Breaking gendered boundaries? Exploring constructions of counter-normative body hair practices in Āotearoa/New Zealand using story completion

Emily Jennings, Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke

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Emily Jennings, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Āotearoa/New Zealand

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

Victoria Clarke, Centre for Appearance Research, Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Corresponding author:
Virginia Braun
The School of Psychology
The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland Mail Centre 1142
Āotearoa/New Zealand
Email: v.braun@auckland.ac.nz

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About the Authors

Emily Jennings is currently working as Graphic Designer. She was an honours student in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland when she undertook this research.

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.

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

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Abstract

Do women with body hair continue to evoke disgust? Are men with*out* body hair read only as athletes and/or gay? To explore contemporary sense-making practices around apparently counter-normative gendered body hair practice, we developed a two-stem story completion task. We collected stories from 161 undergraduate students (129 women, 32 men) about David, who had decided to *start* removing body hair, and Jane, who had decided to *stop* removing body hair. We analysed the data thematically within a constructionist framework, resulting in three themes: 1) secrecy and shame; 2) the personal benefits of going against the grain; and 3) the personal is political. The 'personal benefits' theme included four distinct (gendered) subthemes: a) increased heterosexual attractiveness; b) increased sporting prowess; c) removal of a hassle; and d) liberation from conformity. These story data gave access to familiar, but also somewhat different, accounts than those collected through typical self-report measures.

Key words: depilation, female body hair, male body hair, thematic analysis

Body hair goes way beyond the biological, being imbued with socially-embedded meanings that exist alongside a range of (personal) body hair practices, as well as socio-political symbolism (Synnott, 1993). Normative body hair practices in contemporary Anglo/Western societies appear – in general – to be distinctly

gendered, mapping onto a general common-sense that men's bodies are hairy and women's are hair-free. Yet what is normative is complicated, changes over time and context, and is intersected by other group memberships. We locate our analysis first in relation to research on normative, then on counter-normative, gendered body hair practices in the Anglo/West.

Historical evidence points to body hair removal by (western) women and men at various times (e.g., Ramsey et al, 2009). However, the contemporary practice for women to normatively remove body hair from certain body site emerged as a practice in the early-mid twentieth century, related to changes in fashion as well as advertising practices, and continued to evolve as the century progressed (Hope, 1982; Riddell, Varto & Hodgson, 2010). Despite resistance to this norm within both Women's and Hippy movements in the 1970s and 1980s, a swathe of research from the 1990s and 2000s demonstrate very high – almost ubiquitous – removal of hair by women from the (lower) legs and underarms, and increasing proportions of women removing some-to-all pubic hair (Peixoto Labre, 2002; Ramsey et al., 2009; Riddell et al., 2010; Rigakos, 2010; Schick, Rima & Calabrese, 2011; Terry & Braun, 2013; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2005). With hair constructed as "taboo" (Smelik, 2015), body hair removal has become a *necessity* of acceptable (hetero) femininity, and women consistently report feelings of 'femininity' as well as 'attractiveness' as the most prominent reasons for (continuing) removal (Basow, 1991; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008) – although these actions are also often framed in terms of *personal* choice or

preference (Fahs, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2013; but see Terry et al, 2018), alongside other factors.

The story of male body hair practices is different. During much of the last century, men have generally been understood as body hair *retainers* (Martins, Tiggemann & Churchett, 2008). However, from the 1990s, coinciding with the rise of the 'metrosexual' (Boroughs, Cafri & Thompson, 2005; Fahs, 2013) and an aesthetic focus on the male body (Bordo, 1999), men's hair practices appear to have changed. Displays of hairless male bodies in advertising and popular culture, alongside advertisements for hair removal 'for men' (Immergut, 2010) *suggests* a de-gendering of body hair removal. And indeed, almost two-thirds or more of men in the United States, Australia and New Zealand report in surveys that they removed (or *reduced*) body hair, often from the pubic area, abdomen, or back (Boroughs, 2009, 2012; Boroughs, Cafri & Thompson, 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Martins, Tiggemann & Churchett, 2008; Terry & Braun, 2013). But while complete removal, or reduction (e.g., through trimming) seems to be a *common* practice for some men, at least sometimes, it does not appear to be *normative*. Indeed, *both* men's retained body hair and body hair removal practices occupy a somewhat flexible space of both being acceptable and even, *desired* in certain circumstances (see Terry & Braun 2013, 2016).

So what of the opposite? Body hair on women has been perceived by all genders as 'gross', 'disgusting' and 'repulsive' (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; Fahs, 2017), with negative judgement extending to the woman *herself* (Basow & Braman, 1998; Basow & Willis, 2001; Ferrante, 1988; Hope, 1982; Schreiber, 1997; Synnott, 1993).

Negative ‘perceptions’ of body hair on women highlight the ways in which body hair retention for women is ‘not acceptable’. Breanne Fahs’ (2011, 2012, 2014) real-life ‘experiment’ with women and body hair retention demonstrates that removal is so normative as to effectively be mandatory. Women stopped removing body hair during one semester as part of an extra credit assignment, and recorded and reflected on their experiences; men started to remove hair (Fahs, 2013). Viewing women’s body hair as ‘disgusting’ or ‘unhygienic’ was a key pattern (Fahs & Delgado, 2011) ‘internalised’ by many participants who felt dirty and tried to avoid exposure of the body hair, *and* expressed by others who were often hostile, disapproving, disgusted, angry and outraged (Fahs, 2011, 2012, 2014). Race, class and sexuality intersected, with more social policing of women of colour or working class women, who also felt more visibly ‘other’ when they showed body hair. Heterosexist and homophobic slurs were directed at ‘hairy’ women. This task highlighted to women that their (imagined) *personal choice* framing of their body hair practice was inadequate.

Despite the popularity and rhetorical valence of ‘choice’ discourse in neoliberal post-feminist contexts (Braun, 2009), Fahs’ work revealed women’s body hair practices to be highly regulated, with any individual woman’s ‘choice’ to remove body hair bound up in cultural expectations *and* ‘desire’ to avoid harsh social policing of transgression. Some studies (Basow, 1991; Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2005) have found women with lesbian and/or feminist identities reporting removing body hair at lower rates; likewise, for older women (Herbenick et al., 2010; Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2005) – but it is far from clear that these identities offer spaces of ‘viable’

resistance to appearance norms for femininity, and how they intersect with appearance norms is also likely to change depending on context (e.g., Li & Braun, 2017).

Hair removal by men was, until fairly recently, typically associated with particular groups of men (e.g. athletes, bodybuilders and [some] gay men; Boroughs, 2009; Fahs, 2013). However, despite an apparent commonality of hair reduction or removal among men, and although men with *less*-to-no body hair seem to be considered by many as most attractive (Basow & O'Neil, 2014; Dixson et al, 2010), it may better be characterised as an *opportunity*, not an expectation (Basow & O'Neil, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016). Men who have leg hair visibly removed, for instance, remain a minority on the street in Āotearoa/New Zealand and, for these reasons, we characterise male body hair removal as *non-normative*. However, many men do remove, and those that do cite reasons including enhanced perceived cleanliness, sexual appeal or attractiveness, muscularity or body definition, as well as the appearance of increased penis size, and improved sexual experience (Boroughs, 2009; Boroughs, Cafri & Thompson, 2005; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002, 2014; Martins, Tiggemann & Churchett, 2008). Men also participated in Fahs' project (2012, 2013), and worried about others perceiving them as gay; they reported receiving homophobic comments ('are you turning gay') from family members, indicating some social policing around (hetero)masculinity. Men reported they felt a reduction of masculinity, but also found ways to 'masculinise' the process of body hair removal, including through adopting 'rebelling against the norm' as a masculine position.

Fahs' (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) lived experiment demonstrated body hair non-removal among women to be more strictly policed than body hair removal among men. We wanted to explore this gendered variability through people's constructions and meaning-making around counter-normative body hair practices. We were interested in sense-making in its own right, and as a means to assess whether body hair practices as gendered opposites do present *as norms*. This fits with a constructionist and poststructuralist understanding of norms as productive, rather than just as common, and as limiting and constraining the potential for individuals to actually live embodied difference (Gavey, 1989).

Method

We (2nd/3rd authors) developed a two-stem story completion design to explore counter-normative hair practice perceptions in the UK and New Zealand (see also Clarke & Braun, 2018). Story completion is a *projective* technique, requiring a person to tell a story following a (usually brief) scenario (Clarke et al., 2017). The participant has to draw on the sociocultural sense-making resources at their disposal, which makes it a useful technique in exploring people's assumptions. Further, because it doesn't ask people their *own* opinion, the story completion method allows access to a range of meanings around the topic, rather than just those that are socially desirable (Clarke et al., 2017). We developed two very brief story stems, reversed to capture likely counter-normative hair practice: *David has decided to start removing his body hair…*; *Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair…* The protagonist names were deliberately common ones and aligned (but not exclusively) with the dominant ethnicity.

The study was approved by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee; participants were recruited through an undergraduate research participation scheme in the School of Psychology. It was advertised for credit within the participation scheme, across two semesters. Those with initial interest read a participant information sheet online; those who chose to participate were directed to the task delivered via SurveyMonkey. They were instructed to 'read the opening sentences of a story and then write what happens next,' and informed there were no right or wrong ways to complete the task, to not spend too long thinking about it, and that the stories had to be at least 10 lines/200 words long (to receive credit). They were presented with one stem. After writing their story, they were directed to a brief online survey containing demographic questions and some about body hair perceptions and practice.

In total, 188 students participated and were invited to write one story. An unfortunate typographical error led to 27 stories *by men* being written in response to a stem that read: ***Jane*** *has decided to* ***start*** *removing* ***his*** *body hair*. This stem was effectively 'misgendered'; subsequent stories were about a Jane who *started* hair removal. These stories were hence excluded from the overall thematic analysis, giving an analysed sample of 174 stories; 90 about Jane and 84 about David (see Table 1) – a few (13) participants inadvertently wrote both a Jane *and* a David story; we have retained these (in one, the Jane stem was 'misinterpreted' as starting *to remove*, but we retained that story). Allocation to stories was initially random, but later we assigned Jane stems to a selection of male participants, to gain a more even spread of data.

Given psychology student demographics, the majority of the final sample of 161 participants were women (79.89%, 20.11% male, no-one identified a different gender), and aged on average 21. The majority identified as heterosexual, Pākehā (of European descent), middle class, and were able-bodied and not parents (see Table 2). Behaviourally, the vast majority of women participants reported current hair removal: underarm (95.3%), lower leg (92.3%), some/all thigh (78.4%); and pubic (89.8%). Men typically reported no current hair removal, except 64.5% for pubic hair. However, whereas women most commonly *reported* removal of *all* pubic hair (42.2%), men most commonly (38.7%) reported *trimming*. These levels of hair removal practice are fairly expected in New Zealand (see Terry & Braun, 2013)

[INSERT TABLES 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE]

Overall, stories ranged in length from 6-457 words (some participants did not follow instructions!), with an average story length of 150 words. We analysed the data using the approach to thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2014), inductively and within a constructionist framework (e.g., Burr, 2003), focusing on both latent and semantic levels of meaning. Analysis was led by the first author, with regular input and engagement by second author throughout the stages of familiarisation, coding, and theme development and revision. The data were treated as a single set, and patterns explored *across* both David and Jane stories; gendered difference was kept alive as a *possibility* throughout analysis, but wasn't a determining framework. Ultimately, the themes cut across gender, but manifest in gendered ways. Following a series of reviews, three final themes were identified: 1) secrecy and shame; 2) the personal benefits of going against the grain;

and 3) the personal is political. We developed four subthemes within theme 2: a) increased heterosexual attractiveness; b) increased sporting prowess; c) removal of a hassle; and d) liberation from conformity. The finalised themes often captured latent meaning operating in different ways throughout the dataset. In illustrative quotations, minor typographical errors have been corrected.

Analysis

Somewhat unexpectedly, neither protagonist was depicted as anything other than heterosexual in virtually all stories; the possibility of a non-binary or transgender identity for David or Jane was never included. Certain patterns of meaning were expressed across stories, regardless of the protagonist; others appeared almost exclusively in Jane or David stories. We highlight this gendering below, as relevant.

Theme 1: Secrecy and shame

Body hair practices were often depicted as something to be kept secret. However, the object of secrecy was gendered: for David, it was the *practice of hair removal*; for Jane, it was the *outcome*. Although not easily quantifiable, this difference mapped onto a seeming gendered affective tenor for the stories. Despite reference to emotion, David stories often seemed characterised by a logical/rational or cognitive tone, even when emotion was mentioned, compared to a more emotional tenor for Jane stories. For instance:

> With the arguments that he came up with, David decided that he was right in removing unwanted body hair as it would make him happier (F46)

> Therefore David decided to shave off all of his body hair himself, as he was too nervous and afraid to wax (F68)
>
> Her friends have all given their approval, saying that although they don't think that they could survive without shaving, she should do whatever makes her happy (F8)
>
> Later on in the week she becomes anxious and afraid other people will spot her body hair, which will certainly be very embarrassing (M52)

In stories that focused on practice, David was frequently characterised as taking care to ensure the *process* of removing his body hair was secret. For example: "When he got home he made sure no one else was around then went into the bathroom and removed all the hair from his arms and legs. After it was done, he liked the way his skin felt but was still a bit embarrassed" (F80). Embarrassment appeared as the main reason David kept his body hair removal a secret (from whom was typically not specified): "After locking the bathroom door, to reduce the risk of being caught doing something he's not sure is exactly masculine, he gets to work on his chest" (M50). The precautionary measures David undertook to keep the secret were explained (explicitly here, and implicitly in other extracts) as due to a fear of being 'caught'. The word "caught" here evokes David as doing something 'unacceptable' or 'embarrassing' and (potentially) punishable. The use of "not exactly masculine" evokes body hair removal as not *really* masculine, yet still leaves open the possibility for it to *be* masculine in some way. Indeed the phrase "get to work" constructs the practice within a traditionally masculine framework (see also Fahs, 2013). A

construction of body hair removal not being masculine was fairly prevalent in the accounts: “removing body hair is not exactly a staunch kiwi bloke thing to do” (F12).

Many extracts described a range of hair removal methods David considered or ‘tried out’:

> David started with waxing, but he decided that it hurt too much. So he decided to try shaving but he didn’t know how to do it and ended up cutting himself all the time. Frustrated, David decided to get it lasered off. After many months of treatment David finally had his hair removed for good (F78)

Such accounts depicted David as someone who did not *know* how to remove his body hair, and was thus incompetent at it. The commonality of descriptions of David’s ‘trial and error’ process positioned men as non-body hair removers, situating body hair removal as non-masculine, and indeed implicitly feminine, in a binary-gendered context. That David sometimes gained knowledge by asking women what to do – “He asked his older sisters what was the best way to remove leg hair, shaving or waxing?” (F86) – positioned body hair removal as essentially feminine knowledge/practice. This, despite *facial* hair removal being *normative* for men, hipster beards and increases in beardedness (Terry & Braun, 2016) notwithstanding. This was also one way in which David stories were often characterised by a rational/logical tone.

In Jane stories, instead of *practice*, there was a focus on the *outcome* of stopping hair removal as something she kept secret. As in David stories, secrecy was not

explicitly stated as an expectation. Instead, Jane was described as only having body hair *when* she was able to keep it hidden:

> because the weather is turning cold and she will be covering up anyway. She doesn't have a partner and won't be swimming anytime soon, so what's the point? […] She personally doesn't mind seeing her body hair, it's usually removed for the benefit of everyone else not having to look at it (F23)

This extract illustrates a common description of Jane's decision as dependent on the *season* – a 'hairy in winter' logic, where the extra layers of clothing make women's body hair present but *effectively invisible*. The 'secrecy' of the winter hairy Jane was reiterated in stories that noted she was without a partner, or wouldn't be swimming. This extract (and others) explicitly position Jane's body hair removal "for the benefit of everyone else". The depiction of Jane *only* growing out her body hair when it is not visible echoes a pattern in other research where public body hair visibility for women becomes deeply problematic through the constructions of it as 'gross', 'disgusting' and 'repulsive' (Fahs, 2017; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; also Braun, Tricklebank & Clarke, 2013). The construction of body hair on women as repulsive connects to that identified in the stories of Jane with body hair as unattractive: "boys are no longer interested in her at all" (F26); "the girls call her unfeminine and gross while the guys who do care about her lack of hair removal don't understand how her boyfriend can still find her attractive when she has as much hair as him" (F121). The heteronormativity of this extract (indeed most of the Jane stories) evoke a normative idea of embodied (hetero) feminine unattractiveness with body hair, reflecting the construction of hair removal as about attractiveness (Basow, 1991;

Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004; Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008). Digressing slightly from secrecy, some stories positioned Jane as *able* to grow her hair *because* she was coupled, and her boyfriend 'didn't mind': "Jane has a lovely boyfriend who doesn't mind other way" (F64). Such stories reiterated sociocultural understandings of women's bodies as for men's consumption, and men as effective 'gatekeepers' around embodied femininity and appearance (see also Fahs 2011).

Other stories, however, presented visible body hair as troubling for Jane's heterosexual relationship, an account echoed by Fahs' (2011, 2012, 2014) participants, who recounted sometimes *extreme* expressions of disgust around visible body hair by partners and family members. Although disgust featured only rarely in Jane stories, and often in a way which positioned it as an 'incorrect' response, Jane was frequently depicted as *returning to* normative body hair practices: "She now has to go to a salon and strip off her "winter coat" from top to bottom to impress her new boyfriend possibility and to make her feel sexy and save a whole heap of embarrassment" (F23). Despite strong resistances (discussed later), Jane often ultimately complied with normative expectation.

The different patterning of secrecy and shame across David and Jane body hair stories suggests different enactments of gender – the *practice* of removing body hair for men requires a gendered-feminine *knowing*; the *outcome* of having body hair for women positions them outside appropriate gendered embodiment – "all the boys teased her because of her hairy 'man legs'" (F56) – and (heteronormative) desirable

femininity – illustrated here by one of the stories in response to the typographical error stem: 'jane *starts* removing body hair':

> If she refuses to do so she is insulted as being masculine and homosexual by her peers. At her work in a supermarket her male manager gives privileges to other female workers who remove body hair and are seen as being more attractive. At home her girlfriend says she would be more attractive if she removed her body hair. All of these negative messages around what is attractive and what is not, what is heterosexual and feminine accumulate to motivate Jane to start removing her body hair (M146).

So although secrecy and shame coded both gendered hair practices as indeed counter-normative, David, unlike Jane, was only rarely depicted as *stopping* hair removal: "in the end, David only removed his leg hair once, as he decided it was a rather bothersome activity" (F150). This was not least because he accrued clear benefits from the practice (discussed in Theme 2), suggesting indeed that there are less stringent, and more flexible, (counter-normative) body hair possibilities for men than women (Fahs, 2011, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016; Terry et al., 2018).

Theme 2: The personal benefits of going against the 'grain'

For both David and Jane, engagement in counter normative hair practice was commonly depicted as producing *personal* gains. The majority of stories set up a scenario in which their existing practice (hair removal, for Jane) or state (hairy body, for David) was problematic for them as individuals; indeed, the benefit was effected through the removal of something more or less aversive. These issues and personal

benefits existed across quite different scopes, but were nonetheless patterned and quite distinctively gendered. For David, the two main benefits of hair removal were enhanced heterosexual desirability and sporting prowess – both normatively masculinised benefits. Body hair was constructed as negatively impacting David in both domains, in a way that legitimated and almost mandated removal, through bringing David into (better) alignment with heteromasculine norms. He can be understood as *gaining* heteromasculine social/sexual capital (de Visser, Smith & McDonnell, 2009; Michael, 2004) through his action (see also Clarke & Braun, 2018). For Jane, the two main benefits were a freedom from the hassle and burden of hair removal, and a freedom from oppression – empowerment and liberation. Although these were individually beneficial for Jane, hair retention was not in itself constructed as desirable, and she did not *gain* heterofeminine social/sexual capital through her action. Hence the operation of 'personal benefits' as a theme was different across David and Jane stories

Increased heterosexual desirability

> David overheard the girl he has a crush on complaining about boys who have 'too much' hair on their chest or back. […] His two sisters have on many occasions recommended that he get his chest and back waxed because they find it unattractive for men to be 'too hairy' (F61).

Body hair removal was frequently depicted as enhancing David's attractiveness to women, aligning with recent research showing less hairy men as the 'most' attractive (Basow & O'Neil, 2014; Dixson et al., 2010; Dixson & Rantala, 2016). Yet body hair removal was rarely depicted as a practice *every* man could do to enhance hetero-

attractiveness. David was typically constructed as 'extra hairy': "David always had a lot of body hair on his face, legs, chest and legs" (F65); "he has noticed that he has more body hair than his other peers" (M91); "as David was in the middle of shaving he realised he was what you would call a hair man" (F85). This trope of excess hair (on men) as *un*attractive (rather than just 'not attractive') was common in the data (see also Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016), and provided a justification for removal: a 'too hairy' man needs to remove hair to become not *too* hairy, and within acceptable bounds of heteromasculine embodiment.

In many stories, David's 'excess' hairiness was a 'realisation'; likewise, he was also frequently depicted as having *just* realised that women do not like *too much* body hair on men:

> Sarah had mumbled that she would rather he did [remove his body hair]. Before that it hadn't occurred to him to be a problem. […] What if they'd suddenly all got together and decided that guys should be hairless from now on? (F99)

In such stories, David effectively identified himself as positioned outside of heteromasculine sexual capital (Michael, 2004), and often was depicted as becoming self-conscious: "David has decided to start removing his body hair because he is becoming too self-conscious for his own good." (M94); "[his body hair] was making him feel insecure" (F77); "not only has that made him feel progressively more uncomfortable with his own body, but he has also noticed that he over time, become progressively more socially awkward" (M40). As these extracts illustrate, having *too much* body hair caused David distress to the point that it affected his

behaviour and how he interacted with others. This depiction renders being *too hairy* not only as undesirable, but also as an issue that *needs* to be resolved. Although David was positioned as having a choice, hair removal to align with 'normatively' or 'desirably' hair/less masculinity was the *preferred* choice. Only in a few stories did he stop removal and/or regret his decision:

> This makes him anxious and to gain low self-esteem. He stresses and later decides he will live as it is, therefore stops removing his body hair. He regrets he even started to remove it in the first place (M52).

The unattractiveness of 'too much' body hair on David related to two different facets. First, body hair was depicted as hiding David's muscles: "now David can see the definition of his chest, no longer obscured by dark hair. He can't wait to show off, hair-free, at the beach" (F84); "[body hair removal] makes the muscles on his legs and abdomen stand out more, which impresses the ladies, and makes him feel good" (F28). This links with constructions of both the desirable and the normative; the masculine body as muscular (Bordo, 1999). Quite differently, hairiness was depicted as reflecting a 'lack of control': "David talks to his best friend who's a girl and she tells him that girls like it when guys take care of themselves and keep themselves groomed because guys body hair can get gross" (F95). This evokes a contemporary (hetero)masculinity of body work, care and consumption (Frank, 2014), of aesthetic labour practices (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017), which have only recently shifted from (total) feminisation.

Body hair removal was depicted as effectively the only solution to David's problem of having 'too much' body hair: "He decided that removing it from some areas was

the best option" (F77); "either he exists, or his body hair. Someone has to go. And today at least, it's his body hair" (M40). David's insecurities over having 'too much' body hair were depicted as David's individual problem requiring an individual solution (body hair removal), which was positioned as resolving the issue: David could be rid of insecurities, because he was now (heterosexually) attractive:

> David noticed while he was standing on the beach that he was receiving a lot more female attention that usual, and was approached by a lot more women than usual as well (F69).
>
> After a few months of treatment, David officially become "hair free", he met a girl at the beach and he is happier than ever before (F132).
>
> Now David is hairless from head to toe and has become a different man. His crush is now into him and he asked her out and she said yes (F137).

The David stories suggest that the construction that *all* men are able to leave their hair 'all natural' (Fahs, 2011) may no longer apply (see also Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016). However, an alternative reading of these data is that the only way participants *could* make sense of David's practice was through constructing him *as* excessively hairy, and therefore, that hair removal for men remains both unfathomable, and accessible (under certain conditions), simultaneously – hair removal remains potentially coded feminine, and all 'work' to achieve the 'just-right' hair/less heteromasculine attractiveness needs to be hidden (as per Theme 1) (see Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Sporting prowess

David-as-athlete was a very common trope, with David depicted as gaining in sporting prowess through (sometimes reluctant) hair removal: “because he is a swimmer and he needs to remove all his body hair because his swimming needs to be more slip-stream like as he wants to become a professional” (F28). In some of these stories, David was depicted more as a ‘regular guy’ athlete: “his [high school soccer] team members all shaved their legs and they told him that you tend to play soccer better with shaved legs, and also that the ladies love it. Therefore he decided to give it a go and start shaving” (F146). And his practice of hair removal appeared motivated by team or group ‘norms’ – sports being one of the few ‘subcultures’ where men routinely engage in some body hair removal (Boroughs, 2009; Fahs, 2013): “David read in some sports magazines that it is quite normal for guys to remove their body hair when they are active” (F62); “But now, having joined water polo, he cannot stand sticking out like a clown at a wedding [because he has body hair]” (F57).

However, more commonly, he was positioned as *personally* gaining from hair removal, as a particularly committed/(wanna-be) professional: “with regards to the removal of his body hair, David believes this gives him an added advantage in his chosen profession of elite cycling” (M73). Often, the scope of the gain was miniscule-but-meaningful: “because he is a professional swimmer and believes that this will help him with his swimming and getting those extra milliseconds off the clock […] he has been trying to compete for the Olympics but his times have been just off qualifying and he believes that if he can shave some time off then he will he will be able to compete for his country” (F87). In stories like these, David was depicted as

gaining not only sporting performance, but also a professional career as an athlete. The logic behind the depiction of David as a (wannabe) professional appeared to construct him as particularly *committed* to his chosen sport:

> Because he has become increasingly involved with triathlons and is now becoming pretty competitive. By starting to remove his hair he will be able to cut even more time off his personal best time by being more streamlined in the water and on the bike (F140).

> In order to become faster at swimming. He heard that minimal body hair can help improve speed while in the water and since he is taking swimming more seriously now wants to do everything he can in order to maximise his speed (F82).

The construction of David as doing 'everything he can' positions hair removal as outside the range of normal activities for David (and men, generally), and within the remit of particularly committed (professional) athletes. Body hair removal becomes something David *has* to do, to be better and faster, rather than something he just wants to do. Like 'excess hair', athletic commitment and gain positions hair removal as incongruous with *everyday* masculine practice.

Although this was predominantly a *personal* gain (or a team gain), it was also sometimes inflected by sport or team norms which positioned hair removal as the right thing to do (in that delimited context). The construction of body hair removal as an 'extreme practice' relates directly back to theme 1, where body hair removal was constructed as not *exactly* masculine/acceptable. In *this* subtheme, David appears to

engage in a masculinity 'trade-off' – any 'risk' through hair removal is counterbalanced (or trumped) by gains through athletic prowess.

Removal of a hassle

Jane's body hair removal practice was very commonly framed within a discourse of 'hassle', and Jane positioned as *benefiting* in various ways through the removal of this hassle, when she stopped hair removal (a few David stories also positioned body hair removal within this discourse of hassle). The majority of Jane stories positioned this as a key issue, and/or as a motivator for Jane to stop removing her body hair. Our framework of 'hassle' encompasses different dimensions, including the time, effort and cost involved, and negative outcomes:

> She feels that it's too much work (M159).
>
> Because it's too costly, VERY painful (F64).
>
> Because she was sick of how much time and energy it was taking up (F32).
>
> It is an annoying procedure and takes up a lot of her time and money (M3).
>
> Because she was tired of the daunting and tiring process that it is to remove all the hair in particular places every week (F46).
>
> Because it was becoming a hassle in many ways. It was expensive, time consuming and it also left her with a nasty sore rash (F77).

In some cases, the hassle explicitly oriented Jane's hair removal as *for others*: "because it is a pain having to shave and wax every day to keep herself hairless for

her spouse" (M52); "doesn't believe the effort of continuous shaving and waxing is worth the approval of others" (F79). Many stories, like F79's extract here, positioned the hassle of removal such that it was not worth it: "because she found it to be too time consuming and felt her time was better spent on other activities" (F37). Stories identified *better* uses of Jane's time, energy or money: "now that she has stopped removing body hair she has found that she has more time for other things in life" (F72); "she would save a lot of time and money, and be able to use those money on something else that is… worth more of an investment" (F48).

Body hair removal was regularly constructed as requiring cost and effort and having negative outcomes, and therefore something that is a hassle for woman to engage in. A cost-benefit analysis within many Jane stories weighed in favour of non-removal, and she could use the time/money for more important or meaningful activities. However, unlike in the two David benefits noted, Jane's benefit around removal of hassle was constructed less as *need*, and more as a *want*. So while for David, hair removal was constructed as somehow essential, for Jane hair retention *offered up* new possibilities for her life, but nothing (not her embodiment, or her identity, for instance) effectively *mandated* that she stop hair removal.

Jane becomes liberated from conformity

A final individual benefit to Jane was a liberation from (the pressures of) conformity, through stopping hair removal. Somewhat akin to David-the-athlete, Jane was constructed an *atypical* woman, positioning conformity to social pressure around body hair removal as normal and expected, even as that expectation was depicted as restrictive and unfair. In the stories, Jane was depicted as having become

‘enlightened’ and hence able to resist her (previously) normative activity: “she feels that it is something she does because of societal pressures” (F34); “she guessed she gave in to the peer pressure – she just wanted to do what her friends were doing” (F64). As discussed in ‘secrecy,’ Jane sometimes returned to body hair removal, because the social pressures were too hard: “She doesn't want to start again but she's feeling very pressured to” (F26). However, in other stories, a liberation from conformity meant Jane was able to continue to resist normative expectations: “Jane is not bothered by others opinions and doesn't believe the effort of continuous shaving and waxing is worth the approval of others” (F79); “Jane no longer cares about what people will think if she no longer removes her body hair”(F24). In these, it was Jane’s ‘attitude’ – not caring about others’ evaluations – that allowed her to resist normative societal pressures. These stories had an individualised orientation, framing Jane as changing *herself*. She was depicted as *atypical* in her ability to resist societal pressure:

> [Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair …] which is fairly weird for a girl to decide. However Jane is reasonably wise enough to make this decision. Girls removing hair is just a social requirement which does not have to be carried out by everyone. Jane knows what is best for her and also what she feels comfortable in (F1).
>
> She feels confident with this decision as she is independent woman and feels confident enough to go against social norms (M3).

> Jane is a thoughtful and particularly well balanced individual. Many other girls would have gone back to shaving once the negative attention from the community got too overwhelming (F21).

Most Jane stories depicted stopping body hair removal as difficult. Stories like these created a contrast between unusual, thoughtful, well-balanced, enlightened women – who resist social pressure – and those who do not. This echoes old 'cultural dope' ideas and debates, and constructs women who succumb to societal pressure as 'at fault,' when women's engagement around hair is often more complex and thoughtful (see Terry et al., 2018). It required an *unusual* woman to make the embodied choice, which liberated her from conformity (see also Terry et al., 2018). It was typically through 'not caring about others' opinions' that Jane reached a position of liberation, freedom and pleasure:

> Jane refuses to care anymore and this has led her to freedom and empowerment (F39)

> Jane is enjoying not removing her body hair, she feels liberated and more relaxed without the stress (F42)

> She was a free, hairy, women, and it felt good (F45)

Such stories contained a strong sense of poignancy or envy for an imagined freedom, sometimes containing explicit expressions of admiration: "Power to Jane" (F60); "she is just feeling like a bad ass bitch. Yay for Jane!" (F39). These stories read often as powerful tales of resistance, and their frequency in the dataset suggest 'resistance to gendered body hair norms' has become part of the sociocultural zeitgeist, with

concurrent changes for embodied possibility. Yet they also inadvertently frame resisting societal pressure as an issue for *individuals* to overcome, echoing the individual responsibilisation of neoliberal and post-feminist discourse (Gill, 2007). This suggests, perhaps, that resistance and change are most easily conceptualised in such ways. Moreover, prioritizing individualized 'empowerment' and 'liberation' are common ways (problematic) body practices are now framed (Braun, 2009), aligned with post-feminist constructions of (feminist) empowerment through choice (Gill, 2007).

Theme 3: The personal is political

The final theme captured Jane stories where the focus was on broader impacts, situating stopping removing body hair as a (feminist) political action for social change towards gender equality, rather than (or as well as) an action that brought personal benefit. In a small number of stories, Jane was depicted as frustrated by 'unfair expectations' for women to remove their body hair whereas no expectation existed for men:

> Jane has also especially become sick and tired of society's attitudes toward how females should have little or no body hair. It is unfair that men are not required to groom but women are in order to be 'attractive' (F24).

> She also doesn't like that men don't face the same pressure to be hairless as women do, and thinks that by taking a stand and not removing her body hair she will be able to contribute to discourse on the issue, and perhaps change

> the opinions of others about female beauty standards once they see a woman proudly displaying body hair (M180).

Stopping removal was depicted as the way Jane could 'make a stand' against society and its unfair expectations of women: "as she feels like she should not conform with societal views on keeping her armpits and legs shaved. Jane thinks enough is enough and will finally take a stand on societal norms" (F58).

In contrast to the 'Jane liberation' subtheme, this theme captured the way Jane's actions were positioned as motivated outwards – attempting to change gendered norms, rather than herself. These stories align with feminist theorising around the personal as political, and individual actions contributing to affirming or disrupting norms. Such stories situated the problem of 'unfair expectations' as sociocultural, and society *itself* as needing to change for women to have options. The main way Jane's resistance was depicted as helping to change the (problematic) norms was through 'empowering' other women to (also) resist hair removal, as well as other gendered, norms:

> She is doing this for not only herself but for a lot of women in her community. […] Jane hopes that her taking a stand in not removing her body hair will empower other women around her to stop and think about what women really want. […] Jane thinks this may then lead to the question of what gender roles play in society (F58).

The reasoning relied on the construction of the body hair norm for women as an 'invisible' and mandatory expectation, with women not questioning this until Jane

stopped removing her body hair. Jane's actions offer other women the chance to shift from cultural dope to cultural resister.

A second less commonly expressed idea was that Jane's actions would change how body hair on women is read: "Jane decided to take a stand against the twisted ideals of society and try to change the way people saw natural women" (F5). Body hair on women is understood as normatively viewed very negatively (see Fahs, 2011, 2012, 2014), but this negative take was positioned as produced rather than natural or inevitable, and hence open to (even *requiring*) change.

Stories that expressed this theme evidence a meaning-framework where body hair practices are understood as gendered and unfair towards women, and thus in need of change. Ultimately, these stories constructed Jane as admirable, as her decision is 'for others,' and attempting to make society fairer and hence better.

Concluding Comments

Our analysis identified that body hair practices remain normatively understood in fairly gendered ways in Āotearoa/New Zealand, with women's 'choice' not to remove heavily constrained, and men's 'choice' to remove legitimised, but really only in certain circumstances. Despite the suggestion that increases in men removing/reducing body hair is a sign of increasing restrictions on male bodies (Boroughs, 2009), our analysis suggests 'flexibility' around men and body hair practices (Fahs, 2012; Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016), although an 'excess' discourse may be starting to mandate hair removal (on certain body parts; see Terry & Braun, 2016). For women, body hair practices appear to remain as restrictive as they have

previously appeared, albeit there seems to be movement beyond disgust as the dominating theme (Fahs, 2017) policing embodied ('hairy') femininity, and an embracing of frustration and resistance around these norms. When comparing body hair practices for men and women, then, we could theorise that the practice is becoming in some ways *more gendered*, as a discrepancy increases between restriction (women) and flexibility (men), even as it might seem less so – because removal applies across genders. That we generated stories containing a broad critical socio-political analysis of gendered body hair practice (for Jane) suggest perhaps that available meaning-making resources (discourse) around gendered body hair – and maybe embodied practice – is shifting. But it may (also) reflect method, as the stories were not tethered to 'what *will* happen', and were not based on the participants' reported *personal* perspectives.

We are excited by the potential of story completion to tell both familiar and unfamiliar stories about body hair practice. The majority of the themes mapped onto meanings around body hair practices which previous studies (both qualitative *and* quantitative) have identified, such as viewing it as a private matter, enhancing attractiveness for men, decreasing attractiveness for women, athletes, and feminist retention, and personal choice (Basow & O'Neil, 2014; Braun, et al., 2013; Fahs, 2011, 2012, 2014; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). That these stories contained themes that resonated with past research suggests these constructions remain prevalent sense-making frameworks within and across different Anglo/Western contexts. However, the method also evidenced a common theme not much evident in existing literature, including a pronounced thread of 'resistance' around women and body

hair removal! - That hair removal (for women) is a hassle, taking time, energy and resources, and producing negative outcomes. In a neoliberal context where 'choice' frameworks predominate (Braun, 2009; Gill 2007), it may be that an indirect method for asking about body hair accesses otherwise inaccessible stories. Yet the frequency with which such stories appeared suggested it *is* part of the sociocultural common-sense. This situates story completion as beneficial for both accessing familiar stories (suggesting the stories told really do capture available sense-making, a kind of 'convergent validity'), and previously untapped meaning-making. This suggests self-report methods, which both require a self-knowing subject and one who can avoid 'social desirability' biases, potentially miss certain meanings; ones which may prove useful for disrupting the 'individual choice' rhetoric that pervades much body hair discourse. We of course note a final caveat that these meanings may prove somewhat particular to our sample composition (mostly white, young, heterosexual students in Āotearoa/New Zealand); certainly, sport featured more commonly in the New Zealand David stories than in stories generated with a UK sample (see Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Overall, asking people to write stories about (counter-normative) body hair practices generated a dataset in which both familiar and unfamiliar body hair meanings and practices were articulated. This suggests either that the method gets at meanings other methods have not typically accessed, and/or that ideas around (gendered) body hair practices *are* shifting and sociocultural sense-making resources are too (at least in Āotearoa). We look forward to further research exploring both method and practice, to try to disentangle this question.

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Table 1: Gender of participants by story stem

STEM COMPLETED	Women	Men	Other	Total
Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair...	64	13	0	77
David has decided to start removing his body hair...	55	16	0	71
Both stems: Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair... David has decided to start removing his body hair...	10	3	0	13
Subtotal	*129*	*32*	*0*	*161*
Jane has decided to *start* removing her body hair...*	0	27	0	27
Total	129	59	0	188

* stories excluded from the analysis reported in this paper.

Table 2: Sample demographics (n= 161)

Age	Mean = 20.51 (Max=39, Min=18)
Gender	
Male	32
Female	129
Other	0
Employment	
Full-time employment	4
Part-time employment	85
Full-time student	135
Part-time student	3
Sexuality	
Lesbian	2
Gay	3
Bisexual	12
Heterosexual	138

Other*	5
Not specified	1

Racial/Ethnic Background**

Pākehā/ New Zealand European	80
Māori	11
Pacific	5
Asian	48
Other European/'Caucasian'	11
Other**	17
Not specified	1

Social Class

Working Class	21
Lower/ Working Middle Class	4
Middle Class	105
Upper Middle Class	6
Upper Class	2
No class identification	23

Disability	4
Relationship Status	
Separated	1
Married/Civil Partnership	7
Partnered	81
Single	69
Other***	3
Children	3

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* ‘Other sexuality’ included: Asexual, mostly gay - homosexual tendencies, not sure, Pansexual (2)

** Multiple ethnic identities were possible; we have collapsed more than one into the ‘Pākehā’, Pacific and Asian categories. ‘Other race or ethnicity’ comprises race/ethnicities not as frequently selected and/or focused on nationality rather than race/ethnicity per se. These included: African, American, Brazilian, Kiwi, Latin America, New Zealander, Papua New Guinean, South African, Uruguayan, Latina, Latina- American, British, English.

*** ‘Other relationship status’ included: Casual relationship with boyfriend, Complicated, Multiple partners.