontal') mapping of meaningful patterns *across* data items, regardless of where they might feature in the story (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Temporal, casual and evaluative features of story completion, central to its narrative form, can be lost in a conventional thematic analysis, and story mapping allowed us to retain relatively small but nonetheless revealing narrative details (e.g. David researching how to remove body hair) and to capture patterning in how the central character was constructed, and make sense of these details in the context of stories as whole data items. Furthermore, the story codas particularly highlighted ambivalent and ambiguous meanings of male body hair, depilation and modern masculinities. We have drawn only very lightly on Western story telling conventions (Hoffman, 2010) in this analysis, elements which have been far more fully explored in narrative analytic approaches (e.g., Becker, 1999). Narrative research may have much to offer story completion researchers, in relation to the analysis of stories, and the ways the analysis of the construction and structure of stories in narrative approaches may be important in understanding meaning production in story completion. We encourage narrative researchers to explore the value of adding what *might* be considered 'small stories' (see Georgakopoulou, 2006) generated through story completion, to their methodological toolkit.

Note

¹ It is tempting to interpret the report of no influences as reflecting a masculine ideal of socially autonomous individuality (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). However, research on women's body hair removal practices has found that women are more likely to attribute socially normative reasons for removal to other women than to themselves (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; see also Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008), suggesting conformity to a broader neoliberal ideal of socially autonomous individuality in both men and women's accounts of their body hair practices.

² How can we explain the low desirability of back hair and the fact that back hair is not one of the more common sites for depilation in the studies cited above? This apparent inconsistency might simply be explained by the lower incidence of back hair, compared to chest hair (e.g. Boroughs and Thompson 2014).

³ A fourth – but we think less likely – explanation could be that gay men were assumed to *already* be removing body hair/hairless so David must be not-gay.

⁴ In contrast, this was the most common David story in the New Zealand data (see Jennings et al., 2018), highlighting location as relevant to sense-making practices (and perhaps embodied possibilities).

⁵ Beyond hair removal, we also informally noted strong similarities between our (currently unpublished) story completion research on embryo donation for family building, and interview research with embryo donors and recipients.

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