

FASHIONING THE VAGINA

A Qualitative Investigation of Young Women's Perspectives

Alexandra Lee James (BA Hons) (BCom)

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Abstract

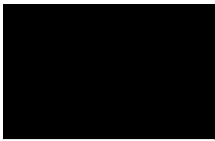
This thesis examines young women's understandings and experiences of genital fashioning. It is a unique contribution to literature by considering and comparing the range of contemporary genital fashioning practices. I conducted qualitative research with young Australian women aged 18 to 30 years old. A series of focus group sessions were conducted with 28 women. Following this, 10 single person interviews were conducted in order to explore key ideas and discussions which emerged in focus group discussion. On the basis of the analysis I argue that genital fashioning has emerged as an extension of beauty regimes. Idealised bodily standards are now applied to female genitalia, which has emerged as a site for comparative evaluation and improvement. I found young women's engagement with genital fashioning practices held different meanings and interpretations, as well as varying opportunities for agency.

Young women engage with genital fashioning within a context shaped by new social influences and pressures about embodiment. Within contemporary discourse, young women are exposed to postfeminist messages which assert individual capacity for agency, expression and (somewhat compulsory) assertive sexuality. Dually, young women experience a variety of strong social pressures and influences from the mainstream media, sexual partners, and peer groups which encourage their participation in practices of genital fashioning. These contradictory social expectations were negotiated by the participants who recognised capacity for agency within the context in which pornographic tropes have become ubiquitous. The research findings contribute to broader debates about agency and choice within a postfeminist, sexualised context. For the most part, the participants in this research respected other women's choices about genital fashioning and this was grounded

in a shared understanding of the contradictory and complex cultural context currently inhabited by young women. Intervention strategies and policy changes are recommended to enhance public education about diversity in genital appearance. I recommend that increased presence of diverse representations of female genitalia within the public sphere would aid awareness of normal genital diversity and self-acceptance.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution that that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis.



Alexandra James

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List of Abbreviations and Definitions

Bleaching: Refers to the lightening of the pubic region, including the vulval area and anus.

Pubic hair may also be bleached or dyed.

Brazilian Wax: A form of pubic depilation involving the removal of all hair from the genital and anal region (Labre 2002 p. 117; Trager 2006 pp. 118-120).

FGCS: Female genital cosmetic surgery. Includes all available cosmetic surgical options such as 'labia minora reductions, vaginal tightening ... labia majora "augmentations", pubic liposuction (mons pubis, labia majora), clitoral hood reductions, hymen "reconstruction", perineum "rejuvenation", and "G-spot amplification"' (Braun 2010 p. 1393) as well as "'O-Shots", "vulval reconstruction" and "de novo vaginoplasty" (WHV 2013 p. 7).

FGM: Female genital mutilation, also known as female genital circumcision or female genital cutting. Defined by the World Health Organization as 'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons' (2008 p. 1).

Genital hygiene products: a variety of products in the form of soaps, creams, washes, wipes, and deodorants which are designed to 'freshen' the genital region and 'improve', minimise or erase smell.

Genital Piercings: The insertion of a barbell or captive bead to the clitoris, perineum or labia.

Genital Tattoo: Tattoos applied to the outer labia and/or mons pubis.

Labiaplasty: The most popular of FGCS procedures. Removes the portion of labia minora protruding below the labia majora, or corrects labial symmetry (McDougall 2013 p. 775).

Merkin: A pubic wig, applied to the pubic area. The application of merkins requires the removal of all pubic hair. Available in a range of designs and colours.

Vajazzling: Involves the removal of public hair and application of diamantes in the form of a motif or pattern to the mons pubis.

Chapter One

Introduction

The world's like vagina centric
(Marissa, Focus Group Participant)

In this thesis I investigate the trend of genital fashioning. I do so through qualitative research with young Australian women. Recent studies have indicated an increase in women's participation in practices of genital fashioning, such as Brazilian waxing and female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun, Ticklebank & Clarke 2013; Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi 2005, McDougall 2013). My research explores the way in which women's bodies are represented in the mainstream media. I examine the influence of pornography in the creation of aesthetic genital norms. Through interview and focus group discussion, I consider the way in which young Australian women relate to their bodies. Peer groups, family members and male sexual partners are discussed as important factors in women's negotiation of their bodily production. I identify the genital fashioning practices which young women perceive to be normative or mandated. This analysis grounds broader examination of contemporary feminine production and agency within a postfeminist context.

My research of genital fashioning is situated within broader analyses of femininity and the production of the female body. As such, the works of Judith Butler and Sandra Bartky provide a strong basis for understanding the social imperative for producing the body. Butler's work is of further significance in considering the way in which the body is imprinted with cultural meaning. The negotiation of social power is also represented through the embodiment of cultural scripts. Women's decisions to engage with time consuming and

sometimes painful disciplinary practices, such as genital fashioning, evidence the strength of the cultural imperative to comply with broader standards of appearance.

In Australia, female engagement with pubic depilation has become normative, with 60.9 per cent of surveyed undergraduate women reporting current pubic hair removal (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 893). Australian data indicates Medicare claims for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty to have grown from 640 cases per annum to 1,565 cases per annum in the years 2000 to 2011 (Women's Health Victoria 2013 p. 8). Similar growth is reported in the US and the UK (Braun 2010 p. 1394). However, publicly funded and audited practices of FGCS are indicative of medical cases only (Women's Health Victoria 2013 p. 8). Reported figures are, therefore, 'conservative' given that the majority of FGCS procedures are performed in private practice (McDougall 2013 p. 775). According to Braun (2010 p. 1394), 'there are few comprehensive or reliable data with regard to the frequency or outcome of FGCS'. Despite this relative dearth of statistical data, it has been estimated that FGCS is the 'fastest growing surgery sector in the United States' (McNamara 2006 p. 2). Moreover, it has been suggested that the increased demand for FGCS appears to be cosmetically, rather than medically motivated (WHV 2013 p. 8). A large variety of other genital modifications also exist. These include genital piercings, tattoos, vajazzling, bleaching, dying, the applications of merkins, and the use of feminine 'hygiene' products. The List of Abbreviations and Definitions (pages 6–7), provides detailed information about these practices. These practices have emerged in conjunction with idealised standards for female genitalia. This standard encompasses a hairless, symmetrical, minimised form, characterised as a 'clean slit' (McDougall 2013 p. 775) in which the labia minora is invisible.

In this chapter I introduce the concept of genital fashioning and the social context in which the trend has developed. I consider the central issues and debates relevant to the evolution

of the vagina as a site for alteration and beautification. I will also discuss the way in which female genitalia has entered the public sphere of discussion. Understandings of bodily production and discipline will be outlined and proposed as a way by which to ground conceptualisations of genital fashioning trends. Although limited and still emerging, academic inquiry has emerged in response to this development and I review this here. I will identify the way in which my research contributes to, and extends, existing academic discussion. Following this, I provide an outline of my research questions and thesis overview to illustrate the way in which I address these questions. My method and methodological approach will be outlined and I will also provide a comprehensive explanation for my terminological decisions. In beginning this discussion, however, I will outline the way in which practices of genital fashioning have emerged over recent decades, and the media discussion which has accompanied this change.

Emergence of the Public Vagina

Mainstream media commentary has documented the change in genital fashions, which started to emerge in the late 1980s but became entrenched as normative in the 2000s. In *The Huffington Post*, Friedland lamented ‘the disappearance of pubic hair’ (2011). *Jezebel* featured a critique of the advertisement for ‘Clean and Dry Intimate Wash’, the article titled ‘Your Vagina Isn’t Just Too Big, Too Floppy, and Too Hairy – It’s Also Too Brown’ (West 2012). *My Perfect Vagina* (2008), a documentary presented by Lisa Rogers, investigated the increased demand for female genital cosmetic surgery and graphically depicted a teenager undergoing a labiaplasty. Rogers contended that increased visibility of female genitalia, as a result of depilation practices, has precipitated the demand for female genital cosmetic surgery. Australian media outlets have also reported on the trend toward genital fashioning. For example, appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was an article titled ‘Why The

Brazilian Wax Won't Wane' (2010), while *Daily Life* also published an article which detailed the increased demand for female genital cosmetic surgery (Jacob 2013). *Hack*, a radio segment of ABC's Triple J, also aired an episode, 'The Vagina Show' (2015), dedicated to discussing the trend of labiaplasty.

A significant proportion of theorists have attributed development of the genital ideal to pornographic representations of female genitalia (Braun 2009 p. 242; Braun, Tricklebank & Clarke 2013 p. 481; Green 2005 p. 175; Jeffreys 2005 pp. 78–83; Koning, Zeijlmans, Bourman & van der Lei 2009 p. 69; Schick, Rima & Calabrese 2011 pp. 47–45; Rodrigues 2012 p. 791). However, homogenous genital representations in mainstream and softcore pornography have also been impacted by Australian censorship laws (Jones & Nurka 2015; Moran & Lee 2013; Sharp & Tiggemann 2015). According to the Australian Classification Board guidelines, softcore pornography must be restricted to 'discreet genital detail but there should be no genital emphasis' (Australian Government ComLaw 2008 p. 8), thereby prohibiting representations of protruding labia minora (McNamara 2013 p. 778). Moreover, the idealised genital standard is also represented and reinforced via other means. Medical marketing promotes the minimised labial form. According to Tiefer, the proliferation of cosmetic surgery has been enabled by US regulatory developments which permit the advertising of FGCS (2008 pp. 467–468). Marketing of FGCS is also heavily conducted online (Liao, Taghinejadi & Creighton 2012 p. 1). Changes in fashion, such as bikini design, have been further noted to contribute to the trend of genital depilation (McDougall 2013 p. 775). The 'clean slit' genital form is indicated in images in women's magazines. According to Bramwell (2002 p. 189), where women's (clothed) pubic region is visible, genitalia appeared as a 'smooth curve'. Overall, I argue that female genitalia are no longer confined to the private domain, but have entered the public sphere through discourse and representation.

Public debate and reporting of celebrity engagement with genital fashioning has contributed to understandings of normative standards for genital fashioning, and entrenched the perception of genital fashioning as ubiquitous. Representations of femininity as adopted by female celebrities serve to broadly determine the boundaries of (un)acceptable feminine embodiment (Kanai 2015 p. 322). For example, US actress Cameron Diaz openly criticised actress Gwyneth Paltrow for failing to engage in pubic depilation (*Daily Mail Reporter* 2014). Diaz has now reportedly changed her perspective and encourages embracing pubic hair (*Daily Mail Reporter* 2014). *Cosmopolitan* Magazine detailed actress Eva Longoria's recommendation to undergo Brazilian waxing as a means to enhance sexual pleasure (Graham 2005). More recently, reality TV star Khloe Kardashian publically described her own engagement with vaginal tightening, which is largely targeted to 'improve' the appearance of genitalia (Schott 2016; *This Kardashian-Approved Vaginal Laser is "Life-Changing"* 2016). Celebrity endorsement and discussion of genital fashioning has also served to introduce and promote practices of genital fashioning within contemporary culture. Most famously, in 2000, an episode of HBO's *Sex and the City* featured a number of central characters undergoing full pubic waxing (Labre 2002 p. 120). As a result, widespread discussion and awareness of pubic waxing was generated and solidified. Venema (2016) reported for the BBC, 'ever since *Sex and the City* tackled the subject, what women do with their pubic hair—trim, shave, pluck, wax or let it all hang out—has become a topic for discussion'. Indeed, academic inquiry also noted the significance of *Sex and the City* in establishing the trend of pubic waxing. Tiggemann and Hodgson found a positive correlation between frequency and amount of pubic hair removal and the viewing of *Sex and the City* (2008 p. 895). The positive portrayal and normalization of Brazilian waxing in *Sex and the City* is noted by Labre (2002 pp. 114–121) who asserts that substantial media attention has directly promoted the trend of Brazilian waxing in this and other forums.

In the mainstream media there are numerous illustrations of the way in which female genitalia is now publically located. According to feminist theorist Rosalind Gill:

In the British media in summer time I see a daily barrage of hostile cartoons, newspaper articles and 'jokes' about women who have 'failed' to depilate properly and allow one or two pubic hairs to show while wearing a bikini, alongside the ongoing normalization of female genitalia in their hairless, prepubescent form. (Gill 2007a p. 75)

Media commentary deploying broader narratives about the presence, and increasing normality, of genital fashioning practices has become a part of the cultural context that young women inhabit. As will be discussed, the trend toward genital fashioning is situated within understandings of the body as culturally mediated and produced.

The Disciplined Body

Nelle, one of the participants in my research, described female bodies as routinely subjected to disciplinary beauty regimes:

And the idea that women, just females being females are something to be fixed, and there's something gross about it, there's something unnatural, there's something shameful about it. And I think that shame really does permeate a lot of the way we're socialised. (Nelle, Focus Group Participant)

Over several decades feminist theorists have argued that women are taught that their bodies require alteration and maintenance in order to meet acceptable standards for presentation, and feminine embodiment. De Beauvoir's statement, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (de Beauvoir 2011 p. 283) highlights the way in which bodies are culturally located and produced. The feminine body is continually produced via disciplinary practices requiring of self-surveillance (Brush 1998 p. 38). Women are compelled to produce their body in accordance with prescribed standards of appearance via coercive, yet

dispersed cultural powers (Bartky 1997 p. 107). According to Bartky, bodily production is essential to the construction of feminine identity and women risk social sanction should they fail to conform to the notion of what it means to be a woman (p. 104). Bartky explains that the disciplinarian enforcing embodied feminine norms is 'everyone and yet no one in particular' (p. 103); a concept which I will repeatedly return to throughout this thesis.

The sanitisation of the female body through disciplinary practices is exemplified through body hair removal. The depilated female body is positioned as 'natural' through cultural messages which conceal the work involved in producing the feminine form (Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 p. 339). Women's own internalised associations between body hair and 'dirtiness' also reflect the way in which women must engage in continual maintenance in order 'to keep the dirt at bay (Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 p. 339). Juxtaposed with male hirsuteness, failure to conform to cultural standards of feminine presentation results in significant social sanctions (Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 pp. 334, 341).

The most uniquely female physical characteristic, female genitalia, has attracted specific 'pudendal disgust' (Tiefer 2008 p. 475). Braun and Wilkinson (2001 p. 21) state 'the vagina is often represented as a part of the female body that is shameful, unclean, disgusting'. Female genitalia is now subjected to cultural standards of appearance and requires specific maintenance. As considered by McNamara (2006 p. 4), to have female genitalia no longer guarantees 'normal' feminine embodiment. Rather, 'normal' female genitalia is represented within ideals promoted by the medical industry and mainstream media. As a result, there are a variety of products and procedures marketed to women as a means by which to 'normalise' their genitalia. Indeed, the perception of idealised genital standards as the new normal, serves to cast anything resembling exceeding the minimalist form as 'abnormal'.

Moreover, fashioning female genitalia is an extension of pre-existing practices to a body site that was a previously ignored component of western beauty regimes. For instance, depilatory practices have long been normative for female underarms and legs within western cultures. In an historical analysis of US women's magazines, it was determined that strong campaigning for the removal of underarm hair first emerged in 1915, followed by a similar campaign for the removal of leg hair beginning in 1941 (Hope 1982). The depilation of female genitalia, by contrast, is relatively recent, having emerged as a trend in the 1980s (Jeffreys 2005 p. 79) and early 1990s (Labre 2002 p. 117, 120). However, the meanings and symbols associated with these broader practices provide context to the extension of these norms to the genital region.

Whilst limited, existing research about genital fashioning has generally been conducted in the context of feminist studies of beauty and body work. Braun's prolific research provides a key basis in discussions of genital fashioning. Within the field of feminist psychology, Braun has examined cultural representations of female genitalia (Braun & Kitzinger 2001, Braun & Wilkinson 2001), cultural understandings of pubic depilation (Braun, Ticklebank & Clarke 2013), and evaluated existing knowledge and debates about female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun 2005, Braun 2009, Braun 2010). To date, other academic research on genital fashioning has primarily investigated the trend toward pubic depilation. Broader examinations of body hair removal frequently underpin these studies. Practices of pubic depilation have been investigated with respect to rates and rationale for engagement (Braun et al. 2013; DeMaria & Berenson 2013; Herbenick, Hensel, Smith, Schick, Reece, Sanders & Fortenberry 2012; Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008; Toerien et al. 2005), cultural implications (Labre 2002; Smolak & Murnen 2011), and medical complications (Trager 2006).

Female genital cosmetic surgery has, more recently, attracted academic inquiry. Studies have sought to investigate the cultural context in which women are increasingly undergoing these procedures. In particular, research has examined the changes in US medical legislation, online and print advertising, and technology, which have facilitated the increased practice of FGCS (Braun 2010; Davis 2002; Green 2005; Koning et al 2009; McDougall 2013; Tiefer 2008). Other cultural considerations have included the depiction of genitalia with pornography, and the way in which 'makeover culture' normalises practices of cosmetic surgery (McDougall 2013; Tiefer 2008). Women's motivational factors for undergoing FGCS have also been examined within a number of disciplines, psychology and medical practice in particular. Within this context, academic literature has also sought to examine the way in which women exercise agency given cultural standards for genital appearance. This has been particularly prevalent in discussions of FGCS when contrasted with debates regarding Female Genital Mutilation. Theorists have sought to highlight the cultural nature of FGCS procedures, which thereby contextualises the choices women make.

Research pertaining to other practices of genital fashioning has been particularly limited. In particular, academic investigation of vajazzling is generally limited to an acknowledgement and definition of the practice. To date, the most in depth discussion of vajazzling was conducted within the field of media and fashion studies (Turney 2016). Practices of genital piercing and tattooing have been considered only within broader studies of body modification.

Research Questions and Contribution

My research extends knowledge of the practices and meanings of genital fashioning. Rather than considering the practices of genital fashioning in isolation, as with the existing research discussed above, I investigate female genitalia as a new site for alteration and improvement.

I contend that it is reasonable to consider the practices of genital fashioning as related and interconnected particularly where certain practices are unavoidably dependent upon others. For example, vajazzling, or the application of merkins, first require the removal of all pubic hair. I argue the vagina is now subject to regulatory practices in accordance with idealised genital standards. This standard has given rise to the increasing normality of genital fashioning practices.

Qualitative research investigating women's experiences and understandings of genital fashioning is limited, particularly within an Australian context. Research has yet to examine women's own conceptualisations of, and experiences with, idealised genital standards. Little is known about women's engagement with, and feelings in relation to, practices of genital modification. This thesis also contributes to academic debate about how these practices may be conceptualised: questions remain as to whether these practices are experienced by women as a component of hygiene regimes, beauty and fashion regimes, a factor in the creation of a sexualised body, and/or a factor in the construction of identity. As such, this research aims to provide an appreciation of young women's conceptualisations of such practices, and their feelings and experiences in relation to the practices and associated social influences.

My research considers the way in which young women experience and understand contemporary practices genital fashioning and associated genital ideals. I also investigate the relationship between feminine embodiment and genital presentation. Practices of genital modification considered include all forms of alteration, including pubic depilation, female genital cosmetic surgery, piercing and vajazzling. I extend previous research through this examination of all practices associated with modifying female genitalia, and position female genitalia as a site for beautification. Higher rates of participation in genital fashioning have

been found within younger generations, with women aged 20 years or younger significantly more likely to remove pubic hair than their older counterparts (Toerien et al 2005). Therefore, I chose to investigate a young cohort of women which were likely to be engaged with these practices.

I examine young women's experiences and feelings about practices associated with genital fashioning with respect to perceived social pressures, influences and expectations. This research aims to contribute to broader discussions of the construction of the body, and women's lived experiences of contemporary cultural beauty practices, thereby adding to understandings of femininity in contemporary Western societies.

The research questions guiding the research are:

- 1) How do young women understand contemporary practices of genital modification?
- 2) What do these conceptualisations of genital fashioning indicate about femininity in contemporary Western society?

In order to pursue these questions, I conducted qualitative investigation with young women aged 18 to 30 years old. A series of focus group sessions were conducted with 28 women. Following this, 10 single person interviews were conducted in order to explore key ideas and discussions, which emerged in focus group discussion. The data were coded and transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

As a means to ground the analysis within a theoretical framework, I employ Gill's concept of critical respect (2007a). Gill proposed the concept of critical respect as a means for feminist researchers to negotiate the complexities between agency, choice and cultural context. Stating 'women make choices ... but they do not do so in conditions of their own making'

(2007a p. 72), Gill posits the necessity of situating the accounts provided by research participants within a cultural context. According to Gill:

The role of the feminist intellectual must involve more than listening and then saying 'I see'. Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and above all, to locate them in a wider context. (Gill 2007a p. 77)

Critical respect has been used successfully within other research as a basis from which to approach participant narratives (see Coy & Garner 2010; Evans, Riley & Shankar 2010; James 2014; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey 2012). I provide a full discussion of this in Chapter Three. In accordance with this framework, throughout my thesis, I seek to prioritise the voices of participants whilst situating their narratives within broader understandings of female genitalia and the body.

Chapter Overview

The structure of my thesis was designed to sequentially investigate the trend toward genital fashioning, with each chapter providing a theoretical understanding for the next. The present chapter introduces the scale and scope of the thesis.

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I review the relatively limited literature pertaining to the practices of genital fashioning. I begin by describing the broader context of beauty work and hair removal before outlining the statistical trends of pubic depilation. Debates about the normative nature of pubic depilation are considered and the problematic association of the hairless genital region and the prepubescent form. Within the literature, the significance of a sexual partner has also been identified with respect to genital depilation. The possible relationship between pubic depilation and increased demand for female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) is discussed. I provide an overview of the emergence of FGCS and its

increased statistical prevalence. The trend toward the practices of FGCS and depilation are considered with regard to the creation of genital ideals, particularly those depicted in pornography. Current literature associates both the hairless trend, vulval 'slit' and invisible labia minora with mainstream pornography. Reports indicate that surgeons have also attributed increased demand for FGCS to pornographic norms. However, the medical portrayal of female genitalia is also problematic in its limited representation of diversity. As the literature has shown the medicalised construction of 'normal' genital appearance is socially constructed and produced. Demand for FGCS is contextualised by a culture of consumer choice wherein the option for cosmetic surgery is presented as a means by which to exercise agency. Other options for genital fashioning, such as vajazzling, have attracted limited academic enquiry. As such, I consider broader discussions of body modification practices as a means to ground the discussion of genital piercing and tattooing. I end the chapter with a discussion of social comparison. I highlight the way in which social comparison enables the embodiment and reproduction of feminine norms. This chapter establishes currently available information about genital fashioning practices. In identifying central debates about such practices, this chapter works to both ground further discussion of genital fashioning and highlight the gaps within the literature which my research seeks to address.

In Chapter Three I provide a theoretical and methodological basis for my research. I ground my research within broader understandings of the body as a 'medium of culture' (Bordo, 1993 p. 90). Disciplinary practices, such as genital fashioning, work to imprint social and cultural scripts upon the body. I draw upon feminist interpretations of Foucault as a means to conceptualise the ways the body is a site revealing of social control and power relations. I argue that engagement with body modification is contextualised by the repercussions of

failure to correctly embody socially mandated characteristics. I utilise Bartky's (1997, 1998) and Butler's (1988, 1989, 1990, 1999a, 1999b) work to explain the way in which feminine embodiment enables the construction of gendered identity, and argue that the self is materialised through the repetitive performance of beauty work. Construction of gendered identities within contemporary culture is also characterised by distinct cultural turns. I discuss the way in which postfeminist, neoliberal, and consumer ideologies have impacted upon the production of the self. As a component of this, the sexualisation of western culture is also considered with respect to contemporary norms of femininity. A feminist post-structural perspective underpins my conceptual framework. Gill's theorizing is central in the perspective of post-structuralism which I employ. Gill's work also underpins the methodological perspective I employ. Gill's (2007a) concept of 'critical respect' provides a methodological framework for examining the accounts provided by young women in relation to their experience of genital fashioning and associated ideals. I explain that the application of critical respect involves prioritizing participant perspectives but also contextualizing the presented narratives within a broader cultural context. In order to ensure respect for participant accounts, I discuss the importance of research reflexivity. The chapter ends with the full detailing of methods undertaken to pursue investigation of my research questions.

Chapter Four provides a necessary investigation of the specific practices associated with genital fashioning. I identify the scope of practices associated with genital fashioning and the way in which young women conceptualise genital fashioning. In particular, I consider the ways in which the participants discussed and contrasted the individual practices associated with genital fashioning. The participants discussed the perceived normative nature of some practices more than others. For example, pubic depilation was discussed as a widespread, common practice, particularly for younger generations. This may be contrasted with genital

piercings and tattoos, which were considered non-normative and, therefore, subversive. Engagement with non-normative practices are also considered to imbue the individual with greater capacity for agency. In this chapter, I provide a description of genital fashioning and how young women conceptualise individual genital fashioning practices. In establishing this definition, I provide grounding for subsequent discussion about the construction of idealised genital standards.

In Chapter Five I investigate the role of linguistic and pictorial comparison in establishing contemporary norms for female genitalia. I contend that media representations of female genitalia are critical to the creation and reproduction of genital norms. It is through social comparison that participants in this study learned how they might produce their body in accordance with broader standards. The power of the comparative capacity of visual representations of female genitalia is enhanced given the ordinarily concealed nature of genitalia in everyday life. To provide a basis from which to discuss current representations of female genitalia, I more fully describe the genital ideal of my participants; a hairless pubic region with minimised labia and clitoris, pale colour and pleasant smell. The mainstream media, inclusive of advertising, is discussed as a significant site that displays images or relays information about genital modification practices in accordance with idealised genital standards. The media is considered as an important informational source about contemporary standards for genital appearance. Pornographic representations of female genitalia are then discussed as a central site for the depiction of genitalia. The depiction of genitalia within softcore and mainstream pornography is identified to reflect genital ideals and portray an unrealistic standard of female genitalia. In this chapter, I also contrast academic assertions regarding the significance of medicalised representations of female genitalia with participant accounts. In general, medical representations were not regarded

as significant, participants did not discuss the medical industry's capacity to construct and display visual representations of female genitalia. Rather, participants considered the medical industry as an impartial source of information with regard to genital appearance and modification practices. Overall, mainstream and widespread representations of female genitalia are described as forming sites of comparison for genital ideals. At the end of the chapter I consider the way in which genital comparison could be mobilised as a positive influence in combatting contemporary ideals of genital appearance. I contend that representations of diverse genitalia could usefully counteract negative internalisation of socially constructed standards.

In Chapter Six I critically analyse the social context in which young women in this study decide to engage with genital fashioning practices. I consider the pressures and expectations that were seen by participants to impact on their participation in genital fashioning. Social norms relating to idealised genital standards are considered an indistinct, intangible source of pressure and influence. Sexual partners were identified as the most significant source of pressure and influence on young women's engagement with genital fashioning. Male sexual partners make direct requests for female genital presentation. Young women perceive male sexual partners to have expectations with regard to genital appearance. As a result, genital fashioning is also motivated by a desire to meet these perceived expectations. Other forms of direct pressure and influence with regard to genital presentation emanate from peer groups and family members. Siblings are discussed as particularly significant in young women's decisions to initially undertake genital fashioning. I also address the potential for pornography to form an indirect influence on women's engagement with genital fashioning. Female agency and capacity for choice is considered with respect to these social forces. I argue that women are 'knowledgeable actors' who exercise agency in a context beyond their

determination. All of the participants in my research identified social constraints on women's choices to engage with genital fashioning. However, participants presented a distinction between those who engage with genital fashioning 'for the right reasons', and those that capitulate to social pressures. Participants considered it an individual's responsibility to withstand social pressure, despite the social context.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I consider the key findings of the thesis and situate them within broader discussions of the body and femininity. I consider how the thesis findings both reflected and deviated from current academic literature with respect to genital fashioning. I discuss the implications of the research and the possibilities comparison may form a positive means by which to educate women of 'normal' diversity in genital appearance. I also consider the potential for educational programs to form important platforms in altering contemporary understandings of genital ideals and suggest changes for Australian policy. Also considered in this chapter are the possibilities for future research pertaining to genital fashioning.

A Note on Terminological Inexactitude

What does it mean for a woman not to be able to use the only word that can accurately denote her genitalia? How has that word become 'socially unacceptable? (Rees 2012 p. 11).

Terminology associated with female genitalia is linguistically charged and revealing of cultural power. The shame associated with female genitalia has affected both the scope of discussion about female genitalia and the terminology developed to refer to it. Indeed, the term 'pudendum' derives from the Latin term *pudere*, meaning 'that of which one ought to be ashamed' (Kapsalis 1997 p. 5). According to Braun and Wilkinson (2001 p. 17) 'vagina' is 'a word that is hard to say and a topic that is difficult to talk about'. Common application of

the term 'vagina' to refer to what is more accurately described as the 'vulva' has attracted criticism. According to Lerner (1994 p. 31), the reduction of female genitalia to merely the 'vagina' effectively results in female circumcision through language.

Anatomically, the vagina refers specifically to the birth canal, 'the "passage" between a woman's external genitals and her cervix' (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 28). However, whilst 'vagina' may be popularly misappropriated, acknowledgement regarding the all-encompassing deficiency of 'vulva' is necessitated. According to Frueh (2003 p. 138), neither term accurately describes the entirety of female genitalia.

Confusion about various terms, including 'vulva', may be as a result of early education. Lerner (1994 p. 31) contends the majority of children are taught that female sex organs are solely comprised of the 'vagina'. Indeed, Braun and Wilkinson (2001 p. 28), note the conventional application of 'vagina' refers not to the anatomical composition of genitalia, but is applied within 'lay talk' to incorporate all aspects of the female sex organ. Moreover, popular medical discourse and leading surgeons have further (mis)employed the term 'vagina' in relation to cosmetic genital procedures which, frequently, seek to specifically alter the 'vulval structures' (Frueh 2003 p. 138). Braun and Kitzinger (2001 p. 146) note the perception of medicalised anatomical terms as 'clinical and impersonal' (Sanders & Robinson 1979 p. 29).

Feminist writers have noted the problems and uncertainties associated with deciding which term to describe female genitalia. Braun and Kitzinger (2001 p. 146), question 'what can women call their own organs?'. Etymologically 'cunt' most accurately denotes the complete female sex organ in entirety (Rees 2013 p. 7). However, they also highlight that this term is

exceptionally derogatory and embroiled with conceptualisations of hate which sexualise female genitalia from the perspective of heterosexual men.

Other options available are often euphemistic, such as 'down there' or 'privates', and 'strengthen the view that a woman's genitalia are something mysterious, vague and taboo: "eclipsed" though the avoidance of naming' (Ussher 1989 p. 20, cited in Braun & Kitzinger 2001 p. 146). Moreover, the application of slang terminology is problematic as a result of ambiguous and imprecise interpretation (Braun & Kitzinger 2001 p. 153). Indeed, Braun and Kitzinger (2001 p. 154) demonstrated the range of meanings applied to slang for female genitalia, finding their respondents to provide, on average, 3.9 different meanings for each term.

The complexity of terminological reference to female genitalia has resulted in numerous feminist attempts to reclaim terms laden with culturally symbolic meanings, such as 'vagina' and 'cunt' (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 25; Rees 2013 p. 7). Feminist activists have sought to recast and challenge representations of female genitalia and position the 'vagina' as a political symbol that characterises womanhood and empowerment (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 pp. 35–26). Allan and Burrige (1991 cited in Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 28) also urge the academic application of the term 'vagina' to reflect ordinary usage referring to the female genitalia in its entirety.

Exemplifying the reclamation movement, the producer of *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler (cited in Braun 1999 p. 515) explained she referred to the 'common-sense' vagina, encompassing 'all the bits "down there"', rather than the 'medical' vagina. Ensler (1998 p. xx, also cited in Braun 1999 p. 515) stated:

We haven't come up with a word that's more inclusive, that really describes the entire area and all its parts ... "Vulva" is a good word; it speaks more specifically, but I don't think most of us are clear what the vulva includes.

In an attempt to contribute to, and reflect, grass roots feminist activism, I employed the term 'vagina' in reference to the entire female genital region in my recruitment and data collection. This ordinary familiar term 'vagina' was intended to support comfortable communication whilst making, albeit, a minor contribution to the feminist goal of reclamation.

Conclusion

In this thesis I contend that the emergent idealised standards for genital appearance have generated a culture where female genitalia forms a new body site for beautification and alteration. The varying practices of genital fashioning work together cohesively in order to produce a genital region in accordance with contemporary appearance standards. The investigation of young women's perception of genital fashioning contributes to our understanding of how contemporary standards of femininity are embodied and experienced. This research reveals the cultural context in which women decide to discipline their bodies. Women's engagement with genital fashioning is contextualised by a variety of powerful social forces including media representations, beauty marketing and the pervasive influence of pornography. Indeed, the participants in my research detailed direct instruction from male sexual partners and siblings to engage with genital fashioning practices.

There is a documented increase in concern about genital appearance. According to Simonis, Manocha and Ong (2016 p. 4) almost all surveyed Australian general practitioners reported to have been asked about the normality of genital appearance by patients. It has been argued that female concerns of genital appearance have precipitated the demand for genital

fashioning practices. However, there are few qualitative studies that investigate the way in which young women understand, interact, and resist the emergent ideals for genital appearance.

Underpinning my research are understandings of the body as socially mediated and constructed. The practice of genital fashioning is considered as a component of feminine bodily production and discipline. The analysis of genital fashioning and associated ideals is important for considering the way in which young women interact with their bodies and society within contemporary culture.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This review will outline the literature that exists in relation to the various practices of female genital fashioning. Within a limited body of literature, young women have been identified as increasingly engaging with practices of genital fashioning (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 230; Toerien et al. 2005 p. 403). As limited scholarly research exists in relation to all practices of genital modification, this review will focus primarily on what is known in relation to pubic depilation and female genital cosmetic surgery. The potential significance of pornography in the growth and development of the trend of female genital fashioning has been identified throughout much of the literature and will be discussed in detail. However, the representation of female genitalia within the medical industry, combined with the technological and structural changes evident within the industry, may be seen to bear on female decisions to undergo genital cosmetic surgery in the context of consumer driven makeover culture. Broader understandings of body modification practices are discussed with reference to genital piercings and tattooing. I end the chapter with a discussion of the production of femininity, social comparison, internalisation and reproduction of feminine beauty norms.

I begin the review by outlining the context of beauty work and hair removal before moving to genital fashioning practices.

The Broader Context of Beauty Work and Hair Removal

The increase in genital fashioning is contextualised within broader understandings of beauty work. In particular, pubic depilation is an extension of longstanding customs of body hair removal and the ways in which gendered meanings are ascribed to the hirsute body. Research by Basow (1991), Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008), Tiggeman and Kenyon (1998), Tiggman and Lewis (2004) and Toerien et al. (2005) has documented the now normative requirement for a hairless body in numerous Western countries including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 890). The removal of leg, underarm, pubic, and albeit less commonly, facial, stomach and arm hair requires the female body undergo a continuous and potentially painful transformation in order to conform to the feminine ideal (Toerien et al. 2005 p. 400). The recent emergence of this hairless trend may be differentiated from historical hairless norms, such as that in Ancient Egypt, on the basis of differing gendered expectations (Hope 1982 p. 98; Toerien, et al. 2005 p. 399). In a pioneering study, Hope (1982) identified the progression of the US advertising industry's 'assault' on leg and underarm hair, post-WWI, beginning an era in which female depilation has become ubiquitous. Subsequent studies, spanning a number of decades, seemingly demonstrate ever increasing engagement with practices of female depilation; later research details higher rates of female practices of body hair removal. Indeed, Basow's (1991) study demonstrated the 'normative' extent of female depilation in the United States; 80 per cent of surveyed women reporting to engage in at least occasional depilation of their leg and/or underarm hair. Following this, Australian research found 98 per cent of 198 female undergraduate students remove leg and/or underarm hair (Tiggemann & Lewis 2004 p. 381). Most recently, British data found 99.71 per cent of the 678 women surveyed have removed some body hair at some time in their lives (Toerien et al. 2005 p. 402). According to

this research, the most commonly targeted body sites for depilation were, respectively, the underarms, legs and pubic area (p. 402).

Female body hair removal may clearly be discerned as a normative practice within Western society (Smolak & Murnen 2011 p. 515), however the extension of the hairless trend to the pubic area warrants specific attention given the distinct, ordinarily unseen and inherently sexualised, nature of this site. Although understandings of general body hair removal may prove useful in the consideration and contextualisation of this phenomenon, it is necessary to consider the individual characteristics of this practice (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 891). Labre (2002 p. 116) considers it unsurprising that the hairless norm has now extended to the genital region given the increased visibility of the female body as a result of various fashion progressions, such as smaller swimming costumes.

Practices and Trends in Public Depilation

Methods of genital hair removal and alteration include shaving, waxing, trimming with scissors, sugaring, depilatory creams, threading, plucking, epilation, electrolysis and laser hair removal (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 226; Trager 2006 p. 121). Although shaving is often reported as the most common method of genital hair removal (Herbenick et al. 2012 p. 682; Trager 2006 p. 120), primarily due to its low cost and accessibility, waxing is used most commonly for extensive pubic hair removal (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 226). The options for pubic hair fashioning are extensive, ranging from trimming, to styling into specific designs, to a full Brazilian wax, which involves removal of all hair from the genital and anal region (Labre 2002 p. 117; Trager 2006 pp. 118–120). Pubic hair removal may be differentiated from all other forms of hair removal, including bikini-line hair, given that the pubic region is not ordinarily visible to the public eye (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 891).

Available Australian data from almost a decade ago indicated 60.9 per cent of women sampled currently engage in pubic hair removal, 75.5 per cent of sampled women having ever done so (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 893). In recent years reported rates of reporting bikini-line hair depilation range between 50 per cent and 100 per cent, although the figures are usually at the higher end of this spectrum (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480). Similar trends have been observed in the UK for over a decade. For example, Toerien et al. (2005 p. 402), found 85.69 per cent of their British respondents have removed pubic hair and 31.71 per cent have removed more than bikini-line hair. Overall, studies from a variety of countries which investigated more than bikini-line pubic hair removal found between 32 per cent and 64 per cent of women depilate 'most or all pubic hair' (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480). Moreover, prevalence of pubic depilation is evidenced to extend across varying demographics, DeMaria and Berenson's investigation into engagement with grooming practices within a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse women in the US finding 'it is more common than not for women to engage in pubic hair grooming' (2013 p. 229). However, the technique and style of pubic hair depilation differs across various racial groups. According to DeMaria and Berenson:

Compared with Hispanics, White and Black women were more likely to groom, and initiated grooming at a younger age ... Hispanic women were significantly more likely to use wax as a grooming mechanism than both Blacks and Whites. (2013 pp. 230–231)

Women of colour may experience heightened requirements for successful conformity to feminine embodiment (Fahs 2011 p. 494). According to Fahs (2011 p. 494), perceptions of body hair are associated with distinct classed and racial assumptions. In a study of US university students, Fahs found that 'women of colour and/or working-class women

reported more familial regulation about body hair and far more social penalties for growing out their hair than white or middle class women' (2011 p. 494).

Research within Australia, New Zealand, the US, and the UK, has demonstrated the significance of age in the removal of pubic hair (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480; Herbenick et al. 2012 p. 678; Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 893; Toerien et al. 2005 p. 404). In general, younger women are more likely to remove pubic hair, and more likely to remove substantially more pubic hair, than their older counterparts (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 226; Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 893; Toerien et al. 2005 p. 404). This finding suggests that the practice of vulval hair removal may be increasingly common for younger women, particularly as they may be considered the prime targets of media attention which further propagates the hairless genital norm (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 892). Research indicates that the trend to engage with pubic fashioning now begins during adolescence. Trager (2006 p. 117), for instance, notes that 'some girls start to remove pubic hair soon after they begin to develop it ... it is not uncommon to see 11 and 12-year old girls with pubic razor stubble'. The emergent practice of 'virgin waxing', a procedure performed in New York on prepubescent girls in order to permanently prevent future hair growth (Hambrett 2012; Cohen 2012 p. 5), is further evidence of the increased prevalence of hairless trends amongst young women.

However, debate currently prevails among researchers as to the whether the depilation of vulval hair may be considered a normative practice. Depilation as a normative practice would signify a broad cultural change, juxtaposed with the previously accepted and normal state of having hair on one's vulva. Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 891) contest the designation of 'normative', arguing that pubic depilation is not yet standard practice drawing on their research from the early 2000s. However, more recent findings demonstrate a

significant proportion of women reporting pubic hair removal, and increasing support for considering the practice as normative (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480; Glass, Bagga, Tasian, Fisher, McCulloch, Blaschko, McAninch & Breyer 2012 p. 1187; McDougall 2013 p. 775; Trager 2006 p. 117; Toerien et al. 2005 p. 403). The increasing prevalence of depilation may contribute to the popular consideration of the practices as normative. Whilst women are reluctant to consider their own practices as influenced by normative requirements, they consider it applicable to other women (Tiggemann & Lewis 2004 p. 385).

Potential Risks and Benefits of Pubic Depilation

Public health campaigns neglect to address the safety of depilation practices and the 'risks of waxing services are not intuitive' (Parayno & Heacock 2014 p. 1). In actuality, as a result of pubic depilation, women risk skin irritation, such as razor burn, infectious folliculitis and viral infections, including genital warts and herpes simplex virus (Smolack & Murnen 2011 p. 507; Trager 2006 p. 122). Women with susceptible immune systems, such as those with diabetic conditions, are at particular risk of complications resulting from depilation; evidenced by the case of a 20 year old Australian woman who twice was admitted to hospital with life threatening complications as resulting from routine hair removal practices (Dendel, Mulvey, Pyrlis, Grayson & Johnson 2007). Removal of pubic hair has also been identified as contributing to the spread of varying sexually transmitted diseases (Glass et al. 2012 p. 1190). As a new source of anxiety for women, the requirement to depilate must not be taken lightly given the potential risks to women's physical and psychological health.

However, the potential benefits of pubic depilation, often unremarked upon, are worthy of acknowledgment given a commitment to understanding and interpreting women's lived experiences of genital fashioning. For example, Hebernack et al. (2012 p. 679) highlight the importance which engagement with practices of vulval depilation may have on the

expression of sexuality for women and adolescents, these practices further constituting a potential source of pleasure. Participation in beauty regimes and rituals has previously been identified as potentially a pleasurable and enjoyable experience for women (Bordo 1993 p. 262), an understanding which may extend to practices of genital grooming. Some have suggested women are likely to apply creams and lotions to the genital region post-depilation which may assist in the generation of 'a sense of femininity related to genital grooming, or that there are sensuous qualities to applying cream/lotion' (Hebernich et al. 2012 p. 683). Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 895) further found pubic depilation, particularly for women who removed all pubic hair, as associated with notions of self-enhancement, differentiated from other forms of routine body hair removal as it may be associated with 'glamour and sexiness'. The potential confidence gained through the removal of pubic hair is significant, particularly as it may impact on a woman's engagement with sexual activities. Significantly, Herbernich et al. (2012 p. 684) found associations between pubic depilation and 'greater sexual interest ... having a casual sex partner, and engaging in vaginal fingering, finger-clitoral stimulation and, marginally, with a longer duration of intercourse'. Further noted within current literature is the perceived potential for the presence of pubic hair to negatively impact upon sexual relations, particularly with regard to practices of cunnilingus, and possible reductions in sensitivity and 'closeness' (Braun et al. 2013 pp. 485–486). Moreover, whilst problematic, the association of pubic hair removal with cleanliness results in pubic depilation affording women the opportunity to 'feel cleaner as well as to make the genital area easier to keep clean' (Braun et al. 2013 p. 485).

Feminine Construction and Prepubescent Appearance Associated with Pubic Depilation

Whilst body hair serves to construct a visible feminine or masculine form (Toerien et al. 2005 p. 399), the previously established understanding of gendered embodiment as partially

reliant on the presence, or absence, of body hair is argued to extend to the pubic region. According to Braun et al.'s New Zealand study, gendered binaries were produced when discussing the acceptability of pubic hair on men and women; pubic hair was deemed acceptable and attractive on men but pubic hair reduced the attractiveness of women (Braun et al. 2013 p. 486). It was considered as natural for women to alter their bodies and fashion their vulval hair (Braun et al. 2013 p. 486), reinforcing the concept of the perfectible, docile female body which necessitates alteration via disciplinary practices (Labre 2002 p. 123). The removal of both body and pubic hair requires ongoing maintenance, and as such is dependent upon continual self-surveillance and alteration. Indeed, Smolak and Murnen (2011 p. 507) consider the practice of depilation as central to the production and reproduction of cultural ideals which 'keep women focused on achieving a particular ideal ... hair removal will require monitoring and surveillance'. Braun et al.'s (2013 p. 486) findings also highlights the significance of pubic depilation to the construction of the idealised feminine form, in which female pubic depilation was 'effectively presented as something that moves the female body from unattractive to attractive'.

The cultural significance of female pubic depilation, particularly in relation to the visual similarity of the shaven or waxed vulva to the prepubescent form, has received significant attention from theorists. Symbolically situating a female as less than fully adult (Hope 1982 p. 99), women may be positioned as powerless in the physical representation of childlikeness (Tiggemann & Kenyon 1998 p. 874). Hope (1982 p. 99) highlights the potential gendered implications for hairlessness, stating "'feminine", when applied to the absence of body hair, doesn't really mean "womanly", it means "childlike" and "masculine" means "adult-like"'. Given the emulation of the hairless prepubescent body, further concerns are raised regarding the sexualisation of young girls (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 896). The

symbolic denial of full adulthood to women (Labre 2002 p. 125), has, according to Wolf (cited in Tiggemann & Kenyon 1998 p. 874), the potential political implication of casting women as powerless at a time in which women became more powerful in political and economic spheres, thereby threatening the gender order. As will be further discussed, this analysis may be particularly pertinent in the current 'postfeminist' era in which neoliberal discourse considers the individual as able to make free, autonomous choices, particularly via practices of consumption (Gill 2007a p. 72). In particular, the capacity for sexual agency is perceived as a site of power negotiation (Gill 2007a p. 72). Labre (2002 pp. 125–126) argues the Brazilian wax to be located within this lexicon, popularly regarded to enhance women's influence and control over men due to their increased sex appeal and 'powers of seduction' as a result of a groomed genital region. However, according to Labre (2002 p. 126), such a contention merely reinforces the notion that women's primary role is to attract men.

Although pubic depilation has been associated with prepubescent emulation, there also exists the potential for the meaning and interpretation of cultural practices to change over time. Initial adoption of vulval depilation trends in the late 1980s and early 1990s may have reflected, and sexualised, the childlike form, evidenced by Labre's (2002 p. 120) documentation of a male's first experience with a Brazilian wax:

And when I felt her it was like, oh my God, an unbelievably primal welling of emotion. First from the shock and then from the whole little girl eroticism of it. It's hard to describe. I guess it was like tasting forbidden fruit.

However, as the trend to engage in practices of genital grooming became increasingly normative, the association of a hairless vulva with a childlike form may be diminished. Indeed, Friedland (2011) presents anecdotal evidence of young men and boys' minimal, or no, exposure to pubic hair; given such experience, younger generations may consider a

hairless vulva as normative. Furthermore, as adolescent exposure to pornography is increasingly prolific, the primary representation of female sexual beauty to which young people are presented is often waxed and completely hairless (Labre 2002 p. 129; Mattebo, Lasson, Tyden, Olsson & Haggstrom-Nordin 2012 p. 41).

Pubic Depilation and Sexual Partners

Another relevant factor is the increased correlation between frequency of vulval depilation and the presence of, or anticipation of, a sexual partner (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 896). Frequency of genital depilation has been associated with sexual activity (Herbenick et al. 2012 p. 684); indicating the potential magnitude of influence sexual partners may have on female decisions to depilate. Indeed, DeMaria and Berenson's (2013 p. 230) investigation found women to cease genital grooming as a result of not being sexually active. Women have identified key motivational factors for engagement with vulval depilation as relating to normative and 'sexiness' reasons (Smolack & Murnen 2011 p. 515). Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 893) further found that participants who removed all pubic hair did so for reasons predominately relating to sexual attractiveness.

A distinction may be made between motivational associations between body hair depilation and pubic depilation. Pubic hair depilation is more directly associated with sexual, rather than feminine, presentation and embodiment. Indeed, Australian women considered the pursuit of sexual attractiveness, rather than femininity, as the most important reason for pubic depilation (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 895). In contrast, feminine construction is a central motivating reason for body hair depilation, as previously detailed (Tiggemann & Kenyon 1998 p. 880; Toerien & Wilkinson 2004 p. 87).

Despite these differing motivations for body hair removal and pubic hair removal, the preference for female hairlessness has evidently been extended to the pubic region. A participant from Braun et al.'s (2013 p. 486) study stated, 'the only hair on a women's [sic] body should be on their head and eyes'. Herbernick et al. (2012 p. 679) acknowledge that pubic depilation may be 'the newest addition to what has been called the "hairlessness norm"'.

Male sexual partners have been found to influence the trend toward genital fashioning. Indeed, male sexual partners may explicitly express their desire for waxed pudenda (Dines 2010 p. 99; Toerien & Wilkinson 2004 p. 81). Reporting her discussion with university students, Dines (2010 p. 99) recounted the experience of some young women whose boyfriends had refused to have sexual intercourse if the female partner sported nonwaxed genitalia, stating they 'looked gross'. As the absence of hair and sexual appeal continue to be commonly aligned, Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 896) contend that the popularly perceived sexually attractive female form is indicated by the absence of pubic hair. The irony of such should not be overlooked given that the presence of pubic hair is a signifier of sexual maturity (Labre 2002 p. 125; Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 891).

Hair Removal, Discipline and the Production of Femininity

In the theoretical literature practices of bodily depilation have increasingly been recognised as contributing to the materialisation of a gendered body via disciplinary procedures and these reveal entrenched social understandings of gendered identity (Basow 1991 p. 86; Hope 1982 p. 93; Lesnik-Oberstein 2006 pp. 1–5; Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 p. 335). Indeed, the depilated female body may be juxtaposed with masculine hirsuteness, and as such, body hair may be evidenced to serve as visible representation of a gendered body (Tiggemann & Kenyon 1998 p. 874). Constructing and maintaining a feminine and sexually appealing form

were the primary factors reported to motivate Australian women to partake in depilation practices (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 895). It is the potential to transgress gendered boundaries which casts the undepilated female form as problematic.

Whilst a significant, and increasing, proportion of men have been found to engage in body hair depilation and pubic hair removal, or 'trimming' (Braun, et al. 2013 p. 480; Smolack & Murnen 2011 p. 514), the practice may be differentiated from that of 'mandated' (Basow & Braman 1998 p. 642) female depilation. The acceptability of reduced hairiness has been incorporated into the lexicon of masculinity, however, as noted by Braun et al. (2013 p. 480) 'the scope for male body hair remains broader than it is for women, with less social and psychological castigation'.

Female failure to comply with the hairless norm risks a range of significant consequences and 'sanctions against non-conformity' (Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 p. 341). A woman's categorisation and identification as feminine may be jeopardised, given that hirsuteness is associated with masculinity, and such repercussions may serve as a form of social control (Toerien & Wilkinson 2003 p. 341). In her analysis of body hair removal, Basow keenly observes the social significance of depilation, stating 'although shaving for most women is ... usually viewed as trivial, the intense social reaction to violations of this norm emphasize its power' (1991 p. 95). The significance of social sanctions, which serve to elicit conformity to gender norms via disciplinary practices, is demonstrated by reactions to refusal to engage in socially accepted depilation. Demonstrating attitudes toward the un-depilated female form, an early study, Basow and Braman (1998) investigated US undergraduate students' perceptions of a model shown to them in both a depilated and un-depilated state; when displaying body hair, the students regarded the model as less intelligent, sociable, happy and sexually attractive than when the model was shown as hairless. Toerien and Wilkinson (2004

p. 82) further detail the ‘complaints, criticisms and comments’ experienced by UK women as reaction to the presence of body hair. Women choose to engage in bodily depilation in order to avoid social condemnation, with Toerien and Wilkinson’s participants further identifying ‘a direct link between others’ comments and their decision to start removing hair’ (2004 p. 82). Echoing these sentiments of ‘gross’, ‘disgusting’ and ‘repulsive’ (Toerien & Wilkinson 2004 p. 84), research has further identified female body hair to induce feelings of disgust in both sexes (Tiggemann & Lewis 2004 p. 386).

Indeed, disgust associated with female pubic hair has been previously identified within the literature. Whilst Toerien and Wilkinson identified broad association with female body hair removal and hygiene, the presence of pubic hair was also specifically noted to attract feelings of being ‘untidy’ (2004 p. 78). Motivations for pubic hair removal have also been cited as pertaining to feelings of cleanliness (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 230; Riddell, Vartso & Hodgson 2010 p. 128; Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 895). Female engagement with pubic depilation for reasons of cleanliness represents an internalisation of discourses which position the female body and pubic hair as dirty. Indeed, DeMaria and Berenson consider that these motivations for female pubic hair removal suggest ‘a negative attitude toward one’s pubic hair’ (2013 p. 230). According to Tiggemann and Hodgson, a commercial imperative is present within associations of female body/pubic hair and hygiene:

Certainly having the lack of body hair associated with spurious hygiene (cleanliness) is a very sure way to keep women continuously shaving or waxing their underarms, legs, bikini lines, and increasingly, pubic areas, and of course buying the necessary products. (2008 p. 895)

Braun et al. (2013 p. 485) also found the removal of pubic hair was associated with cleanliness and hygiene. It was considered that to remove pubic hair is cleaner than not removing pubic hair, and removing pubic hair also ensures greater ease of maintain a clean

genital area (Braun et al. 2013 p. 485). Whilst most of the research has specifically associated *female* pubic hair removal with perceptions of hygiene, Braun et al. (2013 p. 485) found that *both* men and women's pubic hair removal was considered as cleaner.

Underpinning the association of female pubic hair and dirtiness are two possible understandings. Firstly, there is an evidenced long-standing disgust and distain for female genitalia (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64), which may have now extended to female pubic hair. Indeed, Braun and Wilkinson considered the way in which the vagina is represented and conceptualised of as 'smelly, dirty, and potentially diseased' (2001 p. 22). Indeed, Braun et al. expressed surprise at their own finding of gender neutral associations of pubic hair and cleanliness:

In our data, this theme was nongendered, which is interesting when we consider that women's genitals also have been traditionally thought of as more "dirty" and "contaminating" than men's. (2013 p. 485)

Further to this, the other possible basis for association of female pubic hair and dirt are traditional conceptualisations of body hair as being unclean. As detailed above, female body hair has attracted particular distain. According to Toerien and Wilkinson the presence of female body hair was considered to make 'one dirty, sweaty, smelly and ungroomed' (2004 p. 78). Therefore, it remains possible that such unsavoury understandings of the female body have now extended to female pubic hair.

As contended by DeMaria and Berenson (2013 p. 230), female engagement with practices of genital grooming may indicate a predilection to partake in further procedures of vaginal modification, which will be discussed in the following section. Jefferys (2005 p. 82) argues that 'as a result of Brazilian waxing women became more aware of their labia because they were now visible in a way they had not been before'. Indeed, Tiefer (2008 p. 467), with

reference to female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS), further identifies the hairless vulval norm to have made female genitalia 'more visible and exacerbated pre-existing negative genital perceptions'. The increase in demand for FGCS has been attributed to the increased visibility of the vulva as a result of pubic depilation in combination with the increasing presence of pornographic images (Green 2005 p. 173).

Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery: Emergence and Statistics

FGCS refers to procedures of genital surgical alteration that are not medically indicated, but seek to alter the aesthetics or functions of female genitalia (Braun 2010 p. 1393). According to Braun (2010 p. 1393), FGCS includes, 'labia minora reductions, vaginal tightening ... labia majora "augmentations", pubic liposuction (mons pubis, labia majora), clitoral hood reductions, hymen "reconstruction", perineum "rejuvenation", and "G-spot amplification". A health issues paper published by Women's Health Victoria (2013 p. 6) identified the ambiguous nature of terminology regarding the various procedures of FGCS, particularly given the commercialisation of the practices that have contributed to the development of popular terminology such as 'designer vagioplasty'. In addition to the procedures identified by Braun, other procedures of FGCS include the 'O-Shot', 'vulval reconstruction' and 'de novo vaginoplasty', however, details regarding these procedures are limited (WHV 2013 p. 7). Indeed, due to the trademarking of various FGCS procedures, information regarding the descriptions of such procedures is not publically available (WHV 2013 p. 6). Exemplifying similar trends in the US, David Matlock, a Los Angeles based surgeon, has trademarked and franchised his 'G-shot' and 'Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation' surgical procedures (Tiefer 2008 p. 468). He has not published scientific data pertaining to these surgeries in an attempt to 'protect his intellectual property rights'.

FGCS procedures emerged in the 1980s in the United States (Braun 2010 p. 1394). According to Braun (2010 p. 1394), reports of labiaplasty initially appeared in 1984. The procedure gained popularity in subsequent decades through increasing publication of clinical reports and media attention which popularised 'the designer vagina'. Tiefer (2008 p. 467) identifies popular news commentary regarding FGCS to emerge in 1998 as a result of the promotion and publicization of procedures associated with vulval beautification by David Matlock, and another Los Angeles surgeon, Gary Alter. Whilst practices of vaginal 'tightening' have long existed, FGCS may be differentiated given the focus on vulval appearance (Tiefer 2008 p. 467).

The majority of procedures associated with FGCS are performed in the private sector, and as such, data of FGCS is difficult to obtain given that audit and publication of figures is not required of the private sector in the UK (Liao, Michala & Creighton 2009 p. 22) or in Australia (McDougall 2013 p. 775). Indeed, Braun (2010 p. 1394) states 'there are few comprehensive or reliable data with regard to frequency or outcome of FGCS'. Despite this, industry experts have approximated FGCS to be 'the fastest-growing plastic surgery sector in the United States' (McNamara 2006 p. 2).

Labiaplasty has been identified as the most popular of cosmetic genital procedures (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 761). Primarily undertaken for aesthetic reasons, labiaplasty seeks to prevent the 'labia minora protruding below the labia majora or to correct symmetry' (McDougall 2013 p. 775). According to UK data, the demand for labiaplasty in the National Health Service has increased five-fold from 2001 to 2010 (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 761) with over 2000 procedures performed in 2010 (WHV 2013 p. 9). Australian Medicare data reflects a similar increase in demand, claims for vulvoplasty and labiaplasty growing 105% in the period 2003/04 to 2012/13 with annual demand increasing from 744 to 1,588 (Australian

Government Department of Health 2014 p. 6)¹. However, given that the majority of procedures associated with FGCS are conducted in the private sector in Australia, these figures represent a conservative indication of the prevalence of FGCS (McDougall 2013 p. 775). Moreover, the figures provided by Medicare represent ‘medically indicated’ cases of FGCS (WHV 2013 p. 8); FGCS may be deemed medically required as some women may experience discomfort during physical activities as a result of a protruding labia minora (McDougall 2013 p. 775). Despite this, it has been suggested that the increase in demand for Medicare benefits in relation to FGCS is partially as a result of women who seek to address aesthetic interests (WHV 2013 p. 8). Indeed, according to Women’s Health Victoria, a review of internet sources revealed some women sharing advice on how to obtain FGCS under Medicare and, as a result, it is suggested that when seeking surgery ‘women may skew their concerns towards functional, rather than aesthetic, accounts’ (2013 p. 8).

Age is a significant factor in the demand for FGCS, Medicare data revealing women in their twenties and thirties dominated demands for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty (WHV 2013 p. 9). However, in recent years, younger women aged 15 to 24 years old have demonstrated the largest increase in demand for labiaplasty in Australia (Hagan 2012). There also exists evidence that pre-teens, aged below 14 years old, are seeking FGCS (WHV 2013 pp. 9–10). According to Liao, Taghinejadi and Creighton (2012 p. 5), 343 labiaplasties were conducted in the preceding six years via the National Health Service in the UK on girls aged 14 or below.

¹ A review of the Medicare benefit for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty was undertaken by the federal Department of Health in 2014 (Australian Department of Health 2014). This review was prompted by concerns that the increased demand for publically funded labiaplasty was as a result of cosmetic procedures (Ampt, Roach & Roberts 2016). As a result of this inquiry, the Medicare item number for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty (35533) was replaced by two distinct item numbers for the ‘surgical repair of female genital mutilation and major congenital abnormalities’ and the ‘surgical repair for localized gigantism causing significant functional impairment’ (Ampt et al 2016 p. 365). Rebates have been made available for the latter only when ‘documented evidence of a clinical need’ has been provided (Ampt et al 2016).

Demand for vaginal tightening is seemingly most prevalent amongst an older cohort of postpartum women, Braun (2010 p. 1394) detailing a report in which the mean age of women seeking vaginal tightening to be 46 years of age. According to Goodman (2011 p. 7), this data is revealing of two distinct groups of women seeking FGCS; younger women seeking labiaplasty and other cosmetic procedures, and a mid-aged group of women seeking tightening procedures.

There is limited information in relation to the successes and associated risks of FGCS (Braun 2010 p. 1394) and 'little research has been carried out to map the prevalence and consequences of these procedures' (Johnsdotter & Essen 2010 p. 31). Within the majority of published literature, prospective studies and follow-up of patient outcomes have not been conducted (Liao et al. 2009 p. 22). According to Liao et al.'s (2009 p. 22) review of literature regarding FGCS, 'surgery appeared to have been offered on demand, justified by verbal reports of physical and psychological difficulties that were not formally evaluated pre- or post-surgery'.

The American College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (cited in Tiefer 2008) has highlighted the ethical issues in relation to the marketing and trademarking of FGCS procedures, stating that it is 'deceptive to give the impression that [they] are accepted ... surgical practices ... Also of concern are ethical issues associated with the marketing of these procedures and the national franchising in this field. A business model that controls the dissemination of scientific knowledge is troubling'. Indeed, Women's Health Victoria (2013 p. 6) indicates a similar sentiment in relation to practices of FGCS, stating 'many of these procedures have been identified as the "fringe of acceptable gynaecologic practice"' (2013 p. 6).

Genital Fashioning and Media Influence

The media as a key driver of pressure, information, and advertising about genital fashioning is a significant, recurring theme throughout my thesis. The proliferation of the mass media has been identified as significant in the portrayal and communication of feminine beauty ideals (Calogero, Boroughs & Thompson 2007 pp. 7–11). As explained by Orbach:

Information, disinformation, commercial practices, and crazes arrive through the media. It is the medium that stimulates public conversation and trends. It is the means by which the individual finds out things and is impacted by them. (2011 p. 387)

As mentioned in Chapter One, the presence of discussion and debate of genital fashioning within the public sphere has increased in recent years. The media promotes and normalises trends of genital fashioning through discourse, debate, and sanctions (such as those noted by Gill 2007a p. 75) and also through links with celebrity culture.

Kelly and Hoerl (2015 p. 141) previously noted public celebrity endorsement of pubic depilation since the year 2000. According to Kelly and Hoerl (2015 p. 142), 'visual discourses of advertising, fashion magazines, and pornography also provide implicit instruction about the appeal of pubic hair removal'. Indeed, within popular media discussion of genital depilation, there tends to be a focus on the perceived benefits of public hair removal (Labre 2002 p. 118). In some instances, the pain associated with the procedures is noted (Labre 2002 p. 118), but the physical risks of genital depilation are rarely reported.

The significance of the media in disseminating information about genital fashioning options was highlighted by Koning et al. (2009). In their study of Dutch women, 78 per cent had garnered information about labial reduction via the media (2009 p. 67). The cited media sources included television, radio magazines, the Internet, and newspapers (p. 67). As a

result of women's limited exposure beyond media and pornography, Schick et al. (2011 p. 75) contend 'women's conception of the average or typical appearance of female genitalia may be rooted largely in media images'. Bramwell's (2002 p. 190) content analysis of the representation of labia within women's magazines revealed a high frequency of poses which result in concealment of external outlines of genitalia or, when the outline of female genitalia was visible, genitalia was represented as a smooth curve. Bramwell (2002 p. 190) concluded that such representation of genitalia is consistent with social norms which perpetuate the notion that female genitalia ought to be invisible and identified by an 'absence' as juxtaposed with the 'presence' of male genitalia.

Media representations also demonstrate increased sexual openness and permissiveness within western culture. This concept will be further explored within the following chapter with respect to postfeminism and the sexualisation of culture. However, it is worth noting that some theorists have proposed the concept of the pornification of western culture as pertinent to women's exposure to pornified ideals. Perceived to emerge in the 1990s, the pornification of culture may be identified as the increased widespread prevalence and acceptance of pornographic imagery in the mainstream media (Attwood 2011 p. 15; Dines 2010 p. 100; Jeffreys 2005 p. 67; McNair 2002 p. 61). Indeed, Dines (2010 p. 100) contends 'women don't need to look at porn to be profoundly affected by it because images, representations, and messages from porn are now delivered to women via pop culture'. According to Dines (2010 p. 100), genital depilation exemplifies 'porn culture' as the trend, seemingly having originated in pornography, is subsequently conveyed to women via women's media such as *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and *Sex and the City*.

Female Genitals and the Influence of Pornographic Norms

In both academic and popular discussions there is a strong association between genital fashioning and pornography. An understanding of young people's particular relationship to, and experiences of, pornography is an important backdrop to my research. Increasing accessibility of pornography for young people has been noted in current American literature (Ybarra and Mitchell 2005 p. 473). Swedish research has found adolescents perceive pornography and sexualised media as ubiquitous (Haggstrom-Nordin, Sandberg, Hanson & Tyden 2006 p. 389; Mattebo et al. 2012 p. 46). Indeed, the young informants in Haggstrom-Nordin et al.'s (2006 p. 389) study regarded pornography as 'almost impossible to avoid' stating that 'it is everywhere'. Mattebo et al. (2012 p. 40) found both young men and women to consider pornography as a source of information; the participants providing accounts which detailed feelings of pressure in relation to looks and sexual practices and techniques as a result of the messages contained within pornographic media.

It has been argued that bikini-line depilation was introduced and embraced following the inception of the bikini (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480); the trend of vulval hair removal has been attributed to the increased prominence of pornography. Prior to the late 1980s, women depicted in pornographic imagery featured 'an abundance of hair' (Jeffreys 2005 p. 79; Labre 2002 p. 120). Considered a pioneering pornographic publication, *Playboy* magazine may be identified as an original propagator of the hairless pubic fashion, the Playboy models sporting what was popularly dubbed the 'Playboy wax' (Labre 2002 p. 120). Analyses have found *Playboy* magazine to feature models sporting less, and increasingly altered, pubic hair fashions as years progressed (Schick et al. 2011 p. 76). Of the images published in *Playboy* between 2007 and 2008, 61.2 per cent of models depicted had genital hair 'altered to the

point of being invisible’ and a further 19.5 per cent displayed visible but clearly altered pubic hair (Schick et al. 2011 p. 78).

Despite limited research with women themselves, the shift toward vulval hairlessness within pornography has been attributed to the desire for increased visual accessibility of female genitalia and male preference for a prepubescent form (Jeffreys 2005 p. 79). Some have argued that the idealised genital aesthetic standard of a neat, minimised ‘slit’ (McDougall 2013 p. 775) has been promoted by mainstream pornography (Braun 2010 p. 1402). Moreover, the increased proliferation and accessibility of mainstream pornography has resulted in women’s intensified awareness of their genitalia, particularly given the potential for self-comparison to the considered ideal aesthetic genitalia presented in pornography (Braun 2009 p. 242; Green 2005 p. 174; McNamara 2006 pp. 6–7). McNamara (2006 p. 7) contends ‘a beauty standard has emerged, one established primarily through porn actresses, nude models and strippers’. McDougall (2013 p. 778) explains that pornography, softcore pornography in particular, is central to the perpetuation of idealised genital standards featuring a vulval ‘slit’. This assertion may be supported by research investigating the representation of Playboy models which found ‘unnatural genital appearance’ to proliferate within *Playboy* Magazine in which ‘labia minora were visible in only 7 per cent of the full sample of photographs, and were a colour other than pink or light red in only a single photograph’ (Schick et al. 2011 p. 78). The representation of female genitalia in pornography may be significant given the evidenced potential for women, when exposed to images of modified genitalia, to alter their perceptions of what is considered ‘normal’ (Moran & Lee 2013).

McNair (2014 p. 162) further identifies the existence of commentary identifying pornography as pertinent to the increase in trends of genital depilation. However, McNair

critically questions the validity of such claims given that supporting research and evidence does not seemingly underpin these claims. Indeed, McNair (2014 p. 162) contends 'pornography's harms are often cited alongside a generalised critique of cultural sexualisation, and with a similar lack of substantiating evidence beyond reference to "popular perceptions"'. Bramwell, Morland and Garden (2007 p. 1494) also note the existence of limited information detailing women's own reasons and expectations for undertaking FGCS.

The identification of pornography as significant to women's increased demand for FGCS is seemingly reliant primarily on the accounts provided by cosmetic surgeons rather than women's own reasonings for engagement with FGCS. Leading cosmetic surgeons are frequently cited as detailing the importance of pornography in women's decisions to seek genital surgery. This is evidenced by McNamara's (2006 pp. 6–7) discussion of FGCS, stating 'according to surgeons, women are bringing in pictures from magazines and adult Web sites whose vaginas they want to recreate'. Green (2005 p. 174) draws upon one cosmetic surgeon's assertion that pornography has informed the aesthetic genital ideal which women seek and Davis (2002 p. 7) cites another surgeon's detailing of the 'ideal' pornographic ascetics which women request via cosmetic surgery. According to Braun (2010 p. 1402), cosmetic surgeons' uncritical naming of pornography as fundamental to the creation of the aesthetical ideal sought by women who desire "Playboy-pretty outer vaginas" (Matlock cited in Braun 2010 p. 1402), reveals the potential for the medical industry, and the aesthetic (re)created by surgeons, to be influenced by cultural norms. Braun (2010 p. 1402) states, 'surgeons bring culturally influenced personal values and preferences to the work they do'. As such, consideration of the representation of female genitalia within the medical industry,

and acknowledgement of the cultural construction of medical knowledge and information is potentially critical to an understanding of female genital fashioning.

Female Genitals and the Potential Influence of Medical Norms

An understanding of dominant views about genital norms and representations of genital norms within the medical industry is an essential element of the context in which practices of genital fashioning are undertaken. Not only has the medical industry developed practices which cosmetically alter female genitalia, the stature of the medical industry contributes to certain conceptualisations of the body and gender. The representation of female genitalia within the medical industry is significant, particularly in view of the apparent medical adoption of particular cultural ideals of idealised female genitalia. As contended by Johnsdotter and Essen (2010 p. 29), 'how we comprehend and describe biological sex (and its genital manifestations) is closely linked to cultural concepts about gender'. Kapsalis (1997 p. 110) details the importance of female representation, and that of female genitalia, within medicine, which, according to Kapsalis, is imbued with cultural ideology and affects both medical practice and contributes to particular conceptualisations of gender. For example, Kapsalis' (1997 p. 90) analysis of *Danforth's* gynaecological text book reveals routine positioning of women's genitalia as pathological, the only healthy and normal depiction of female genitalia contained within the text book depicts a depilated female giving birth; 'these photographs are the only occasion in *Danforth's* in which a healthy normal vulva is shown, the vulva has already been shaved'. Kapsalis (1997 p. 110) notes that the images contained within medical textbooks are 'neither transparent nor inevitable' and that 'representational practices in turn affect medical practice'. Indeed, based on information of doctor referral patterns, it has been suggested the increase in demand for FGCS is associated with referring doctors' limited understanding of the variability in the relative sizes, shapes,

proportions, textures and colours of the constituent parts of the normal vulva. The pejorative language identified in some referral letters furthermore suggest the presence of negative attitudes towards actual vulval appearances that are typical for women (Andrikopoulou, Michala, Creighton & Liao 2013 p. 648).

Significant diversity exists in relation to size and proportions of female genitalia (Zwang 2011 p. 82). Whilst one clinical study considers a labia minora of 4 cm or more as 'severe hypertrophy', thus medically indicating a potential need for labiaplasty, other information details a 'healthy' labia minora to range from 2–10cm in length (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 374). The consideration of what may be classified as 'abnormal' measurements for labia minora vary considerably and are not ordinarily based upon evidence for the classification (Braun 2010 p. 1400). According to Zwang (2011 p. 82), current medical literature ignores the diverse and unique character of female genitalia, especially that of the labia minora, as no two women will have identical labia minora. It has been suggested that colonial histories in which African women were displayed and analysed for physical characteristics, such as large labia, which were assumed to indicate racial differences, may further underpin present contemporary pathologisation of larger labia (Nurka & Jones 2013 p. 417; McNamara 2006 p. 9).

Braun and Wilkinson (2001 p. 27) consider the occurrence of FGCS as a result of pre-existing notions of female genitalia as 'not nice, as sexually inadequate, and as perfectible'. In contemporary society, cultural beauty standards are often unattainable without the utilisation of cosmetic surgery (McNamara 2006 p. 6). Further to this, the mediatization and pathologisation of female genitalia has demonstrated the capacity of the medical industry to affect conceptualisations of normalcy. Indeed, the attainment of 'normal' physical appearance, often cited as a determinant for seeking cosmetic surgery, may be seen as a

motive for FGCS (Bramwell et al. 2007 p. 1495; Tiefer 2008 p. 475; McNamara 2006 p. 4). McNamara (p. 4) states 'simply having female sex characteristics in no way ensures that a woman qualifies as normal. Yet, when surgery is promoted as the path to achieve normalcy, the constructedness of the very idea of normal is revealed'. Braun goes further to argue that within medical and surgical discourse, the definition of abnormal is resultant of a body which does not meet the criterion of 'perfect' (Braun 2009 p. 242).

Tiefer (2008 p. 467) proposes the increase in FGCS as a result of numerous structural and political factors within the medical industry. According to Tiefer (2008 pp. 467–468), an oversupply of surgeons coupled with the easing of US legislation allowing surgeons to market their products and services aided in the proliferation of cosmetic surgery. Indeed, the capability for surgeons to now directly market their procedure and practices to Western populations may be considered a significant factor in the increase in consumer demand for FGCS (Liao et al. 2012 p. 1). The resultant 'new medical model' which has emerged demonstrates a shift within medical practice beyond traditional healing of physical health to pursuits of lifestyle and happiness as requested by the consumer (McDougall 2013 p. 784). This shift has, according to McDougall (p. 784), resulted in a positioning of patients as consumers and allowed the medical industry to develop new opportunities, female genital alteration one such opportunity, within a 'consumer medical model'.

In this way, the medical industry serves to both characterise and define pathology or 'problems' and offers the solution via surgical means (McDougall 2013 p. 784). The technological advances enabling the development of practices and the rise of 'makeover' culture which promotes and encourages self-transformation and improvement, positioning the body as a project, has led to a complexity of environmental factors enabling the increase in demand for FGCS. As a manifestation of makeover culture, Tiefer (2008 p. 469) highlights

the development of surgical reality television shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, which serve to glamorise, normalise and market cosmetic surgery whilst informing women of the expanding array of cosmetic procedures from which they may choose.

Genital Fashioning and Consumer Choice

Critical to the discussion of makeover culture is the concept of consumer choice and agency. Within my research, choice forms a central theme. The notion of choice is applied to other practices of genital fashioning such as pubic depilation. As previously noted, vulval depilation is popularly regarded as an emancipatory and liberating practice, enabling women to play with their embodiment of sexuality whilst exercising their sexual prowess and agency, given the perceived capacity for independent, autonomous action (Labre 2002 p. 125). Whilst participants within recent studies have employed postmodern interpretations, prioritising individual choice with regard to female pubic depilation, they also demonstrated conflicted understandings given the context in which these choices are made (Braun et al. 2013 p. 483). Braun et al.'s conclusion highlights the notion of contextualised choice:

It seems that the nuancing of this theme of choice, then, is that pubic hair removal should be up to the individual, but this ideal is in reality regulated by other factors—hence it is choice, within limits. (2013 p. 483)

Therefore, although it is critical to acknowledge female choice and agency when seeking FGCS, or other forms of genital modification, the social, cultural and historical context is of significance to the contextualisation of female choices which are engaged with as a result of 'situated knowledges' (Sullivan 2007 p. 404; Braun 2009 p. 244). Choice and contextualised choice are key themes that are addressed throughout my thesis.

Discussion of FGCS would also be incomplete without an acknowledgement of the complexities of individual choice and agency in seeking FGCS. According to Braun (2009 p.

236), 'choice, empowerment and consumption—of things like cosmetic surgery—are intrinsically linked'. Through the utilisation of rhetoric relating to choice, practices of consumption may be cast as empowering; the postmodern individual is positioned as free to make autonomous, knowledgeable and decontextualised choices (Braun 2009 p. 236). However, notions of individualised choice are increasingly critiqued as choice may be understood as subject to limitations, both as a result of the pressures of social norms and expectations and 'inequalities of privilege' (Bordo 1993 p. 247) which present restrictions of access to modes of bodily alteration, such as cosmetic surgery. Indeed, Braun (2009 p. 236) states 'although cosmetic surgery is a domain where women are framed positively as making choices about their lives, women's articulated desires to achieve "normality" through surgery raise questions about choice'. Of particular concern, is the capacity for women to make informed choices in relation to FGCS, as 'misinformed consent' may be resultant from ignorance in relation to 'real' genital appearance given the proliferation of altered visual depictions of genitalia within the media and pornography (Tiefer 2008 p. 472; Braun 2009 p. 238).

Within contemporary debates, it is most frequently the rhetoric of choice that is seen to separate the practice of FGCS from non-Western practices of 'female genital mutilation' (FGM, also known as female genital cutting) (Braun 2009 p. 233). The World Health Organisation defines FGM as 'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons' (2008 p. 1). Whilst this definition may initially seem to refer to procedures of female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS), the practices of FGM and FGCS are distinct. A body of literature has emerged which jointly considers and discusses the practices of FGM and FGCS. Theorists have mobilised discussion of FGM as a means to illustrate the contradictory narratives

employed which separate FGM from Western, medicalised practices of FGCS. In Australian legislation, practices of FGM are illegal, even when sought by a consenting adult (Sullivan 2007 p. 398). According to Sullivan, the legal restriction on requests for FGM evidences both the double standard of debate and the significance of cultural discourse with regard to practices of FGM or FGCS (Sullivan 2007 pp. 398–399). Despite the aesthetic similarities in some instances of FGCS and FGM (Davis 2002 p. 24), it is the perception of the freely choosing agent which constructs a notion of difference between the procedures (Sullivan 2007 p. 404). The differential construction of FGCS and FGM on the basis of choice is outlined by Sullivan:

The rhetoric surrounding cosmetic genital surgery, the perception of such procedures as valid forms of enhancement, constructs the female consumer (and the product she consumes) as a viable subject of consent. The notion of “FGM”, on the other hand, renders choice impossible for those involved in practices deemed “traditional”. (2007 p. 404)

Similarly, Braun (2009) critically interrogates the way in which choice narratives underpin procedures of FGCS whilst choice is regarded as impossible for women from cultures which practice FGM:

Western women are framed as superseding the influence of culture ... to undergo FGCS. In contrast, the question of choice is elided for women from cultures where ‘FGM’ is practiced. (2009 p. 235)

Moreover, under-acknowledged in discussion of choice, FGM and FGCS, are historical occurrences of Western practices of clitoridectomies and contemporary practices of performing genital surgery on intersexed children, performed for aesthetic and cultural motivations (Green 2005). The understanding of the nuances of medical discourses relating

to choice and practices of female genital alteration is significant in the contextualisation and elucidation of FGCS and associated social and cultural factors.

Other Practices of Genital Fashioning

Within academic literature, there exists particularly limited investigation of vajazzling. For example, in an editorial, Iglesia (2012 p. 1083) contends the trend of pubic depilation to have resulted in the development of 'decorative vulvar services (vajazzling)' but further elucidation of the practice is not provided. Referencing beauticians' claims, Quilliam (2015 p. 73) suggests there is decreased demand for vajazzling services. The most comprehensive discussion of vajazzling is provided by Turney (2016), who suggests it results from consumer, celebrity and media culture. I will further discuss Turney's work in Chapter Four.

Limited literature exists in relation to other forms of genital fashioning, such as tattooing or piercing. Davis (2002 p. 14) notes the occurrence of genital and labial piercings amongst alternative youth as a means to fashion or 'decorate' genitalia, or assist in clitoral stimulation. According to Davis, such modification is often sought as a means to achieve healing from past abuse. However, Davis' analysis, whilst insightful, is reliant on Web-based discussion of the practice, and details of the research method were not provided.

However, broader analyses and understandings of body modification practices aid in the conceptualisation of genital fashioning practices of tattooing and piercing. Body modification is defined by Wohlrab, Stahl and Kappeler as 'the (semi-) permanent, deliberate alteration of the human body and embraces procedures such as tattooing and body piercing' (2007 p. 87). It is within these broader studies of body modification that genital piercings and tattooing is frequently addressed. For example, Deschesnes, Demers and Fines' study of youth engagement with, and motivations for, body piercing and tattooing found minimal

undertaking of genital piercings by both young men and women: only 1.5 per cent of surveyed female Canadian high school students reporting a genital piercing (2006 p. 326).

According to Sweetman (1999 p. 51), practices of body tattooing and piercing gained in popularity subsequent to the mid to late 1980s. Wohlrab et al. note the adoption of body modification in the 1980s particularly occurred within the punk and gay movements as a means to 'protest against the conservative middle class norms of society' (2007 p. 87). However, tattooing and piercings have now grown in popularity, and participation in these practices has extended to a broad range of social classes (Wohlrab et al. 2007 p. 87). Although previously associated with working class men, body modification practices are now engaged with by all genders from a variety of backgrounds (Sweetman 1999 p. 51). In fact, Deschesnes et al. (2006 p. 327) found a higher prevalence rate of tattooing and body piercing among young Canadian female adolescents than their male counterparts. The media and consumer and celebrity culture has been central in the mainstreaming of these practices (Sweetman 1999 p. 52; Wohlrab et al. 2007 p. 88). Indeed, postmodern preferencing of individual identity and style has enabled this popularization and commercialization of body modification (Sweetman 1999 p. 52).

Deschesnes et al. (2006 p. 325) identify the expression of individuality and individual identity as central to young people's engagement with tattooing and body piercing. Women's adoption of tattooing has been understood to have the particular functions of 'cultural rebellion but also personal reclamation and self definition' (Wohlrab et al. 2007 p. 88). Motivations for engagement with tattoos or piercings have been identified as similar when considered broadly (Wohlrab et al. 2007 p. 88). However, Wohlrab et al.'s review of the literature found that such motivations are generally diverse in nature and predominantly include: 'beauty, art and fashion'; 'individuality'; 'personal narrative'; 'physical endurance';

‘group affiliations and commitment’; ‘resistance’; ‘spirituality and cultural tradition’, ‘addiction’; ‘sexual motivation’; and ‘no specific reason’, such as impulse (p. 89). Genital piercings (not gender specific) were identified in particular as motivated for sexual stimulation and decoration (p. 91).

Female engagement with body modification has attracted distinct feminist critique and interpretation. Theorists, such as Jeffreys (2000), regard body modification practices as a method of mutilation and self-harm. However, there also exists positive interpretation of the practices, particularly from a postmodern feminist perspective (Pitts 2003 p. 49). In accordance with this view, body modification represents a way by which to undermine beauty norms, and thereby ‘symbolically “reclaim” the body from its victimization and objectification in patriarchal culture’ (Pitts 2003 p. 49). Genital piercings, within this reclaimative discourse, are positioned as having the potential to recast negotiations between the self and society (Pitts 2003 p. 56). However, Pitts highlights the important role of the external viewer in the interpretation of body modification (p. 80). According to Pitts, ‘the subcultural body is not made socially powerful only by its intended messages, but *also* by the “spectator’s active gaze” which views and makes sense of that body’ (p. 80). This is particularly significant in the context of genital piercings, which the male gaze may sexualise and fetishise (Pitts 2003 pp. 80–81).

Negative social interpretations of individuals with body modifications such as tattooing and piercings have been identified within the literature. Whilst body modification has attracted negative non-gender social connotations and impacted on, for example, employment opportunities, gendered judgments also prevail (Vanston & Scott 2008 p. 226). Perceptions of women with tattoos have been previously identified to include stereotypes of being ‘heavier drinkers, more sexually promiscuous and less physically attractive than women

without tattoos’. Vanston and Scott further highlight the distinct perceptions of genital and nipple piercings which, within western societies, are (apparently) classified as ‘self-mutilation’ (2008 p. 226). The WHO includes genital piercings under the definition of Type 4 Female Genital mutilation (World Health Organization 2017). Vanston and Scott also demonstrate the distinct societal interpretations of genital and nipple piercings through discussion of legislative distinction. According to Australian legislation, piercings for individuals under the age of 16 is permitted with parental consent. However, genital and nipple piercings are restricted to those over the age of 16, ‘even if you have permission’ (Lawstuff 2014).

These understandings and social negotiations of body modification practices will be further explored in Chapter Four.

Social Comparison, Genital Norms and Femininity

The final important theme to be addressed in the literature review is social comparison. The way in which conceptualisations of normative femininity are constructed has been demonstrated to often depend upon comparison. Indeed, the performative nature of gender is bound by constraints reliant upon the ‘repetition’ of regulated acts, contingent on the potential to successfully embody broader societal notions of acceptable gendered identity (Butler 1988). As Salih (2002) has argued, the inscription of cultural ideology on the body is compelled via social punishment for those who fail to adopt the correct’ options for their gendered identity (Salih 2002 p. 58). Sanctions occur when gendered boundaries are transgressed, such as the documented disgust breaches of the female hairless norm (Basow & Braman 1998).

Women's perceptions of normal genitalia was significantly impacted as a result of prior exposure to images of modified genitalia (Moran & Lee 2013). According to Moran and Lee's study, 'women who had first viewed the modified images rated the modified vulvas as more normal than the nonmodified vulvas. The control group, on the other hand, rated the images of the nonmodified vulvas as more normal than the modified vulvas' (p. 764). The potential for modified images within the media to impact upon women's perception of genitalia has been further asserted by Sharp, Tiggemann and Mattiske's (2016 p. 475) research which found women who had previously undergone labiaplasty to have had greater exposure to media images than a comparison group of women who had not undergone labiaplasty. As a result, Sharp et al. assert that 'the media is a powerful motivator and source of information about genital appearance and a strong influence on women's decisions to undergo labiaplasty' (2016 p. 475). However, it is worthy of note that this study did not investigate whether a greater media exposure to female genitalia by the group of women having undergone labiaplasty was as a result of pre-existing concern of labial appearance. It may be proposed that correlation was established, however, causation may be problematised by a variety of factors. Nevertheless, the consumption and usage of media images depicting female genitalia is salient in the formation of women's construction of internalised genital appearance standards.

Social comparison, wherein an individual engages in personal judgement relative to the presentation of others (Franzoi, Vasquez, Frost, Sparapani & Martin 2012 p. 4), enables the process of self-objectification (p. 5). Understandings of self-objectification enable an appreciation of one way in which media consumers may internalise discourse in relation to appearance norms and expectations. According to Aubrey (2006 p. 367), female employment of self-objectification is a process through which women employ the primary

perspective of an observer as a means of negotiating their own embodiment. In this way, women may understand and relate to themselves as “objects” and regard their physicality, on the basis of how they perceive their body as appearing to others, primarily in self evaluation and production. Those engaging in self-objectification preference the visual appearance of their body over the lived experience of capacity and feeling of the body (Aubrey 2006 p. 367). Information in relation to culturally dominant standards of appearance as internalised by individuals may be regarded as primarily disseminated by the media. Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012 p. 869) state, ‘women and girls are expected to learn what the prevailing beauty ideals are from the media, and to internalise these standards’.

However, understandings of self-objectification should not obscure the potential for women to be active in the consumption and interpretation of media texts, and agents in their bodily production. As considered by Jackson and Vares (2013 p. 350), the body is negotiated in relation to images and media images and ought to be understood as presenting individuals with both possibilities and limitations for constructing and producing the physical self. In this way, individuals exercise agency as constrained by the limited options proffered for the embodiment gendered norms (p. 4).

Conclusion

As outlined in this literature review various trends of genital fashioning are increasingly prevalent amongst young women. Whilst theorists have proposed explanations for the increasing trends of genital fashioning, such as the potential impact of representations of female genitalia within popular culture, pornography or the medical industry, research has largely not yet investigated the lived experiences and understandings of women in relation to these practices and associated social and cultural influences. Further to this, existing

research investigates singular practices of genital modification, but has yet to consider all practices of modification as contributing to broader conceptualisations of female genitalia as a new body site subject to a variety of disciplinary regimes, positioned on a continuum of modifications, rather than separated as distinct practices. In-depth research investigating the trend toward genital fashioning, and young women's experiences and feelings is of value in this context.

Chapter Three

Conceptual Framework and Methodological Approach

In this thesis, I situate discussion of genital modification practices within broader conceptualisations of bodily alteration and materialisation. The body is understood as a 'medium of culture' (Bordo 1993 p. 90); culturally constructed and subject to disciplinary practices through which social and cultural scripts are imprinted and power is negotiated. Thus, inscribed with social and cultural symbology and meaning, the body also becomes a '*text of culture*' (Bordo 1993 p. 90, original emphasis). Corporeal disciplinary practices are both constrained and agentic: central to the (re)production or transgression of femininity and associated power relations.

My understanding of the body is informed by a feminist, post-structural methodological perspective. Gill's (2007a) concept of 'critical respect' is utilised within this framework as a means to negotiate female choice and agency, whilst recognising the cultural context in which decisions are made. In accordance with this perspective, researcher involvement within knowledge production, and researcher insider status is acknowledged, within the discussion of ethical feminist research.

The following section outlines the conceptual framework and methodological approach as employed in this thesis. Beginning with an exploration of the body as a surface for social inscription, Foucault's description of the body as a site for the negotiation of power will be detailed with respect to feminist theories proposed by Bartky (1997, 1998), Bordo (1993, 1999) and Butler (1989, 1990, 1999a, 1999b). I will also consider the ways in which theorists have conceptualised female embodiment and agency in the contemporary context of

postfeminism and the sexualisation of western culture. Subsequently, the feminist, post-structural methodology employed within this thesis will be presented.

The Culturally Inscripted Body

In this study the body is understood as a malleable and culturally significant form, and locus of a complex interplay between materiality and subjectivity upon which social ideals may be imprinted. Drawing upon Grosz's identification of the body as the 'threshold' of subjectivity and materiality—the mind and physical body—Brush (1998 p. 26) explains the body as the point between 'nature and culture; it is both material body and cultural inscription, and the point where the two conflate to form the subject'. As such, the body may be understood as the site at which 'self' is located (p. 26).

The body is not 'natural', 'pre-inscriptive' or free from cultural interpretation (Brush 1998 p. 25); rather the body is representative of culture. Butler (1990 p. 165) identifies Foucault's positioning of the body as unconditionally located within cultural inscription, providing a surface upon which cultural meaning is imprinted, thus seemingly obscuring the possibility of a pre-inscriptive form. Indeed, Foucault (1984 p. 83) considers it the task of genealogical study to 'expose a body totally imprinted by history', as the Foucauldian appreciation of the body emerges only as a result of social inscription. However, Butler (1989 p. 604) critically engages with Foucault's understanding of the inscriptive body and identifies the paradoxical nature of the Foucauldian body given that 'by maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality to the body prior to its signification and form'. Whilst allowing for the questioning of the formulation and qualification of the pre-inscriptive body (p. 601), Butler interprets the construction of the inscriptive body as located within political and historical understandings, stating:

the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation ... and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. (1988 p. 521)

Grosz (1994 p. 142) further posits that the body is inextricably situated within cultural and historical appreciations and, as a result, the actuality of the 'natural' body remains spurious (Brush 1998 p. 28). Grosz argues that even a bare, decontextualised body is 'in no sense a natural body, for it is as culturally, racially, sexually, possibly even as class distinctive, as it would be if it were clothed. Every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence' (p. 142).

Power and Bodily Inscription via Disciplinary Practices

In considering the body as a contested site, Foucault's understanding of power assists in the explanation and analysis of engagement with disciplinary practices which seek to transform and produce the culturally located, material form. According to Foucault, the powers and relations enacted on the body have an 'immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks' (Foucault cited in Labre 2002 p. 123). In the absence of authoritarian regimes of power coercing adherence to normalising standards relating to the embodiment of sex and gender, Foucault conceives of power as implemented by fluid, informal structures (Bordo 1999 p. 253). The delineation of power as ubiquitous but dually unattributable, as conceptualised by Foucault, has been appropriated and applied by feminist scholars (see Labre 2002 p. 123). As Bartky (1997 p. 103) explains, 'the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular'.

Foucault's determination of contemporary power as dispersed yet contingent on the reproduction of historical forms of power aids in the understanding of the significance of

social politics and power relations on corporeal construction (Bordo 1999 p. 253; Labre 2002 p. 123). In accordance with Foucault's consideration of the body as the instrument through which power and resistance operate (Grosz 1994 p. 146), Bordo (1993 pp. 90, 105) details the body as a 'site of struggle'. She (p. 91) locates the body as an active vehicle through which culture is embodied, revealing of processes of social control and power. Employing Foucault's notion of the culturally regulated docile body, Bordo describes the process of disciplining as:

Organisation and regulation of the time, space and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity. (p. 91).

Feminine materialisation and inscription of disciplinary regimes is dependant on anonymous power which is not arbitrary but, instead, constructed to reproduce broader historical and cultural forms of power and associated inequality (Bordo 1999 p. 253).

The culturally and historically located and constrained nature of bodily inscription is further highlighted by Grosz who highlights how the disciplinary practices of inscription are discerned as forces via which 'bodies are made amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power' (Grosz 1994 p. 142). A rhetoric of choice frequently underpins discourse pertaining to women's engagement with disciplinary practices. However, arguments of decontextualised choice are problematised by repercussions for failing to embody the appropriate characteristics (Brush 1998 p. 39).

Post-modern understandings of bodily inscription do not rely on the authority of formal processes or institutions to ensure the implementation of social standards given the seemingly free conformity to normalising practices of corporeal alteration (Bartky 1997 p. 103). However, discourses which position women's engagement with disciplinary practices

as free choice obscure both the inequalities which prohibit equal access to methods of corporeal inscription and the 'desperation that characterises the lives of those who do' engage with practices of bodily alteration (Bordo 1999 p. 248). The dispersion of power results in a partial concealment of the influences exerted upon the individual, 'yet it none the less produces and normalises bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination' (p. 252).

The body is made docile as a result of the disciplinary practices of self-surveillance, intervention and production to which it is subjected (Labre 2002 p. 123), the performance of which necessitates an 'uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity' (Bartky 1997 p. 94). However, Foucauldian understandings of power as employed by Bartky and Bordo allow for an acknowledgement of the coexistence of both power and pleasure (Bordo 1999 p. 253). As such, Bordo posits that women may contribute to the perpetuation of disciplinary powers, while simultaneously being subjected to such disciplinary power (1999 p. 254). The Foucauldian conceptualisation of disciplinary practices which Bordo and Bartky mobilise, refers to not simply transformative methods of bodily alteration, but to practices which seek to 'normalise the subject' (Bordo 1993 p. 254). Bartky (1997 p. 107) identifies a 'perpetual and exhaustive' regulation of 'the body's size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts'. In particular, Bartky (p. 107) considers such practices as relating to the appearance of normative heterosexuality. Engagement with practices which seek to normalise and transform the body may thus be experienced and perceived as pleasurable and beneficial, whilst remaining situated within broader, problematic power struggles (p. 103). Further to this, the dynamism and fluidity of modern power allows for the transference and transformation of power and social relations (Bordo 1999 p. 254).

Accordingly, disciplinary and normalising productions of the body reveal transgressive and revisional potential (p. 254), as exemplified by Butler's (1999b p. 416) identification of discontinuous gendered performativity within 'heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts'. Butler's description of performativity provides further elucidation of the production of the gendered body.

Butler and the Performative Body

The notion of the performative body, proposed by Butler, is constructive in the understanding of beauty practices, such as genital fashioning, as social acts which contribute to the gendering and producing of the body. Butler (1988 p. 528) argues that an appreciation of performativity is central to understanding the body as socially constructed, and imbued with cultural meaning. Discourse which deconstructs the sex/gender distinction aids in the mobilisation of the performative body (Butler 1988 p. 528). According to Butler, sex constitutes a concept which is not 'a simple fact or static condition of a body' (1999a p. 236) even though it is frequently couched in phraseology which underlines the perceived natural and biological unquestionability of truth. Rather, as Salih (2002 p. 55) elucidates, Butler regards sex as inherently gendered, materialising only via the processes by which the body re-enacts normative standards (1999a p. 236): sex assumes a physical, and recognisably social, character through the mobilisation of gender. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, Butler (p. 235) argues that categorisation of sex reveals regulatory practices and power relations which underpin the production of the body. In her (1999b p. 417; 1988 p. 528) analysis, the bodily inscription and performance of gender reveals the fictional nature of gender, as gender may be understood as performative, rather than as expressive of intrinsic identity. Consequently, transgressive bodily materialisations of gender thus disrupt the gendered order and reveal the assumed normative and regulatory character of sex and gender (Butler

1999b p. 417). The performance of gender is thus reliant on 'a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time' (Butler 1988 p. 523). Butler's mobilisation of gender as demonstrative of performativity rests on the conceptualisation of gender as a process of doing, rather than a state of being (Salih 2002 p. 55). Indeed, Butler's theory of performativity is contingent upon the repetition of a series of culturally and historically situated acts, the manifestation of which is the body.

Butler (1999a p. 239) resituates the significance of the body as not merely a surface for inscription, but subject to a *process* of continual materialisation that culminates in the formation of the physical self. Butler argues:

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter. (1999a p. 239)

This process of materialisation speaks to the embodiment of social and cultural scripts, thereby facilitating the production of the subject. Butler's description of 'materialising of possibilities' proposes a body which is produced via performative practices (Butler 1988 p. 521). Butler (p. 521) asserts 'one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body'. The performative body consists of actively engaged repetitive acts in accordance with social prescriptions of identity (pp. 525–526).

As identified, bodily inscription results in the interpretation and categorisation of a perceived internal identity. As such, the self-surveilling, disciplinary gaze is implemented and internalised by women in the production and performance of femininity and associated productive regimes, such as beauty work (Brush 1998 p. 38). Genital modification practices are a component of the cultural construction and locating of the body. Indeed, corporal

materialisation is dependent upon disciplinary practices that work to situate and normalise the inscribed body.

Beauty practices reflect the way in which the body is culturally located and constructed. The relationship between physical materialisation, inscription, and embodiment of power, presented and adopted as the theoretical basis of understanding for the analysis of cosmetic genital modification, is most fully encapsulated by Butler:

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances. (1988 p. 531)

Therefore, the understanding of the body as socially constructed, materialising through the performance of repetitive acts, underpins the conceptual framework employed in this thesis. The selection of feminist theory in relation to the production of the gendered body, which is regarded as subject to disciplinary regimes, assists in the locating of genital fashioning as one such disciplinary and performative practice that is reflective of cultural meaning.

The Production of Femininity

There are multiple ways of understanding the relationship between feminine embodiment and bodily experience. According to Bartky (1998 p. 244), disciplinary practices imprint femininity upon the female body and are revealing of power and cultural norms that are disempowering to women. Grosz (1994 p. 144) argues that discourse positions *all* individuals as involved in power relations and subject to practices of self-creation and modification. However, as highlighted by Butler (1988 p. 526), whilst the subject is not passive in the adoption of embodied social scripts, there are social constraints on embodiment of

gendered identity. The following discussion outlines theories of femininity, the body and power, as employed within this thesis, proposing that beauty practices, such as genital fashioning, contribute to the construction of the (feminine) body and are disciplinary practices.

Bartky (1997 p. 95) views the body as an inscribable surface and positions femininity as a construction, imprinted upon the body via disciplinary practices. Although Bartky (1997) does not seek to deconstruct the materiality of the (female) body, her analysis identifies the body as reflecting cultural norms, meaning and power. The normalising processes of bodily inscription transforms the body into a recognisable and ‘particular type of body’ (Grosz 1994 p. 142); that is through disciplinary practices central to the embodiment of normalised femininity (Bartky 1998 p. 244). The process of gendered bodily inscription allows for the construction of a seemingly intrinsic gendered identity (Butler 1988 p. 528; Butler 1999b p. 417). The facade of femininity is fundamental to confirmed embodied identity as woman (Morgan 1991 p. 43). The significance of a feminine identity—femininity understood as socially juxtaposed with masculinity—is further elucidated by Bartky:

To have a body felt to be ‘feminine’—a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is in most cases crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female, and since persons currently can *be* only as male or female, to her sense of herself as an existing individual. (1997 p. 105, original emphasis)

The requirements of femininity are increasingly transmitted via mass visual media that educate viewers on socially required self-presentation (Bordo 1993 p. 94). Bartky (1997 p. 95) describes the ‘artifice’ of femininity as a realisation borne from the performance and reproduction of gendered norms as inscribed upon the body.

Despite the potential pleasurable and transgressive nature of transformative practices, as already discussed, the disciplinary processes required for the production of femininity are identified by Bartky (1998 p. 17, p. 20; 1997 p. 100) as disempowering and harmful to women. The regimes employed to normalise and feminise the female body implicitly position the natural, undisciplined female form as deficient and shameful (Bartky 1997 p. 100). Moreover, Bartky regards the standards of appropriate femininity that women are required to enact and replicate as unattainable, resulting in a compounding shame. Bordo (1993 p. 91) too considers the engagement of normalising disciplinary practices to contribute to the female experience of 'conviction of lack, of insufficiency, or never being good enough'.

Whilst Bartky (1997 p. 100) considers the disciplinary practices of feminine embodiment and inscription as oppressive, casting the feminine form as inferior, Grosz (1994 p. 144) provides a useful alternative understanding that *all* individuals are subject to the disciplinary practices of self-surveillance and self-creation. Although the negotiation of power may be discerned within the various disciplinary practices, no one is exempt from engagement with the constraining social regimes manifest in bodily production.

Patriarchal power relations do not function to make women the objects of disciplinary control while men remain outside of disciplinary surveillance. It is not a question of more or less but of differential production. (Grosz 1994 p. 144)

The interplay between external powers and individual agency is central in the disciplinary practices of femininity (Bartky 1997 p. 103). Embodiment of socially constructed norms and enactment of disciplinary regimes requires proficiency, skill, and is materialised as a result of a choosing subject (p. 103). Whilst culturally situated, the transformation of the body in accordance with cultural scripts may be characterised as an active process via which the

embodied exercises agency. Grosz (1994 p. 142) explains the production and surveillance of one's body as enmeshing 'us in various networks of power, but never do they render us as merely passive and compliant'. Butler also advises not to position the body as passive, rather, the scripted body and corresponding illusionary identity may be perceived as subject to a restricted array of pre-existing options; 'the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives' (Butler 1988 p. 526). Bartky and Bordo's analysis of the resultant effects of the socially constructed feminine form illuminates the rigid disciplinary regimes of femininity. Bartky (1997 p. 91) explains the repetitive and 'ritualistic' nature of the disciplinary practices as producing the 'pervasive sense of bodily deficiency', inherent in the production of femininity. Moreover, the limited options of normative femininity are noted by numerous theorists; along with ramifications and sanctions for individuals who fail to correctly perform gendered norms (Bartky 1997 p. 104; Butler 1999b p. 420).

Contemporary Culture and New Femininities: Postfeminism and Sexualisation

Contemporary western society is now characterised by sexualised imagery and tropes, in accompaniment with the proliferation of postfeminist discourse. According to McRobbie (2008 p. 235), 'existing feminist vocabularies' are not fully adequate as frameworks to address the altered environment of contemporary postfeminist culture. Thus far, this chapter has traced established feminist understandings of the body and the production of gender. However, the construction of femininity within contemporary culture requires extended analysis given the existence of new and distinct societal and ideological turns. The cultural shift toward the eroticised should not be examined as an isolated characteristic of 21st century society. Attwood (2006 p. 85) explains that this change has occurred in conjunction with new class distinctions and the widespread adoption of consumerist

ideology. In the following discussion, I will examine this societal shift and the intersecting cultural components that are associated with these developments. In particular, I will consider the way in which postfeminism and sexualisation intersect within both consumer culture and emergent representations of normative femininity. In order to ground the discussion of these ideological shifts, I will also discuss the emergence and defining characteristics of postfeminism and the sexualisation of culture.

New femininity

Contemporary femininity has departed from the submissive feminine figure and is instead characterised by the production of playful 'sexiness'. Dubbed by Gill as a 'new femininity' (2011 p. 52), it has emerged as a consequence of the sex positive influences of the feminist movement, coupled with neoliberal, postfeminist and consumption discourse. Indeed, the postfeminist cultural turn is identifiable by the replacement of traditional modes of femininity with the celebration of female embodiment of consumerist values, characterised by active assertiveness, materialism and independence (Evans et al. 2010 p. 114). According to Gill (2007a p. 74), 'young women are under greater pressure than ever before' to achieve particular modes of femininity through beauty practices. There has been a marked extension of requirements for production of the entirety of the female body (Gill 2007a p. 74) and Dobson (2012 p. 256) explains that the 'production of femininity through sexiness' mandates a high level of self-surveillance, discipline and body work.

Gill argues that it is now normative, within a postfeminist society, that young women produce and display 'a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency' (2007a p. 72). In this way, women are no longer cast as sexual objects, but now as knowing subjects, active in their sexual expression (Jackson, Vares & Gill 2012 p. 3). Gill explains that 'a crucial aspect of the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is

framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom, and above all, choice' (2009 p. 148). New femininity, underpinned by postfeminist sensibilities, rests on the portrayal of women as being actively empowered and possessing confidence, and sex appeal (Jackson et al. 2012 p. 3). Representations of this new femininity adopt assertive, feminist tones and women are cast as engaging with products and practices for their own enjoyment, in the process of which they 'just happen' to also gain approval from men (Gill 2008 p. 437). Indeed, narratives which promote the agential sexual subject have reconstructed traditional body work for the purpose of the male gaze as now an expression of self care and doing it for yourself (Evans et al. 2010 p. 116). In this way, the ideal feminine subject focuses less on the attaining and pleasing of a male partner, and is instead 'empowered by the knowledge of her own sexual attractiveness' (Gill 2009 p. 150).

This new femininity has provided increased opportunities for, and acceptance of, diverse sexualities and sexual expression, while the display of female sexuality has been celebrated within postfeminist discourse (Chen 2013 p. 442). However, Gill (2007a p. 72) counters claims of diversified representation and states that sexualised representations of women predominate within the mainstream media. Whilst having moved beyond the portrayal of women as housewives and mothers, Gill states that sexually assertive femininity is not offered to women as one of numerous options for embodied femininity, but is presented as the central factor in all representations of women (2007a p. 72). Indeed, echoing Gill, Chen considers that sexual expression has 'become the new imperative, the obligation from which one is not free' (2013 p. 442). Women's engagement with sexuality has been framed as voluntary self-objectification in accordance with idealised beauty norms (Chen 2013 p. 442). These contemporary discourses coax women into asserting their own enjoyment and capacity for choice in their conformity to normative feminine standards (Chen 2013 p. 448).

The media representation of this new femininity also frequently consist of sexualised representations of women accompanied with texts which make reference to women's agency—sexual agency, in particular—and perceived empowerment (Gill 2006 p. 150). Indeed, within postfeminist discourse, 'being "sexy" and being "empowered" are conflated (Jackson et al. 2012 p. 3). Not only is empowerment promoted as gained through consumption, contemporary conceptualisations of female empowerment are centred on sexual power (Gill 2006 p. 149).

However, representations of women's sexuality are not analogous but incorporate different meanings and constructions (Gill 2009 p. 154). According to Gill, 'though practices of "sexualisation" people are discursively constituted as very different kinds of subject or object' (p. 154). As a result, participation in these new, idealised femininities is limited to only some women. Women who do not meet normative standards of femininity are excluded from empowerment via consumption and production of normative, sexually appealing, beauty (Gill 2009 p. 150). Indeed, older women are not only excluded from participation with sexual identity and performance, but actively derided with sexualisation discourse. Racial and classed distinctions are also employed within contemporary representations of desirable femininity. Gill discusses the way in which distained working class female sexuality may be differentiated from the dignified sexuality embodied by the middle class woman (2006 p. 151). Indeed, Gill states the negotiation of classed sexuality is so significant that 'it makes little sense to think of representations of sexiness outside of class' (2009 p. 154). Furthermore, the sexualisation of culture is also distinctly gendered, with women cast as responsible for invoking and promoting the erotic (Gill 2006 p. 141). Explaining that this is a facet often overlooked in discussions of sexualisation, Gill states that contemporary postfeminist and sexualised narratives serve to 'mystify the real situation by

occluding the gender, race, class and age relations at work in “sexualised” visual culture’ (2009 p. 142). New femininities, shaped by postfeminist discourse, encourage women to make individualised decisions which depart from traditional representations of female sexuality as passive and are instead cast as sexually assertive.

The Sexualisation of Culture

The context in which bodies are currently produced is one in which sexualised imagery and narratives proliferate within the mainstream media (Attwood 2006 pp. 81–82). Some theorists have considered the sexualisation of culture ‘a distinctly postfeminist phenomenon linked to discourses of celebrity, choice and empowerment’ (Gill 2011 p. 53). It is important to understand the theoretical intricacies involved in discussing embodiment and empowerment in a sexualised culture, given the centrality of these concepts to the investigation of genital fashioning. Indeed, Dobson (2012 p. 256) explains that contemporary widespread practices of bodily alteration and production, such as Brazilian waxing, were previously associated with ‘erotic performance work’. In the previous chapter, I introduced the concept of the pornification of culture as a way to explain how women may learn of genital ideals presented in pornography. Paasonen et al. (cited in Ringrose 2011 p. 102) distinguish the sexualisation of culture from the more specific terminology of “pornification”; that is pornification referring to the increased presence of pornographic imagery and the ‘blurring of boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream’. I consider the pornification of culture as significant in specific discussion pertaining to the uptake of genital fashioning. However, in this chapter I seek to provide a broad understanding of the cultural context in which femininity is mediated. As such, I employ the broader term of sexualisation in the discussion of agency and femininity in contemporary culture.

Academic discussion of the sexualisation of culture is particularly contentious. There exists significant academic debate regarding the scope, meaning, and impact of sexualised, or pornified, culture. Despite academic contention, numerous theorists have identified this increased proliferation of sexualised or pornographic imagery and discussion within mainstream culture (Attwood 2006 p. 78; Gill 2012b pp. 483–484; McRobbie 2004 p. 259; McNair 2013 p. 163). According to Gill, there is concurrence over the notion that contemporary culture is characterised by a previously unknown level of sexual exhibitionism (2012b p. 484). Rather, academics have differing opinions as to the conceptualisation and interpretation of this cultural shift (p. 484). For the purposes of this discussion, I understand the sexualisation of culture, defined by Gill (pp. 483–484), as ‘the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, permeating ‘mainstream’ contemporary culture’.

Underpinning celebration of women’s new capacity for sexual agency is the departure from traditional gendered roles for sexuality (Erchull & Liss 2013 p. 2341). Some theorists, such as McNair (2002 p. 206), have argued that a sexualised culture can positively enhance opportunities for sexual expression. Lamb and Peterson (2012 p. 708) also acknowledge, to an extent, the potential emancipatory capacity of sexual media but consider the majority of representations of sexuality to be homogenous. Walter (2010 p. 3), critical of this cultural turn, further contends there to be a narrow representation of female sexuality as a result of the extension of pornographic standards into the mainstream. As a result, sexualisation has been considered to have the effect of enhancing women’s self-regulatory, self-surveilling gaze (Edell, Brown & Tolman 2013 p. 277). My investigation of genital fashioning is grounded in the understanding that the sexualisation of culture effects both positive and negative

social consequences. This cultural phenomenon has resulted in increased sexual openness and acceptance of diversity. Within this context, women are provided greater scope for sexual agency. However, there also exists pressure that presents sexualised embodiment as compulsory. Bodily production in accordance with sexualised tropes, therefore, requires undertaking significant self-surveillance. It is within the context of a sexualised culture that young women make decisions about femininity and bodily production.

Postfeminist messages of choice underpin women's engagement in a sexualised culture. For instance, female participation with sexualised practices and presentation is conceptualised as an example of women making a lifestyle choice of which they are in control (Chen 2013 p. 446). As stated by Gill (2007a p. 90), 'sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active (confident, assertive) female subjects'. Walter is also critical of the context around women's engagement with contemporary sexualised femininity. According to Walter (2010 p. 120), women's decisions are impacted by a culture in which specific choices for sexual embodiment are celebrated whereas others are condemned.

Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Feminist Ideology

Theorists such as McRobbie and Gill have discussed contemporary culture as characterised by postfeminism. Gill argues that this postfeminist era is identifiable by the:

Shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; a dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of culture. (2007b p. 149)

The nuanced, and occasionally contradictory, nature of postfeminism is described by Butler (2013 p. 45) as illustrating how discourse has the capacity to 'travel through complex social

terrains, deftly adapting to cultural, economic and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics’.

One such intersection is evident in the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism. According to Gill and Scharff (2011 p. 7), neoliberal ideology underpins most postfeminist thought. Identifiable shared characteristics of neoliberalism and postfeminism have been noted to include an emphasis on context free individualism which demands ‘an autonomous, self regulating, active subject’ and the gendered insistence that women’s decisions are constructed as freely chosen (Butler 2013 p. 45). Neoliberal ideology positions the individual as a rational agent who, through a series of choices, constructs their own identity and life trajectory (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose & Weems 2009 p. 2). Neoliberalism moves beyond the previous forms of disciplinary power and does not, according to Chen (2013 p. 444), effect individual choice in traditionally coercive ways. Instead, neoliberalism ‘impacts on the conditions that make these choices desirable and voluntary’ (Chen 2013 p. 444). The almost panoptic control presented within neoliberal culture results in self-disciplining individuals who are guided by seemingly self optimizing rationality (Chen 2013 p. 444).

These characteristics of postfeminism have been considered as contradictory. One such contradiction is evident in the postfeminist negotiation of feminism (Budgeon 2011 p. 281). Central to an appreciation of postfeminist ideas is an understanding of the way in which specific tenants of the feminist movement have been incorporated within postfeminist discourse whilst concurrently dismissed as no longer relevant (Budgeon 2011 p. 281). Budgeon (p. 281) explains that postfeminism is not a backlash against feminism per se, but instead seeks to legitimise feminist successes and cast women’s rights as already achieved. With this achievement of women’s equality, feminism is understood as now redundant (p.

281). In this way, 'feminism is both incorporated but simultaneously reviled' (p. 281). According to Butler (2013 p. 43), postfeminist discourse positions feminism as irrelevant in contemporary culture. Importantly, there has been a shift from feminist emphasis on the collective to the postfeminist individual (Lazar 2011 p. 49). Indeed, Budgeon and Currie state postfeminism 'celebrates women's achievements in previously male-dominated realms and, thus, undermines the collective nature of women's liberation by directing women to individual goals' (1995 p. 184). The shift toward personal achievement destabilises collective action which, within the feminist movement, is considered central to the shared goal of fighting the patriarchy (Chen 2013 p. 446).

Further to this, postfeminist discourse subtly misappropriates and redirects feminist arguments. For example, resultant from the dual mobilization and dismissal of feminist standpoints within postfeminism, according to Lazar, is a reversal of 'feminist efforts to make the personal political, by repeatedly and universally reducing the political to the personal' (2011 p. 49). One way in which this shift is evidenced is through altered narratives on female empowerment and achievement. Historical feminist arguments for collective female achievement through the workplace, education and government, have been replaced with a focus on 'projects of individualised self-definition and privatised self expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices' (Budgeon 2011 p. 281). Within this context, women are provided with an increased range of lifestyle choices (Chen 2013 p. 445). However, these broadened lifestyle options are centred on personal choices of appearance and apparel in favour of wider political engagement (Chen 2013 p. 445). Young women are provided, under the guise of feminist principles of choice, the freedom to choose engagement with unfeminist ideals (p. 442). Popular commentators have also identified this cultural turn; McGuire discusses the 'bizarrely circular logic ... that, since feminism was about

giving women choice and feminism succeeded, every choice a woman makes now is proof of feminism's success' (2008 p. 5). Sex positive feminist standpoints have also been appropriated and reframed within the sexualisation of culture, as previously discussed, which is understood to be both enabled and accompanied by postfeminist ideology.

Postfeminist Consumer and Media Culture

Postfeminist discourse has been particularly mobilised within the context of consumer culture (Jackson et al. 2012 p. 3). Purchasing power gained by women's involvement in the workplace prompted new media representations of women. Indeed, McRobbie highlights the material changes in women's employment and educational status as contributing to the growth of consumption and associated marketing messages (2008 p. 534). According to Gill (2006 p. 149), new marketing directives were required to sell products to women who emerged as a potential consumer base and target audience. The feminist concepts of independence and agency have been mobilised and co-opted to market products to women with consumption cast as an expression of choice and empowerment (Jackson et al. 2012 p. 3; Chen 2013 p. 447; Lazar 2011 p. 49). Within postfeminist narratives, embodiment of the active, independent consumer is idealised. Indeed, McRobbie has argued that, within consumer culture, feminist narratives have been appropriated; companies have seemingly adopted the interests of women as a means to cast their products in a progressive and attractive light (2008 p. 533).

The incorporation of postfeminist values within consumer culture is employed particularly within the discourses advanced by the beauty industry (Lazar 2011 p. 38). The capacity to produce the body and emancipate oneself through the creation of an idealised physical form is presented as an expression of women's liberation (Lazar 2011 pp. 38–40). As stated by Lazar, 'the liberating promise of beauty is to gain access to ways of life and styles of dressing

otherwise “denied” them’ (p. 40). Gill (2007a p. 74) also notes the popular presentation of the postfeminist consumer actor as having the capacity to choose engagement with beauty products and practices as a means to enhance self-confidence and practice self-care. Through these discourses, women are encouraged to obtain power through consumption and cultivation of a specific appearance (Gill 2007a p. 90). Ultimately, postfeminist consumer discourse celebrates women as the ideal subject exercising choice through consumption and bodily production.

Marketing and media messages have also adopted postfeminist narratives, which promote empowerment through consumption. In particular, Budgeon and Currie’s (1995 p. 184) early work identified the presence of postfeminist messages within advertising, which associated female empowerment with the usage of beauty products. However, feminist understandings of postfeminist media messages have altered over time. Chen (2013 p. 447) documents the theoretical shifts in feminist approaches to media and women’s cultural literacy. In the late 1970s McRobbie identified the capacity for agency and resistance through young women’s consumption of popular media (Chen 2013 p. 447). Budgeon and Currie (1995 p. 174) also highlighted the potential for women to resist and reimagine cultural texts and commercial messages. They praised the expression of women’s desires within the spheres of fashion and beauty (1995 p. 174). Despite this, later analysis by McRobbie also found that the burgeoning space narratives of agency and empowerment within women’s media, did not lead to an opening of women’s embodiment of diverse identities (Chen 2013 p. 447). Instead, through the consumption of these media, young women were encouraged to engage with idealised femininity as a mode of empowerment and choice (Chen 2013 p. 447). McRobbie (2011 p. xi) dubbed this cultural occurrence a ‘double entanglement’; that is, progressive cultural shifts allowing for diverse sexual identity and participation in the public

sphere, accompanied by shifts toward the patriarchal which coupled such freedom with 'conservatism, [and] consumerism'. In this way, women are considered to freely choose their own objectification (Gill 2008 p. 437). Within these narratives, media representations of women promote engagement with sexualised culture as a means of empowerment, frequently achieved through consumption (Edell et al. 2013 p. 278).

In this way, women's engagement with occasionally costly, painful and time consuming beauty practices is removed from understandings of cultural mandates for appearance and instead touted as 'free choice, pampering, or even self indulgence!' (Gill 2007a p. 75). Indeed, the discourse of 'choice' in postfeminist and consumer narratives can be perceived as a way in which feminist demands for 'rights' has been replaced (Lazar 2011 p. 43). However, in this context, female choice is exercised only through consumption, rather than broader political and social decisions. Moreover, Lazar (2011 p. 45) notes that women are not offered the option to refrain from consumption choices. According to Chen, 'this is a mentality that the neoliberal self-governance contributes to, whereby to be empowered, free and actively choosing becomes the normative ideal to which one must aspire through ceaseless self care and perfection, and for which one must bear full responsibility and take risks' (2013 p. 448). As a result, the resource limitations faced by working class women's production of femininity are cast as a failure of the individual (Budgeon 2011p. 286).

Choice in a Postfeminist Era

Central within postfeminist discourse is the neoliberal emphasis on individual capacity for choice and agency. Historically, choice has been a cherished principle of the feminist movement given denial of choice to women within economic, political and social structures. The disintegration of previous social structures which largely dictated an individual's classed trajectory has, according to some theorists, opened possibilities for the exercise of agency

(Butler 2013 p. 41). According to Gill and Scharff (2011 p. 8) traditional social structures have been replaced with identity developed via the production of the body and 'projects of the self' (Featherstone cited in Gill & Scharff 2011 p. 8). As such, Gonick et al. question how then might 'agency and resistance be imagined and analysed within and against the signifiers of girl power, post feminism and globalization' (2009 p. 4). In contrast to broader understandings of choice and freedom as universal and absolute, choice, within neoliberal, postfeminist discourse, is understood as the capacity to create a rational, self-determined identity (Chen 2013 p. 443). Moreover, within this perspective, individuals are considered to have already achieved the determinants allowing for freedom and choice (p. 443). Chen explains that the neoliberal construction of freedom is a 'never complete freedom from power, but the active ability to respond to power and the autonomous ability to realise one's potential through one's own efforts and active choice' (p. 443).

The framing of choice within postfeminist discourses conceals structures associated with broader social inequalities. As previously considered, experienced inequalities are thus considered as purely resultant from individual choices, rather than structural forces (Chen 2013 p. 446). The acknowledgement of such inequalities and differences would disrupt the identity of the individual as self-actualizing and determined (Budgeon 2011 p. 286). Therefore, such unsatisfactory circumstances experienced by the individual may be solved through individual actions of personal improvement via 'a ceaseless project of the self, be it hairstyle, make-up, cooking skills or career capabilities' (Chen 2013 p. 446). Stuart and Donaghue elucidate the interplay between postfeminist discourse and the concept of choice, stating postfeminist rhetoric implies that:

Systematic and structural factors disadvantaging women have largely been addressed and that remaining differences between women and men should be understood as a result of the free exercise of individual choice. (2011 p. 98)

In this way, postfeminist and neoliberal discourse prevents women from identifying structural forces that may impact upon their lived experiences. Instead, personal success or failure is considered solely as a result of good choices or mistakes (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 149). Choice within neoliberal rhetoric is, therefore, central in the construction of contemporary identity and life trajectory (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 148). As a consequence, it is necessitated that modern individuals make the right choices as they are individually responsible for outcomes and failure (McRobbie 2009 p. 19). Moreover, the possibility of self-enhancement is particularly significant for women seeking to transcend a particular class status. Noted by Budgeon and Currie (1995 p. 184), postfeminist narratives offer beauty as an achievement, which is accessible to all women. Walter's (2010 p. 36) critique of contemporary sexualised culture also points to potential for women to achieve social status via engagement with sexualised ideals, as opposed to career advancement. Thus, particularly within the current 'makeover culture' (Braun 2009 p. 244) the individual is also positioned as responsible for their aesthetic judgements and as such is responsible for all negative repercussions, bearing 'self-blame when success eludes ... her' (McRobbie 2009 p. 18). Despite variation in social and economic circumstances, women are, according to Budgeon (2015 p. 309), encouraged to identify as modern, self-actualizing subjects.

Within this framework, it is suggested that young women have the capacity to *choose* to embody gendered identities and associated productive practices. Gill and Scharff (2011 p. 7) contend that women are required, more so than their male counterparts, to regulate and transform themselves whilst maintaining that their actions are freely chosen. As stated by Harris and Dobson (2015 p. 148), styles and tropes of femininity are 'now divested of

singular, oppressive meanings, and can be adopted ironically or re-framed as actively chosen and enjoyed rather than imposed by the patriarchy'. This postfeminist framework enables a move away from the feminist critique of femininity, and allows women to engage with femininity as knowing and empowered individuals (Budgeon 2015 p. 306). According to some theorists, the existence of contemporary feminine norms provides young women with a basis from which to negotiate their gendered identity. In this way, femininity may be reconceptualised as more than just an oppressive structure to which women are subject. Within this context however, agency and resistance are not analogous. The potential to exercise agency and choose to embody feminine tropes is separate from the decision to reject, resist and subvert these femininities (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 147).

Empowerment has been reframed as an individual effort, achieved through personal accomplishments in the contexts of education, work, and bodily production and presentation (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 149). The way in which we can understand young women's experience of empowerment and agency within a sexualised culture is critically contested. Peterson (2010 pp. 308-309) cautions against positioning young women's experienced feelings of empowerment as false empowerment. However, Harris and Dobson (2015 p. 152) also highlight the need to critically investigate the notion that women are able to subvert patriarchy through the assertion that they feel empowered through their choices. There exists a critical distinction between women's pleasure and empowerment. Although Budgeon and Currie (1995 p. 185) acknowledged the potential for women to derive pleasure from engagement with popular texts of beauty, they stated that 'we do not view pleasure as a measure of the empowerment of women'. Indeed, Erchull and Liss note that the distinction between empowerment and objectification is unclear given that women

reportedly experience feelings of empowerment through the process of objectification (2013 p. 2341).

The preferencing of an individualist discourse has also enabled women's cultivation of narratives that dismiss and deny subjectification to structural barriers. According to Harris and Dobson (2015 p. 148), young women do not identify with, or describe, their experiences as shaped by structural oppression. However, young women's asserted capacity for choice does not necessarily negate the structural constraints on their lived experiences (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 149). Rather, according to Harris and Dobson (p. 149), this vocabulary of choice merely demonstrates the fact that young women 'consistently mobilize narratives of choice and personal autonomy to articulate and make sense of their actions'. Gill (2007a p. 76) furthers this thought trajectory and, as a result of the centrality of discourses of choices within contemporary neoliberal consumer culture, considers it unsurprising that choice narratives underpin women's own accounts. As a result, theorizing of agency within contemporary culture is complicated by adopted narratives of women's empowerment and achievement (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 148).

Feminist theorists have been criticised for the perceived positioning of women as "victims" to contemporary ideologies of sexualisation, empowerment and agency (McNair 2014 p. 167). However, theories which cast women as active, agential subjects who freely choose engagement with sexualised behaviour and embodiment have also been critiqued for 'seeing objectification as self-chosen' (Kolehmainen 2010 p. 180). This polarization of theory replicates the 1980s feminist 'sex wars' of the anti-porn feminists versus the sex-positive feminists (Gill 2011 p. 53). Numerous theorists (Gill 2007a; Jeffries 2005; McRobbie 2009) are critical of the failure to acknowledge the inherent power dynamics and social contexts which impact upon the scope of female choice. Gill also considers postfeminist and

neoliberal rhetoric to have impacted upon academic analyses of women's choices. She draws attention to the potential for academics to be impacted by broader contemporary ideologies. Whilst some theorists such as Jeffreys (2005) are resolute in their view of women's oppression as a result of beauty practices, there has emerged theory which allows for both the acknowledgement of agency coupled with interrogation of cultural influence. Both Gill (2007 p. 73) and Chen (2013 p. 443) question the extent of women's capacity for free choice and highlight the similarities in women's decisions for feminine embodiment. Chen (2013 p. 443) considers that despite the discourse of freedom and choice, women ultimately continue to make homogenous decisions in accordance with normative standards as shaped by patriarchal and capitalist values. Rather, Harris and Dobson, following the work of McDonald, propose the negotiation of agency and structure through the conceptualisation of 'the suffering actor' (2015 p. 152). This understanding moves beyond 'agent/victim dichotomies' to instead recognise the way in which women exercise agency in conditions of struggle as a means to achieve 'social acceptance and survival' (Harris & Dobson 2015 p. 153). The understanding of women's choice as exercised within a context has also been described by Gill (2007a p. 73), who further proposes a methodology for examining women's narratives within a postfeminist culture.

The relationship between choice, cultural context and postfeminist femininity provides grounding for exploring young women's engagement with genital fashioning and their perceived freedom to do so. In particular, the broader narratives of neoliberalism and postfeminism may shape the way in which young women mobilise concepts of choice. Contemporary bodies are produced in accordance with cultural standards based upon disciplinary practices of corporal materialisation. Gendered performance and bodily production is negotiated within the confines of gendered norms and the existence of social

sanctions. Contemporary feminine norms are characterised by postfeminism and the sexualisation of western culture. Given pervasive narratives of empowerment and choice, there is debate as to how theorists may best address contemporary understandings of female agency. In accordance with the view that women make choices within a given structure, I employ Gill's (2007a p. 78) theory of critical respect as a methodological framework.

Methodological Approach: Post-Structuralism and Critical Respect

As previously outlined, my work is situated within a post-positivist conceptualisation of knowledge which considers the body as socially negotiated. Throughout this thesis, I use two concepts proposed by Gill (2007a). As already detailed, Gill approaches notions of choice and agency as contextualised by broader social constraints. Gill's description of contextualised choice underpins my understanding of the relationship between individual agency and societal structure. As a means to analyse participant narratives in keeping with this perceptive, I also employ Gill's proposition of 'critical respect'.

Gill's concept of 'critical respect' (2007a p. 78) is an appropriate methodological framework for investigating the trend of female genital fashioning: critical respect enables the investigation of young women's perspectives whilst acknowledging the significance of the cultural context in which these perspectives are formed. Critical respect was proposed by Gill in response to Duits and van Zoonen's condemnation of the moral panic relating to young women's sartorial decisions which, according to Duits and van Zoonen, serves to deprive young women of their agency (2006 p. 114). Gill's recommendation of critical respect seeks to address the complexities of negotiation between agency, choice and cultural context. Stating 'women make choices ... but they do not do so in conditions of their

own making' (2007a p. 72), Gill posits the necessity of contextualised choice as a framework with which to analyse the accounts provided by research participants.

Critical respect enables the process of critical social inquiry within a feminist post-structural epistemological perspective. The elucidation of the various theoretical approaches drawn upon in this outline are often problematic due to their contested definitional qualities (Gannon & Davies 2012 p. 65). Nevertheless, this thesis accepts the understanding of post-structuralism as provided by Davies and Gannon (2005). According to Davies and Gannon, feminist post-structuralism may be understood to:

Trouble the very categories male and female, to make visible the way they are constituted and to question their inevitability. Poststructuralist analysis focuses on discourse and discursive and regulatory practices. It seeks to transcend the individual/social divide and to find the ways in which the social worlds we inhabit, and the possibilities for existence within them, are actively spoken into existence. (2005 p. 318)

My adoption of a feminist post-structural approach is in accordance with the perspectives employed by the various theorists which inform my theoretical understanding. Given the post-structural aim to interrogate 'the structures and practices of everyday life' (Gannon & Davies 2012 p. 73), post-structuralism is useful for investigating the often habitual and increasingly normative practice of genital fashioning. Further, as outlined, a feminist post-structural perspective problematises narratives, which consider gender and sex as fixed or inevitable; instead, these concepts are positioned as formulated via social structures (Davies & Gannon 2005 p. 318). Indeed, Harris and Dobson (2015) have recommended poststructural theory as a framework from which to analyse agency within contemporary culture. They highlight the way in which poststructuralism has enabled conceptualisations of agency as produced in relation to a variety of social constraints and influences (2015 p. 152).

My research, using a post-structural perspective, pursues inquiry of discourse, meaning and power, and appreciates the involvement of the researcher within social power relations (Gannon & Davies 2012 pp. 72–73; Kenway, Willis, Blackmore & Rennie 1994 p. 189). Particularly germane is the deconstructive capacity for investigation concerned with the creation and fluidity of meaning contained within language, practice and relations (Kenway, et al. p. 189). Defined by Lather (2004 p. 207) as the ‘belief that there is no transhistorical, culture-free, disinterested way of knowing’, the approach of critical inquiry seeks to reject essentialist perspectives, facilitating the adoption of constructivist tendencies. Consistent with the underlying tenets of critical respect, a constructivist framework will be used to explore the production of gender and sexuality relative to complex environmental and social structures (Barber & Murray 2001 p. 24). Whilst post-structuralist theory does not prescribe ‘a set of practices that might be taken up and ossified as “method”’ (Gannon & Davies 2012 p. 72), the emphasis on linguistic and textual analysis supports my selection of a qualitative approach.

Acknowledging thoughtful and considerate listening as essential to feminist analysis, Gill further argues the obligation of critical inquiry to extend beyond a perceived patronising approach, to enable questioning of the perspectives presented, and thus, in accordance with a feminist post-structural framework, examine the associated cultural context. This is illustrated by Gill’s assertion:

Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end of the process and our job is surely to contextualise these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context. (2007a p. 77)

The application of critical respect is situated in opposition to postfeminist and neoliberal understandings of the autonomous, context-free individual and does not endeavour to

position, or 'elevate', the researcher as superior. Rather, as further discussed in the following, it is undisputed that the researcher is also embroiled within the locus of cultural influence (Gill 2007a pp. 72, 77).

Critical respect has been effectively utilised and interpreted as a methodological approach in recent studies (see Coy & Garner 2010; Evans et al. 2010; James 2014; Ringrose, et al. 2012), thereby demonstrating capacity for effective application. The adoption of critical respect thus provides for the acknowledgement and appreciation of women's agency with regard to decisions to engage in genital fashioning, while recognising the social and cultural factors that may influence female perceptions of, and engagement with, practices of vulval modification.

Applied in Coy and Garner's (2010) exploration of 'empowerment' and 'oppression' rhetoric regarding glamour modelling, critical respect may be further perceived as pertinent in discussion relating to practices engaged within a postfeminist context (Coy & Garner 2010 p. 659). Coy and Garner contend that critical respect provides a means of analysis when 'objectification is both marketed and experienced as agency' (2010 p. 659). Indeed, the principle of 'critical respect' proves particularly relevant for pursuing studies with young people in the context of a sexualised culture. Coy and Garner state that investigations into the way women experience and understand sexualised culture 'whilst accounting for individual actions, need to not lose sight of systems, the operations of gendered power and how these translate into everyday ontologies' (2012 p. 294)

Ringrose et al. (2012 p. 21), also employed the methodological approach of 'critical respect' in their study of sexing within peer teenaged networks. According to Ringrose et al., the use of critical respect as an approach to interviewing and analysis enabled researchers to

consider seriously the participant narratives, whilst maintaining an appreciation of the cultural context in which participant narratives are produced (2012 p. 21).

The conceptual framework of critical respect proves particularly salient given the application of discourses citing glamour and sexual agency with respect to genital modification (Labre 2002 pp. 114, 125–126).

Method

In this thesis, I explore young women's understandings and experiences of genital fashioning, relative to perceived social pressures and expectations. The questions that I seek to address are:

- 1) How do young women understand contemporary practices of genital modification?
- 2) What do these conceptualisations of genital fashioning indicate about femininity in contemporary Western society?

In order to answer these questions, I pursued research underpinned by feminist principles. Drawing on Letherby's (2003 p. 3) definition of feminist research, I sought to undertake investigation that is non-exploitive and centred on women's perspectives. Seibold (2000) describes the research characteristics, typically regarded as a feminist approach to qualitative methods:

The principal investigator is a woman; the purpose is to study women and the focus of the research is women's experiences; the research must have the potential to help the subjects as well as the researcher; it is characterized by interaction between researcher and subject and by non-hierarchical relations and expression of feelings and concern for values (one or all may be incorporated); the word feminist or feminism is used in the report; non-sexist language is used; the bibliography includes feminist literature. (pp. 151 – 152)

The methods selected are informed by the framework of ‘critical respect’ (Gill 2007a), which seeks to prioritise women’s perspectives whilst critically situating these perspectives within cultural context.

As a means to best enable the expression and prioritisation of women’s perspectives, a qualitative research method was selected. Qualitative investigation allows for detailed and nuanced understandings of genital fashioning, as described by the research participants. Further to this, qualitative research provides greater scope and insight with respect to the construction and interpretation of sexuality (Attwood 2005 pp. 3–4).

A complementary mixed method of focus groups and single person interviews was selected as the mode of investigation. Focus groups, guided by broad discussion questions, were chosen for their capacity to generate rich responses through group interaction (Lewis cited in Wilkinson 1998 p. 113)—a particularly important function given the relatively emergent nature of the research topic. Previous research has also demonstrated the potential for the fluid discussion within focus groups to guide the conversation to topics and questions determined as relevant by the participants (Wilkinson 1998 p. 115), a function in keeping with the aim to prioritise participant perspectives. Further aligning with feminist methodology, focus groups replicate consciousness raising groups through the provision of group discussion leading to increased awareness and solidarity through potentially shared experiences and understandings (p. 115). However, the sensitive nature of the research topic required offering the option of single person interviews as some potential participants would not feel comfortable with discussing the research topic in a group setting, thereby leading to potential exclusion from participation. Further to this, inclusion of single person interviews enabled further, in-depth exploration of the results from the focus group

discussion. In addition to providing a rich data set, this mixed methods approach was utilised in an attempt to provide varying opportunities for participation and involvement.

Participation and Recruitment

Young women aged 18 to 30 years old were recruited to participate in focus groups and interviews. In total, 28 young women were recruited for participation in 11 focus group sessions. A further 10 single person interview sessions were conducted with 6 newly recruited participants and 4 previous participants from the focus groups. The specified age range was selected on the basis of literature detailing the increased predilection of young women to engage with genital alteration (DeMaria & Berenson 2013 p. 230; Toerien, et al. 2005 p. 403), and my own 'insider' status within this cohort.

Participant recruitment was conducted via a combination of advertising and snowball sampling. Research flyers (Appendix A and B) were displayed in women's bathrooms on two Monash University campuses. These recruitment sites were selected because it provided the potential to access a large cohort of women in the selected age range and my own accessibility to the site. Women's bathrooms were specifically selected given sensitivity of the topic and specific research design for female only participants. Atkinson and Flint (2001) suggest that young people constitute a potentially difficult to reach population that can optimally be contacted via snowball sampling. To increase the number of participants I also undertook snowball sampling via my cohort and university network. Contacts were provided with a copy of the recruitment flyer and plain language statement that could be forwarded on to potentially interested parties. In all cases, participants' self-selected participation.

Recruitment and data collection spanned approximately one year and was undertaken with university human ethics approval.

Data Collection

Data collection began with an initial round of semi-structured, audio-recorded, face-to-face focus group sessions. The focus groups were designed to be comprised of up to 5 women, however, most frequently focus groups consisted of 2–3 women for various logistical reasons. In total, 11 focus group sessions were conducted. Focus group sessions were conducted for approximately 30–50 minutes and were conducted in safe, public venues such as library meeting rooms. A series of open questions (Appendix C) were asked throughout the focus group sessions as a means to guide the discussion; however, participants were free to discuss topics of their choosing. One of the focus groups exceeded the allocated time limit and, as a result, not all discussion questions were posed to participants.

Focus group participants were invited to further participate in single person interviews. Whilst all focus group participants expressed willingness to be contacted for subsequent interviews, contact and availability for interview was limited to only some focus group participants. Therefore, in order to ensure adequate numbers of single person interviews, additional participants were also sought. The participation of initial focus group members in subsequent single person interviews fostered increased rapport between the researcher and participant (Knox & Burkard 2009 p. 569), which was important given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed. In total, there were 4 focus group participants who were later interviewed in single person interview sessions. A further 6 newly recruited women also participated in interview sessions.

The results of the focus group sessions informed the design of a series of subsequent semi-structured, audio recorded, single person interviews. Interviews were conducted for approximately 20–40 minutes. For ease of participant access, participants were offered the option to conduct the face-to-face interview in a safe public location, or via Skype. In total, 3

interviews were conducted face-to-face and 7 interviews were via Skype. A semi-structured approach was utilised along with a series of open questions (Appendix D), which were informed by the emergent themes within focus group discussion. Topics covered included: the role of the media; social norms; the influence of sexual partners; the potential association of pornography; and perceived reasons for engagement with genital fashioning. Participants were not asked questions directly pertaining to their own practice of genital fashioning. However, they were not prevented from discussing their practices if they chose to do so. Participants were also requested to read and provide comment on two extracts from *Cosmopolitan* Magazine (Appendix E).

No reimbursements or incentives were offered for participation in this research; however, light refreshments were provided in all face-to-face focus group and interview sessions.

Data Analysis

The focus group and interview recordings were transcribed in full to allow for close thematic analysis. In order to protect participant privacy, all names and identifying characteristics were removed in the transcription process and pseudonyms were used throughout.

The definition of thematic analysis applied within this research is drawn from Braun and Clarke (2006 p. 79), as 'a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data'. The themes identified in the data were coded, and these recognised patterns and themes in the data set formed the basis of analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006 p. 82). Thematic analysis was used to produce 'a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data' (Braun & Clarke 2006 p. 78) in accordance with the underlying methodology. In keeping with the feminist qualitative methodological approach which seeks to prioritise participant perspectives, a 'data driven', inductive approach to thematic analysis

was pursued (Braun & Clarke 2006 p. 83). In adopting Braun and Clarke's (p. 83) method, data was coded based on the emergent themes, free from the researcher's own preexisting perspectives.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this small-scale qualitative study. As this is a small self-selected sample recruited from a university campus the majority of participants had, or were undertaking, higher education. Questions were not asked with regard to ethnic identity; however, it may be noted that there was relatively little ethnic diversity in the sample.

As a means to gain deeper understanding in relation to the participants' perspective on gender and gender relations, focus group participants were invited to describe their relationship with feminism. Of those that chose or were able to do so, the majority identified as liberal feminists (n=5); a further few identified themselves as feminist without further elaboration or classification (n=4); and some stated that they support the feminist movement but do not consider themselves as feminist (n=4). A couple of participants identified as radical feminists (n=2). One participant considered herself unsure of her feminist leanings and a further two participants identified as not feminist.

Finally, given associated sensitivities, particularly in group discussion, I did not specifically ask about the sexual orientation of participants. Four participants openly identified as same sex attracted, but it is not possible to draw further conclusions as to the representation of lesbian, queer or bi-sexual women in the sample.

Generalisation of the results is restricted given the small self-selected sample but instead the research provides an in-depth exploration of this emerging topic. The selected sample of

young women provide insight to how some young Australian women experience and understand the trend of genital fashioning.

Ethical Considerations

An appreciation of participants' negotiation of agency within cultural confines is central to the conduct of ethical research. It is essential that the perspectives presented by the participants are respected and ethically portrayed; the application of 'critical respect' enables the consideration of the complex interplay between agency and cultural influence and constraints. Further to this, the researcher's 'insider status' (Seibold 2000 p. 154) and involvement in the production of knowledge necessitates ethical consideration. In order to ensure the conduct of respectful and ethical research, a reflexive and transparent research process is necessitated.

Feminist negotiation of agency requires acknowledgement of previous feminist propensity to engage in the positioning of women and participants as "cultural dupes", particularly in discussion pertaining to female engagement with practices of bodily objectification (Rubin, Nemeroff & Russo 2004 p. 28). Indeed, in their rejoinder to Gill, Duits and van Zoonen (2007 p. 167) assert that Gill's postulation of critical respect functions as a mechanism for silencing of women's perspectives. Duits and van Zoonen (p. 165) additionally consider the utilisation of agency to not necessarily require investigation and elucidation of context stating:

We use agency as an analytical term that refers to the purposeful actions of individuals, leaving aside the questions whether these actions are autonomously arrived at, or are results of structural forces.

My methodological approach adopted in accordance with Gill's theory of critical respect seeks to appreciate cultural contextualisation whilst recognising the paramount significance of the exercise of female agency within these cultural constraints. Further to this, Gill

questions the validity of research which fails to situate participant narratives within broader cultural understandings, regarding the popular appropriation of neoliberal discourse within feminist analyses to abnegate women's potential to consider their oppression within cultural and social contexts (2007a p. 75).

Ethical portrayal of informants and their associated perspectives is particularly significant in feminist research given the feminist identification of the exclusion and misrepresentation of women within previous research methods (Preissle & Han 2012 p. 596). As discussed, this research does not seek to stifle or muzzle the narratives presented by informants, and is thus careful to appreciate the capacity for agency as exercised by women. Considering the embodied subject as situated within context, not 'statically determined by it' (Davis 1995 p. 169), female negotiation and mediation of agency is critically addressed and respected, acknowledged to operate within the confines of a culture both influenced by and of influence to individual choice, as outlined by Gill's delineation of critical respect.

In accordance with the perspective that 'there is no freedom from power relations, nor is there any place outside discourse' (Gannon & Davies 2012 p. 75), as a researcher, I acknowledge my complicity in the participation and production of power and knowledge. My involvement in the research process is further characterised by my status as an 'insider' to the young female population which I seek to investigate. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009 p. 58) identify insider research as the circumstances in which 'researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members so that the researcher shares an identity, language and experiential base with the study participants'. Although this insider status may assist in the accessing of, and communicating with, the research population, there exists the potential for interpretation or direction of the research to be obscured by the researcher's own perception and/or experiences (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009 p. 58). However, as

indicated by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009 p. 59) the potential for researcher bias is not limited to insider status and, therefore, a commitment to transparent research processes and genuine, accurate representation of the perspectives presented by participants is important.

The feminist methodological perspective underscoring this conceptual approach seeks to extend 'checklist' interpretations of feminist research, moving toward a reflexive model of knowledge production in which the negotiation of lived experiences is a predominate perspective (Seibold 2000 p. 152). It is the intention within this research to prioritise the voices and perspectives of the research participants; however, the endeavour to conduct reflexive and ethical research requires the acknowledgement of the researcher within the production of knowledge (England 1994 p. 250). As noted by Wasserfall (1993 p. 28), 'researchers cannot pretend to present fully their informants' voices and have to take responsibility for their intrusions both in their informants' lives and the representation of those lives'. The inherently hierarchical nature of the research process is acknowledged and, as such, a reflexive approach will be employed throughout this research study to ensure the conduct of ethical and respectful research.

A commitment to feminist methodology and the continued acknowledgement of participant expertise and knowledge relative to that of the researcher underlies the selection of semi-structured in-depth interviews (Maynard 1994 p. 11). This approach provides participants with the scope to discuss their understandings, relatively unconstrained by prior conceptualisations or definitions imposed in accordance with the researcher's perspective (Maynard 1994 p. 12). Moreover, power and respect for privacy is further conferred to the participants through this interview method as the participant is provided with the capacity to self-select which information they choose to disclose. This research is reliant on the

information provided by participants and, therefore, seeks to acknowledge the participants' role as co-constructors of knowledge.

Conclusion

The conceptual approach presented, which considers the body as socially constructed through disciplinary and performative acts, allows exploration of the processes of bodily production that serve to materialise and gender the body. Women's exercise of agency and resistance is done so through, and within the context of, gendered identity and bodily production. As stated by Gonick et al. (2009 p. 6), 'gendered agency is practiced within normative social, economic and political processes of creating and reproducing gender'. In this way, social norms are an inescapable factor in gendered 'production, expression and resistance' (Gonick et al. 2009 p. 6). As such, practices of genital fashioning may be understood as a disciplinary practice, which is culturally and socially located and linked to the negotiation of power.

The feminist, post-structural perspective employed in this conceptualisation of the body allows for the utilisation of Gill's proposal of 'critical respect' as a methodological perspective. Critical respect enables acknowledgment of female choice and agency exercised via engagement with disciplinary practices, whilst dually recognising the cultural context in which decisions are made.

Chapter Four

Practices of Genital Fashioning

Having pubic hair is no longer normal
(Dianne, Interview Participant)

In this chapter, I describe the range of genital modification procedures identified by participants and their understandings of contemporary options for alteration and beautification of female genitalia. There is little existing research on the ways in which women conceptualise the variety of methods that may be employed to fashion the genital region. In this chapter, I contribute to current understandings and identify the scope of genital fashioning and how young women conceptualise the associated practices and argue that there is a continuum of modification practices.

As previously mentioned, the definition of genital fashioning, or genital modification, utilised within this thesis includes all practices of *cosmetic* genital alteration. Practices include pubic depilation, genital piercings, female genital cosmetic surgery, tattooing, vajazzling, the application of merkins, skin bleaching, and odour ‘maintenance’. The understanding of genital fashioning, which I employ, excludes practices that are medically necessary. Also excluded from my own definition of genital fashioning are surgeries for trans and intersexed people, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). However, as noted below, FGM will be discussed within this chapter because it was a salient topic for participants who raised it in the interviews and focus groups. I will briefly discuss the complex distinction between FGM and FGCS before the conclusion of this chapter. For a full outline of options for cosmetic genital alteration see the List of Abbreviations and Definitions (pp. 6–7). The chapter does

not aim to provide a comprehensive detailing of all available options for genital modification but instead focuses on the practices participants identified and discussed in the interviews.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘genital fashioning’. However, used throughout the literature, and also acceptable, are the terms ‘genital modification’ and ‘genital alteration’. All terms refer to the cosmetic change of the external female genital region. The term “genital modification” has previously been employed to refer to both pubic depilation (Braun 2009 p. 241; Cox 2016 p. 226; Herzig 2009 p. 252; Rodrigues 2012 p. 785) and FGCS (Cox 2016 p. 226; Dobson, McDonald, Kirkman, Souter & Fisher 2017 p. 354; Moran & Lee 2016 p. 3; Smith, Butler, Wagner, Collazo, Caltabinao & Herbenick 2017). “Genital alteration” has been further used in reference to FGCS (Braun 2005 p. 407), pubic depilation (Hammons 2014 p. 28), vajazzling (Hammons 2014 p. 1) and pubic hair dying (Hammons 2014 p. 1).

A key finding of this chapter is that the practices that were understood by participants are situated on a continuum. Participants were more accepting of some practices, such as pubic depilation, than others. There was also greater consensus on some topics than others, while discussion of other practices elicited division within participant perspectives. I begin by outlining the most common and accepted practices and then move along the continuum to practices perceived to be less common and less acceptable by participants. Pubic depilation and FGCS are presented as genital modification options that normalise the body in accordance with contemporary aesthetic standards for female genitalia. In contrast, genital piercings and tattoos are considered non-normative practices. Whilst attracting negative connotations by some participants, engagement with such practices was also understood by participants as an active choice and a way of reclaiming the body. By contrast, vajazzling was broadly derided, and was situated as a practice that garners media attention but is not typically engaged with by young women. Genital hygiene and bleaching products are also

considered as non-normative options for genital modification that have been extensively promoted and marketed via commercial interests. Finally, in response to participants raising the issue of female genital mutilation there is a brief discussion of the perceived relationship between genital fashioning and practices of female genital mutilation.

Pubic Depilation

Pubic hair removal was the most widely discussed and practiced option of genital modification. Pubic depilation was regarded by most as a common and widespread practice within contemporary western society. The hairless pubic norm was considered to be particularly prevalent amongst younger generations of women. An important component of engagement with pubic depilation was the link with perceptions and feelings of hygiene. The perception of pubic depilation as a component of genital fashioning is significant in the consideration of contemporary understandings of female body hair and associated grooming practices. In particular, the normalisation of routine body hair removal evidently extends to the pubic region; pubic hair now considered to carry negative connotations of disgust as associated with female body hair. Pubic depilation is a component of bodily production associated with new femininity.

Throughout both the focus groups and interviews, pubic depilation was the most commonly identified method of genital fashioning. In general, participants broadly discussed the normative nature of pubic depilation without reference to the individualised practices associated with achieving the hairless ideal. Nevertheless, within interviews, waxing was the most commonly identified form of pubic depilation (n=4), whereas shaving was mentioned on only one occasion. In contrast, focus group discussions identified a broader scope of depilation methods: general pubic depilation, grooming, styling or trimming (n=7), pubic hair waxing (n=9), pubic hair shaving (n=5), and laser hair removal (n=1). The more frequent

discussion of waxing as a depilatory method was evident within both focus groups and interviews. On one occasion, Brazilian waxing was detailed within a focus group as a practice favoured by 'most people' (Sookie, Focus Group Participant).

The majority of interview and focus group participants discussed some form of pubic depilation as normative practice within contemporary western society, particularly for younger generations. It is evident from participant discussion that young women consider public depilation as a routine component in the production of contemporary femininity. Illustrative of the way in which participants discussed their regard for pubic depilation as a widespread and conventional practice, are the following extracts:

I think that at least some form of waxing is usually normal. (Alicia, Interview Participant)

I would say most ladies in Australia under the age of 40 don't have hair. (Ally, Interview Participant).

I think that for a very long period it has been fashionable to have no pubic hair at all. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

These days it is more normal to get a Brazilian or just go out and get a wax or just go out and completely be bald. And I think a lot of people have sort of grown up with that and ... having pubic hair is no longer normal. (Dianne, Interview Participant)

If it's as normal as even trimming, it's, 99 per cent of people you know do it, or will do it, or have done it. (Daria, Focus Group Participant)

According to Braun et al. (2013 p. 480), current literature indicates that between '32% and 64% of women' remove most or all pubic hair. The participants' perceptions of pubic depilation as a normative practice is reflective of contemporary norms also identified within

academic literature. According to Braun et al. (p. 480) 'substantial pubic hair removal for women does appear to have formed a social norm'. Previous research with a cohort of US college students found motivational factors for female pubic depilation to centre on the normative nature of the practice (Smolak & Murnen 2011 p. 515). The participants' regard of pubic hair removal as normative is reflective of popular discourses, which also position female hairlessness as normative. Moreover, female internalisation and reproduction of such narratives work to reinforce this norm.

Practices of pubic depilation were detailed by a number of participants as particularly significant for younger women: there were social 'expectations' in relation to a hairless genital appearance for younger women.

My perception at least is that currently amongst the younger generation, generation x say, and y, that's the younger one right? That hair removal, at least to some degree, is the norm. (Eden, Interview Participant)

Within a focus group, Nelle and Ling discussed the relationship between age and engagement with depilatory norms:

Ling: I really felt the pressure when I was younger, for sure.

Nelle: Yeah. Up until the age of 17, 18, I used to do pretty much what was standard, what most young women do. Shaving everything basically.

The participant discussion revealed that young women perceive teenagers and adolescents as impacted, to a greater extent than older women, by norms of pubic depilation. Drawing on their own experience, participants detailed that their younger peers may experience heightened feelings of pressure of coercion. In part, this was regarded as an outcome of teenagers having not yet fully developed their own identity and, as a result, being more

susceptible to broader social norms and pressures. One said teenagers may use pubic depilation in an attempt to cultivate an identity associated with adult women:

Maybe, I wonder, if some of it ties into like, as young women are growing up and develop their identity, there's a lot of experimentation in different ways ... this might be another opportunity to do what is perceived to be adult, that is an adult norm. (Adeline, Focus Group Participant)

Age as a significant factor in the trend to engage with pubic depilation was previously identified by Toerien et al.'s (2005 p. 404) UK survey finding 'participants aged 51 years and older were less likely than younger participants ever to have removed leg or pubic hair'. Current literature seemingly supports the categorisation of increased prevalence of pubic depilation amongst adolescents and younger women in contrast to their older counterparts (Braun et al. 2013 p. 480; Herbenick et al. 2012 p. 678). Overall, both the participant discussion and current literature, indicates that pubic depilation is more normative amongst younger generations of women who may experience greater pressure with regard to depilation norms.

A key theme was pubic depilation as a form of cleanliness. This was differentiated from the potential for pubic depilation to provide legitimate forms of cleanliness; instead, pubic hairlessness was regarded to carry a perception of hygiene. The differentiation between the two concepts is explained in the statement by Andy:

I mean, it's nature, so probably just, if you leave it that's perfectly fine. Otherwise we wouldn't have, you know, we would have evolved to not have pubic hair at all. But I think it feels, sometimes it feels like, my friends wax, and I might have a quick shave every now and then, it just feels cleaner. But I think there's a difference between feeling clean, and actually being more hygienic, if you know what I mean? (Andy, Focus Group Participant)

Whilst the potential for pubic depilation to legitimately generate a more hygienic pubic region was debated within focus groups, the broad theme which emerged centred on the identification of social messages which cause both women and men to regard a hairless genital region as more hygienic:

I definitely think there is a really common theme about people thinking its unhygienic not to shave. I definitely think that the really common perspective is that you're unhygienic. (Willow, Focus Group Participant)

About the waxing, some women say that it's cleaner. Like hair is something dirty. [the] Vagina smells because of the hair ... People make us think that women's bodies are dirty and you have to try to clean most as you can, like with all your hair gone. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

Phoebe's analysis of the fictitious association between pubic hair and a lack of hygiene demonstrates a critical awareness of broader narratives about the female body.

In some of the instances in which participants were either aware or sceptical of the hygiene associated with pubic depilation, they still emphasised the potential to feel cleaner as a result of pubic hair removal:

I: You've mentioned this a little bit, but does modification relate to hygiene?

Sookie: See, I don't know. I don't think it does. Because from articles that I've read and stuff like that, a lot of people, well a lot of doctors and stuff are of the opinion that it's not actually cleaner, like it's there for a reason. It kind of protects everything ... But in the same breath though, I mean I've never heard of anyone who had it completely, you know, gone saying that they've had skin irritations from clothing or anything like that. So I just think it's a personal thing. But I personally don't think it's more or less hygienic.

Lane: Yeah well what you said, I've actually read about that stuff, and I agree with you. But at the same time I'm inclined to think that it is somehow hygienic if you cleaned it up a little.

Pubic hair removal as producing cleanliness, albeit fallacious, was found by Braun et al. (2013) where women suggested that 'pubic hair is not dirty but having less is cleaner' (2013 p. 485). Whilst participants in both my and Braun et al.'s research overwhelmingly acknowledged that pubic hair itself is not unhygienic, they also presented a contradictory message of the removal of pubic hair invoking feelings of cleanliness (Braun et al. 2013 p. 485). The association of hygiene with reduced pubic hair indicates both an internalisation of discourses which position female genitalia as 'dirty' and an extended perception of female body hair as disgusting. Interestingly, whilst participants said pubic depilation could imbue feelings of cleanliness they were simultaneously critical of feminine hygiene products, such as 'femfresh', as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Overall, these participants considered that the practice of pubic depilation is both normative and ubiquitous. Perceptions and feelings of hygiene, rather than legitimate forms of hygiene, were considered an important component of, and motivation for, contemporary norms of pubic depilation. Participants also discussed female genital cosmetic surgery as a means to normalise female genitalia.

Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery

Participant discussion of female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) centred on its capacity, like depilation, to normalise the body in accordance with contemporary standards of appearance. In general, participants presented a nuanced discussion of FGCS, and were critical of the social circumstances which were seen to influence the increased demand for FGCS. However, there was respectful discussion of the women who chose to undergo FGCS procedures and, frequently, participants expressed understanding of women's desire to attain bodily confidence and comfort via cosmetic surgery. The understanding of FGCS as a means by which to homogenise and construct female genitalia in accordance with

contemporary social norms, provides important insight into perceptions of genital modification procedures and contemporary norms of aesthetic ideals.

All of the focus groups about genital fashioning involved considerable discussion of FGCS. A majority of focus groups considered the practice of FGCS as a component of genital fashioning and modification. The prevalence of identification of FGCS may be contextualised by the current demand for the various procedures of FGCS. As previously noted, recent studies have demonstrated increasing demand for female genital cosmetic surgery with Australia, the US and the UK (Braun 2010 p. 1394; WHV 2013 p.8).

Focus group participants discussed a wide variety of FGCS procedures. Most frequently, FGCS was referred to as plastic surgery, genital surgery, or surgery. Specific practices of FGCS were discussed to include, labiaplasty (n=6), 'vulval alteration' (n=1), hymenoplasty (n=3), vaginoplasty (n=1), and vaginal rejuvenation (n=1). Throughout later group discussion, participants raised options of vaginal tightening (n=1) and the 'husband stitch' (n=1), a colloquial term to refer to an 'extra' stitch which artificially tightens the vagina after an episiotomy (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 21). However, interview discussion presented less scope of discussion pertaining to the identification of FGCS practices. Within interviews, FGCS was discussed on a less frequent basis (n=4), and labiaplasty was the only specific practice of FGCS identified. Despite this, participants frequently discussed labiaplasty, with half of the interviewees discussing the practice.

Throughout both interview and focus group discussion, participants were respectful about women who had FGCS, but remained critical of the social circumstances, which may influence women's decision to undergo such practices. Patty stated,

I think that if women genuinely feel like changing their genitalia is going to improve their life then they have the right to do that. If they genuinely feel like their sex life will be improved if ... they have labia surgery then that's great, but then you think well, is it actually being improved or you just think it's being improved because they think that's how it's supposed to look? (Patty, Focus Group Participant)

In another focus group, Sandy also expressed a desire to respect individual decisions whilst questioning the capacity for free choice:

There's a lot of reasons why someone might want to change their, both their external and internal genitalia. I think one of the issues is trying not to be judgemental of peoples' free choices but also really challenging how free they can possibly be if they're only given a sort of ideal of this is what, you know, the female is supposed to look like. So they make a free choice to have surgery, but it's like, it's not really that free if the society isn't supporting their natural state. (Sandy, Focus Group Participant)

These extracts demonstrate the way in which participants expressed criticism of the context in which women make decisions to undergo FGCS whilst simultaneously demonstrating respect and understanding for women's decisions. I argue that participants such as Patty and Sandy moved away from neoliberal discourse which situates the individual as autonomous and context free, and presented a nuanced understanding of the interactions between free choice and culture.

The capacity of social norms to impact upon women's engagement with practices of FGCS was further detailed within interviews. A key motivation of undergoing FGCS was assuaging feelings of discomfort with bodily appearance. On a number of occasions, FGCS was situated as a method, along with pubic depilation, as a means to 'normalise' the body. Nelle articulated both the social and personal elements motivation which determine demand for FGCS:

Some women I've read online and spoken to feel that, they just feel better about themselves because they take part in genital modification in all of its forms. And I think that that's just treating the symptom. So, these women feel better about themselves because they felt bad about themselves before undertaking this genital modification, and I think that's the issue. The issue at the very core of it is not that they have hair or labia obviously, but that society makes them feel dirty or ugly as a result of it. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

Indeed, the influence of genital aesthetic norms were considered the primary factor associated with increased demand for FGCS; women were regarded as motivated by a desire to feel 'normal'. Self-evaluations of genital (ab)normality rely on self-surveillance and comparison to perceived standards of normality. It was considered that:

I think there are a lot of norms that, like a lot of women think that oh this is normal, is my vulva and vagina supposed to look like this, which encourages that type of behaviour like waxing and labiaplasty. (Monica, Interview Participant)

Willow: I think stuff like labiaplasty is, you know, my labia don't look normal. I want to look normal. Not even about looking sexy, I think it's genuinely about being normal.

Cordelia: I would think that there would be very few reasons, like very few cases that people medically have surgery.

Jackie: There is a comfort thing, there is that aspect of um. A friend of mine from high school had labia that were actually so long that it was really uncomfortable when she walked. I mean, she was considering surgery, I don't know whether she ever went through with it, but like I think a big aspect of it for her was normalising it, like looking normal.

Self-perceptions of body normality have previously been identified as significant in analyses of bodily modification behaviours. Indeed, cosmetic surgery is conceptualised as a means by which the body may be produced in accordance with standards of normality. Davis (2003 p. 74) found Dutch women undergoing breast augmentation regarded the procedure as a means by which to achieve a 'normal', rather than particularly beautified, standard of

appearance. The potential for cosmetic surgery to reconstruct the body to a perceived state of normalcy evidently extends to the practice of FGCS. Sharp and Tiggemann (2016 p. 71), for instance, stating 'it appeared ... these women were attempting to achieve a "normal" genital appearance though surgery'.

Participants demonstrated an awareness of norms associated with genital appearance, but in some instances, were critical of the pursuit of the genital ideal via surgery. Ebony said:

I hate the thought of someone mutilating themselves with surgery because they feel like something's not right down there; 'cause what is right to go on down there? (Ebony, Interview Participant)

Indeed, according to Bramwell et al. (2007 p. 1495), women having undergone labiaplasty expressed some uncertainty as to the characteristics of 'normal' genital appearance. Despite this uncertainty, the women considered their own pre-surgical genital appearance to be 'abnormal'; the presence of discussion regarding abnormality serving to highlight the existence of perceived standards of normality (p. 1495).

Despite some participants being critical of engagement with FGCS, the majority of focus group attendees expressed an understanding for those who sought to gain confidence and physical comfort through the procedures:

I mean, I can understand if people wanted to get surgery you know, to fix lengths or things like that. I mean, my stepsister had that done which, I mean, I don't think it makes much of a difference but like, visually I think it bugs people, you know, those kind of things. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

The narrative of cosmetic surgery as a means to rectify or 'redeem the body' is reflective of broader discourses employed by the medical industry in situating surgery as the primary method by which to achieve bodily satisfaction (Fraser 2003 pp. 38–39). According to Fraser

(p. 39), such discourses situate cosmetic surgery as ‘the best or most effective means of attaining satisfaction, chosen by the most active, self-reliant subjects’.

However, the pursuit of surgery to produce the body was considered by some participants as only reasonable within limits. Whilst it was regarded as understandable and acceptable to seek to normalise the body, some participants expressed disdain for individuals who seek to excessively beautify the body:

This woman, I couldn’t tell that I was looking at her vagina because it was so so perfect ... she’d obviously had labiaplasty and like fillers or something, ‘cause it was all just, everything was so perfectly round and, I don’t know, it just looked ridiculous to me. It didn’t look normal. Even if I did want to fix something, you know, if maybe one side’s way longer than the other, or if it’s irritating, or I just didn’t like how it felt, yeah I would fix it. But I wouldn’t fix it to that extent. So I think it’s all about being reasonable. (Marissa, Focus Group Participant)

In some ways, women using the procedure were somewhat pathologised. Those undergoing FGCS were considered as lacking in confidence and, on occasion, it was suggested that alternative methods of increasing self-satisfaction would be preferable to seeking surgery:

I guess they don’t feel comfortable with themselves. I don’t want to generalise, but a lot of plastic surgery seems to be ‘cause they’re not feeling comfortable with their bodies so they want to alter it. (Carol, Focus Group Participant)

If I was definitely very unhappy and felt that I wasn’t sexually confident ... I would probably get surgery. But at the same time ... I’d have to recognise that it would probably be my own problem, and if I could overcome it in a way that wasn’t surgery then I think that would be beneficial. (Summer, Focus Group Participant)

The rhetoric employed by participants in this case reflects and reproduces narratives, which both compel women to engage in beauty work but are critical of women’s participation in social constructions of beauty. Interestingly, cosmetic surgery is increasingly marketed to

women as a means by which to alleviate confidences issues, a method cast as more effective than that of psychology (Fraser 2003 pp. 38–39). However, the cited participants have adopted and inverted the narrative. In this case, cosmetic surgery remains considered as a means by which to achieve bodily confidence but is negatively framed within their discussion.

Participants frequently discussed practices of FGCS in conjunction with practices of pubic depilation. Both FGCS and pubic depilation were conceptualised by participants as a means by which to normalise female genitalia in accordance with contemporary standards for feminine embodiment. McDougall states the 'clean slit' genital ideal attained through FGCS 'is also an anti-hair ideal' (2013 p. 777). The capacity of FGCS and depilation to contribute to the construction of idealised genitalia may be contrasted with other practices of genital fashioning. As described within one focus group:

I think maybe if it was like a piercing or tattoo, maybe they might draw more identity. Same as if you had like a regular tattoo somewhere else, or a piercing on your face or something, it might have more to do with your identity. But waxing nor surgery I don't, I see it more just as a practice that you do. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

Whilst the social contexts considered to compel women to undergo the practice of FGCS were strongly criticised, participants generally expressed understanding for those who sought the practice to normalise the body and increase bodily confidence and comfort.

Genital Piercings and Tattooing

In contrast with the practices of pubic depilation and FGCS, which were broadly considered to normalise the female body in accordance with contemporary standards of genital appearance, genital piercings and tattoos were not considered by participants as a normative practice but engaged in by some younger women. Piercings and tattoos were

generally associated with negative connotations, such as promiscuity. However, the functional potential of piercings to contribute to enhanced sexual experiences was also highlighted. The participant discussion of genital piercings and tattoos is situated within broader understandings of bodily modification practices. Genital piercings and tattoos were perceived to be self-expressive and reclaimative, unlike other practices of genital modification, and to imbue the individual with greater capacity for agency.

Typically involving the insertion of a barbell or captive bead to the clitoris, perineum or labia, genital piercings have received limited academic attention. Armstrong, Caliendo and Roberts (2006 p. 176) note that existing literature contains 'stereotypical assumptions about individuals who choose genital piercings'. Such stereotypes were detailed by Armstrong et al. (p. 176) as persons with genital piercings as having masochistic tendencies and belonging to 'fringe' subcultures. Genital tattooing is also an emerging component of 'vulval accessorising' (Cox 2016 p. 226) situated on the spectrum of broader bodily modification options. Jeffreys' (2000 p. 409) radical feminist analysis considers body piercings and tattoos to be a component of self-mutilation undergone by 'those groups who occupy a despised social status, such as women, lesbians and gay men; disabled people and women and men who have suffered sexual abuse'. However, the understandings and interpretations of genital tattoos and piercings as presented by my research participants offers, from the perspectives of young women, an alternative consideration of the practices and expands contemporary discourse in relation to genital modification. Current academic literature on genital piercings and tattoos is generally limited but is mentioned within broader investigations of body modification practices (see Mayers & Chiffriller 2008, for example). Existing literature, which is critical to my investigation and analysis of genital piercings and tattoos, will be discussed in the following sections. My research adds to the existing

literature on the topic of genital piercings and utilises these broader investigations of body modification as a platform for analysis.

A majority of focus groups contained discussion of genital piercings in the consideration of genital fashioning practices and associated interpretations (n=7). Whilst only five of the focus group sessions initially noted piercings as a component of genital modification, a further two groups later considered piercings throughout the course of the discussion. Some of the interviewees (n=3) also contemplated the option of piercings in discussion of genital modification practices. Within one focus group, piercings were perceived as more specifically related to genital fashioning than other options for modification:

I: Yeah, and can you tell me what would you associate with the term genital fashioning or genital modification?

Lane: Umm. Well I would think waxing obviously, piercings, and tattoos. That's my understanding of it.

Sookie: I guess if I first heard it without seeing an explanation on the flyer or anything like that, I probably would have thought surgery and piercings, not so much like waxing or anything like that, or like laser or whatever, probably more just yeah surgery, piercings.

Genital tattoos were less frequently discussed, mentioned only within one focus group as an initial response to defining genital fashioning, and noted throughout later discussion within a further two focus group sessions. In addition, genital tattooing was considered by one interviewee.

According to Caliendo, Armstrong and Roberts (2005), US studies find 12–14 per cent of college students self-report the wearing of a nipple and/or genital piercing. Another study of US undergraduates reported 0.8 per cent of the 384 female students with a current genital piercing. In the same study, 1 per cent of female participants had genital tattoos, stated to

consist of ‘pubic-genital tattoos and ... “inside the lip”’ (Mayers & Chiffriller 2008 p. 202). However, perceived prevalence rates of genital piercings and tattoos were not generally discussed by my research participants. Only on one occasion did a focus group member note that she was not aware of anyone within her friendship circle having a genital piercing or tattoo. Within another focus group, one member self identified as having a genital tattoo. Age was noted within one focus group as impacting upon likely engagement with the practice of genital piercings:

Age has a lot to do with certain things as well. You know, I think someone who was 60 probably wouldn’t get a piercing or something like that. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

The perception of genital piercings as a trend engaged with by younger generations is perhaps unsurprising given the prevalence of body modification amongst younger men and women—Australian data demonstrating men and women in their twenties to have significantly higher prevalence of body tattooing and piercings than older generations (Makkai & McAllister 2001 p. 3).

Negative connotations associated with genital piercings and tattoos have been noted within academic investigations of bodily modification. For instance, Caliendo et al. (2005 p. 476) consider the negative characteristics associated those who have body piercings to include a perception of pierced individuals as deviant, criminal, and as having ‘poor school performance’. Such perceptions are most likely reinforced by quantitative data which found increased correlation between lifetime injecting drug users and higher rates of body tattooing and piercing (Makkai & McAllister 2001 p. 4). Both current and previous literature has positioned individuals with body modifications, such as piercings, as distinct from the broader population (Caliendo et al. 2005 p. 476). However, not all participants held this

view. One interviewee criticised the negative portrayal of such genital modifications within the mainstream media:

Any kind of piercing or tattooing is displayed in a very negative light. Which I don't agree with. (Alicia, Interview Participant)

Nevertheless, these negative perceptions were reflected within focus group discussions:

Lane: I'm of the opinion that it is a woman's right to choose what she does with her body, I do think there are um certain opinions people definitely do form, despite us talking about how we should break them, so if you were about someone getting a piercing, there is an instant opinion you do form.

Sookie: Yeah.

Lane: As much as there shouldn't be.

Within the same focus group, these negative perspectives were further elaborated:

Lane: I spoke to one of my guy friends ... what he said he thinks; he wouldn't want be in a relationship with a girl with a piercing in the long run. Because, sad as it is, he said I would judge her to be a little more promiscuous than the others, and while at the same time he said, if I was just having a one night stand with a girl and found out she had a piercing or tattoo, he made that emoticon with the hearts [laughing] and he also expressed concern about pulling the piercing.

Sookie: Yeah

Lane: If, if that were to be the case. I thought it was interesting, a male perspective. Although I wasn't totally surprised when he said the promiscuous thing, cause, yeah,

Sookie: Yeah

Lane: That's how they think, don't they?

Sookie: Yeah. I think that's probably the thing. I think with piercings, and tattoos that's more, yeah, linked with promiscuity. I don't know why, but I think it just is.

Same as like the lower back tattoo.

Lane: Yeah

The perception of genital modifications as related to sexually deviant behaviour was also raised within an interview:

Like you see, you know, the pierced girl, and you know, oh she's probably got one down there, she's a bit you know, weird. And she'll be into the freaky stuff.
(Ebony, Interview Participant)

The extant literature is limited in relation to the perception of characteristics of women with intimate piercings and tattoos. However, the negative perception of women with body modification is examined within broader discourses, which identify the capacity of tattoos to construct the body of the “other” (Dann, Callaghan & Fellin 2016 p. 45). According to Dann et al. (p. 45) a tattooed female form serves to subvert traditional conceptualisations of femininity, the tattoo ‘functions as a permanent marker of difference from middle-class feminine norms, marking the body as differently classed, as otherly feminine’. The capacity of tattoos and specific placement thereof to inform perceptions of the body is significant. The placement of the ‘tramp stamp’ on the lower back is now perceived as a signifier of promiscuity (Dann et al. 2016 p. 47). As with the ‘tramp stamp’, the location of piercings and tattoos in the genital area was positioned as somewhat distinct from other forms of body modification in casting the wearer as more sexually promiscuous.

Despite the perception of negative characteristics of those with genital piercings or tattoos, some participants shared the belief that genital piercings may contribute to an enhanced sexual experience:

I know that people say that piercings both with guys and girls can add a certain aspect to sexual intercourse. (Ebony, Focus Group Participant)

Within current literature, the motivational factor of enhancing sexual experience has been previously identified in decisions to obtain genital piercings. Caliendo et al. (2005 p. 480) report their US cohort of male and female respondents to have strongly considered sexual factors in the obtaining of an intimate piercing with 77 per cent of respondents stating the piercing to have ‘improved my personal pleasure with sex’.

Whilst the participants generally did not acknowledge the health risks associated with other practices of genital fashioning, such as waxing procedures, it is worthy of note that participants keenly identified some medical complications of genital piercings. According to Caliendo et al. (2005 p. 475) genital piercings have been found to pose significant health problems including 'infections, allergic metal reactions and rejection, scarring, bleeding, impotence and sterility, loss of sexual response, tearing, and high risks of STDs'. Most common drawbacks associated with the practices were highlighted in participant discussion of potential risks associated with piercings, including infection and the pain of the procedure:

Olivia: It's just such a delicate sensitive area, just why risk it, can you imagine potential infections? It's just not worth the risk.

Andy: I agree. I think bringing up potential infection is a really good point. No way, just to. Yeah Nah. No way.

Aria: So I worry about that then, if people are getting these modifications, it's one thing to decide to shave or not shave, you can put a piercing in and you can take it back out, like I know, I'm assuming that there's a risk that if you pierce down there, like yeah, that would, could go very wrong I imagine, like, it would just fuck shit up.

Daria: It's the same thing that people say if they get eyebrow piercings, be careful, 'cause it can paralyse your face.

The participants sought to differentiate the practice of piercings and tattoos from other methods of genital fashioning. It was considered that piercings enabled greater individual agency than other forms of genital modification. Narratives within broader culture have situated body modifications as a way to 'reclaim' the body (see Pitts 2003 pp. 49–86). Jefferys (2000) considers such perspectives as underpinned by postmodern understandings of the body as espoused by Butler and Grosz (2000 p. 421). One focus group member used

the concept of reclamation after sexual abuse in discussing her experience of genital fashioning:

Well even my tattoo. I first of all got it as a yeah, I own my body, this is my thing. As a bit of a joke too, like, 'cause a bit of trauma's attached to that area, but it was kind of like you need to remember to laugh, like you came through and you need to laugh. You know what I mean? This is your body and you own it. But at the same time I remember reading an article that was like, oh well girls who get stuff down there are, that's kind of a bit more out of the norm, that kind of points to that they're really messed up. And that messed me up for a few months. I kind of sat there and go, well, well, am I? (Faith, Focus Group Participant)

The discourse of reclamation of the female body has been previously highlighted with respect to broader body modification and scarification practices. Pitts (1998 p. 68) outlined the employment of non-normative body modifications as a means by which to resist gendered bodily subordination. However, claims of reclamation via modification have also attracted some criticism (Jeffreys 2000). Nevertheless, given the gendered nature of some culturally mandated genital fashioning practices, such as depilation, it is possible that participants sought to contrast the practice seen as socially normative with one that is non-normative and therefore empowered; engagement with such practices was considered to be as resultant from greater personal choice than practices which were considered as normative. For example, in discussing the capacity for choice in decisions to engage with genital fashioning, it was stated:

Um it depends on like their relationship with their body and um like I think definitely genital piercing and all of that would be a choice, but probably not hair removal. (Carol, Focus Group Participant)

Those people who do tattoos and piercings, I don't think they're very influenced by the society but they actually, they like to express themselves. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

The conceptualisation of genital piercings as done for personal pleasure has been reflected within other qualitative research. According to Caliendo's study (cited in Caliendo et al. 2005), intimate female piercings were described by research participants as engaged with for themselves, for 'their own pleasure'. Makkai and McAllister (2001 p. 5) suggested that female engagement with bodily modification practices may symbolise 'gender rebellion'. Parallels between subversive body modification options and identity were also detailed within the comment from Sookie which I previously discussed in the context of constructing idealised genitalia:

I mean, I think maybe if, it was like a piercing or tattoo, maybe they might draw more identity, same as if you had like a regular tattoo somewhere else or a piercing on your face or something, um it might have to do with your identity. But waxing nor surgery I don't, I see it more just as like a practice that you do, whereas tattoos or piercings then you might get I don't know, more identity related reasons, or things like that. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

The transgressive nature of bodily modifications such as intimate piercings, therefore, may challenge normative gendered bodies and identities. In this way, the practices of genital piercings and tattooing may be understood within the context of other modification options that enact 'an identity shifting performance which "destabilize[s] many of our preconceived notions about beauty, identity, and the female body"' (Pitts 1998 p. 80).

Participant discussion of genital piercings and tattoos as a component of genital fashioning options demonstrated the distinctive nature of the practices when contrasted with other options for genital fashioning. In particular, whilst FGCS and depilation are considered a means by which to 'normalise' the female genital region, genital piercings and tattoos were considered a non-normative practice. Whilst negative connotations were perceived as associated with genital piercings and tattoos, there also existed the belief that engagement

with genital piercings and tattoos can provide the individual with greater capacity for agency and potentially reclaim the female body. As such, genital piercings and tattoos were considered engaged with for reasons of self-expression, rather than due to motivations of attaining a normative genital appearance.

Vajazzling

In contrast to piercings and tattoos, vajazzling was viewed by participants as a frivolous and ridiculous practice. A significant proportion of participants identified the practice of vajazzling and its resulting media attention. However, female engagement with the practice was viewed as limited and the practice of vajazzling was frequently derided. Unlike other options for genital fashioning, which were considered legitimate options for bodily modification—be it to normalise or reclaim the body—vajazzling was generally positioned as a media promoted practice, not engaged with by ordinary women.

The practice of vajazzling, whilst receiving media attention (Turney 2016 p. 149), has been little researched. Vajazzling involves the removal of public hair and application of diamantes or glitter in the form of a motif or pattern to the mons pubis (Cox 2016 p. 226; Turney 2016 p. 149). According to Turney (2016 p. 149), vajazzling is a temporary modification, lasting less than 24 hours, having been performed at a salon or via a DIY kit. Prevalence rates of the practice are unknown. In the UK, an increase in emergency hospital admissions had been attributed to the trend toward vajazzling (Gore 2012). However, little evidence was provided to substantiate this claim, which was discussed in conjunction with other genital fashioning practices that pose risk to the genital region.

Vajazzling was discussed as a form of genital modification on a number of occasions (n=6). However, the perceived prevalence of the practice was generally not discussed. One focus

group participant questioned the proportion of women who currently engage in the practice. Also questioned within focus groups was the way in which vajazzling is practically applied and removed (n=2). One participant did consider vajazzling to be ‘a big craze a few years ago’ (Ebony, Focus Group Participant). The understanding of the trend as passé has also been expressed within the popular media; Krupnick (2012) stating surprise at the Love Hewitt’s public assertion of continued engagement with vajazzling, given ‘we had assumed the trend had fallen out of style’. A further focus group participant laughingly described her belief that her step-sister engaged in the practice of vajazzling.

Prior to viewing the extracts from *Cosmopolitan*, which contained reference to vajazzling, the practice was discussed within three interview sessions. Each of the interviewees mobilised and conceptualised vajazzling in a unique way. One of the interviewees laughed about the practice, and stated of her partner:

You want diamonds on me, go get them on yourself. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

The ‘comical’ nature of vajazzling was highlighted by a number of participants, some of whom considered the practice as ‘ridiculous’.

I just think ugh how ridiculous, what a waste of time. I guess you’ve got nothing better to do. I mean you would have to have a lot of time and a lot of cash, I’m just too much of a cheapskate. I’d sooner have I don’t know my eyebrows or my lashes tinted or something else, that’s so far down on the list, I think it’s a bit ridiculous. (Andy, Focus Group Participant)

I: Can you tell me what would you associate with the term genital fashioning or genital modification?

Ebony: Vajazzling. [laughing] That’s immediately what I thought of when I first read though the thing, just I remember that was a big craze a few years ago, I just think it’s the funniest thing. Um, I would never get it done myself but yeah [laughing] ... I don’t understand the point of vajazzling. I just like saying it. Um

yeah so each to their own but its not something I would, its not something I'd do, ever.

I: Yep.

Joyce: Me too.

Ebony: Just doesn't seem worth it.

(Speaking of vajazzling) That Made in Essex thing, like that show, it just seems funny, like why would you do that? (Janice, Focus Group Participant)

Practices of vajazzling have been associated with particular tropes of working class femininity. Turney (2016 p. 144) also details viewers' reactions to the depiction of vajazzling on the television programme *The Only Way is Essex* as having prompted incredulous cries of the frivolous and wasteful nature of the practice. The conceptualisation of the practice by participants strongly reflects the reaction of British audiences of *The Only Way is Essex*, as detailed by Turney (2016 p. 144), which considered vajazzling the 'wastefulness (time; money), the sheer uselessness and pointless luxury of "unseen" bejewelling and the wantonness of such intimate decoration'. Both the perception of vajazzling and the mediums by which is promoted, such as via reality television, also indicate a classed distinction of the practice. 'Chav' celebrity culture, as detailed by Tyler and Bennett (2010), represents a means by which class boundaries are identified. The grotesque and excessive engagement with consumer choices, such as vajazzling, serves to distinguish the 'chav' from the middle classes (Tyler 2008 pp. 21–22). Classed boundaries are also identifiable in the 'chav's' unsuccessful embodiment of femininity which, in contrast to the middle class woman's 'correct' production of femininity, is viewed as an 'unconvincing and inadvertently parodic attempt' (Tyler & Bennett 2010 p. 381). Indeed, the laughter directed at the 'chav', and their associated acts of consumption, is another means by which classed boundaries are delineated (Tyler 2008 p. 23). In this way, the participants' scorn and mocking of vajazzling created 'a distance between "them" and "us"' (Tyler 2008 p. 23) through the assertion of 'a

superior class position' (p. 23). This judgement of vajazzling as a classed feminine beauty practice is also discernible within participant discussion.

Another interviewee considered that the practice might be likely to be seen in pornography, which may contribute to the normalisation of the practice:

Well, in pornography you're more likely to see sort of...vajazzling, so I guess it's a good way to normalise those practices. (Ebony, Interview Participant)

The role of the media in promoting practices of vajazzling was also noted by an interviewee:

I had no idea that vajazzling, like I would still not know that vajazzling was a thing, had I not seen some advertising for it. Cause I ... wouldn't have known unless it was directly through media channels that vajazzling was a thing. (Ally, Interview Participant)

Participant exposure to mainstream media discussion of vajazzling illustrates one way in which contemporary culture has been increasingly permeated by sexualised content. Whilst female genitalia was previously a taboo topic, the participants did express surprise at the promotion or discussion of female genitalia and associated fashioning practices within the mainstream media.

Turney has previously identified the way in which the mainstream media publicises the trend of vajazzling (2016 p. 149). According to Turney, media discussion of vajazzling subsequently 'drive the desire for such fashions' (2016 p. 149). Focus group discussion also considered the role of the media in publicising the practice. Within three of the focus group sessions, the relationship between the media and vajazzling was noted. For instance, Andy stated her first introduction to the practice as having been via a media source:

Cherry Healey is another documentarian and she um, I think she did an episode where she went and got herself vajazzled with a friend, with the girl that she was

speaking to but it wasn't actually on the topic of genital muti, mutilation uh sorry modification.

(group laughter). Anyway so yeah that, that's where I came across vajazzling for the first time. In the media. (Andy, Focus Group Participant)

In another focus group, one member described this discussion with friends:

We started talking about vajazzling, like putting diamantes, because apparently Jennifer Love Hewitt started that whole thing. I feel like that's really silly. We laughed about it. We actually sat around and laughed at it. 'Cause I was like, what do you do, get your hot glue gun and stick on diamonites? That's literally what it is. It's just silly. (Patty, Focus Group Participant)

Indeed, the emergence of the vajazzling trend has been attributed to Love Hewitt's open discussion of her engagement with vajazzling (Krupnick 2012).

However, throughout focus group and interviewee discussion, there emerged a single alternative interpretation of the practice as empowering:

I think its really empowering having ability to either choose to modify it or not modify. And you can shape your identity around that to some extent by going this is something that I care about this is something that I put value on, and I think even people who, like vajazzling and stuff like before what I was saying, like that's cool, that's as much as it's kind of useless and I don't really know why you would do that and I don't really know if I would bother but I'm also like rad, as a persons identity I'd look at that and go okay well you're obviously, you've owned your sexuality and your womanhood and that's something that you take pride in, that you want the world to see and I think that's really cool. (Aria, Focus Group Participant)

The potential for vajazzling to represent a mode of empowerment as described by Aria may be situated within the neoliberal, postfeminist understanding of individuals imbued with agency via consumer culture (Turney 2016 p. 144). According to Turney (p. 150), media representations of vajazzling position engagement with the practice as 'a gift to oneself, a

means of expressing individuality, even empowerment'. Aria's understanding of vajazzling as sexually empowering further draws upon the postfeminist portrayal of new femininity as confident and assertive sexuality. Within this discourse, women are now positioned as sexual subjects, knowingly engaging with sexuality for their own enjoyment.

In general, participants positioned vajazzling as an amusing practice, which was more commonly discussed and promoted through media channels than individually experienced. The presence of vajazzling within the mainstream media is perhaps not reflective of a wider uptake of the practice, as participants questioned its prevalence and purpose. Despite this, awareness of vajazzling options indicates the increased capacity of the mainstream media to discuss and display genitalia in ways that were previously taboo. Participant discussion of vajazzling as a ridiculous and frivolous practice may be contrasted with other practices of genital fashioning, which are cast as legitimate and reasonable forms of body modification.

Bleaching and Hygiene Products

Participants discussed bleaching and the use of hygiene products as genital fashioning that are promoted through business and commercial channels. But the use of bleaching and hygiene products were not seen as typical practices for young women. Rather, the emergence of hygiene practices was perceived as a result of marketing campaigns. Bleaching was identified by participants as prevalent in pornography but not in the wider population. Participants considered the unnecessary and superfluous nature of engagement with hygiene products which were not regarded a routine form of genital modification—much like participants' perceptions of vajazzling. Demand for hygiene products was regarded critically as artificially promoted through marketing campaigns that drew on broader social discourses regarding female genitalia. Bleaching products were also viewed critically and discussed by participants as having problematic racialised underpinnings.

Options for genital fashioning now extend to the regulation of the smell of female genitalia. A variety of products are now available in the form of soaps, wipes, deodorants (McCartney 2012 p. 1) to ‘freshen’ the female genital region. Whilst little research pertains exclusively to the usage of genital hygiene products, Herbenick et al. (2012 p. 683) found a relationship between pubic hair depilation and the application of genital hygiene products. It was suggested by Herbenick et al. (p. 683) that the association of hygiene products with pubic depilation is unsurprising given the utilisation of pubic depilation as a means by which to present a sexually appealing genital region. According to Herbenick et al. (p. 683), the usage of hygiene products to enhance sexual appeal given ‘the negative messages women receive about the smell of their genitalia ... lotions may be scented to conceal their natural genital scent’. Braun and Kitzinger further identified the development and advertisement of hygiene products to contribute to the construction of natural, unmodified female genitalia as problematic (2001 p. 264). Hygiene products form a component of the cultural lexicon in which women’s genitalia is considered “smelly” (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 22). The development of hygiene products and female engagement with douching is considered by Bruan and Wilkinson to constitute an aesthetic practice designed to eliminate genital smell.

Few interview participants identified hygiene products as a component of genital fashioning (n=2). Instead, focus groups were somewhat more likely to discuss the capacity of intimate hygiene products to contribute to the construction of perfectible genitalia. Perceived societal preferences for smell associated with female genitalia were outlined by Sandy, who detailed:

People say that the vagina smells bad and is dirty, and I mean, the fact is that genitals aren’t supposed to smell good. Male genitals don’t smell good; if you shove your face in one of those they’re not nice either. But there’s this

expectation that women have to always smell really good. (Sandy, Focus Group Participant)

Alexis, an interviewee, also identified the idealised norm that:

Genital care. The way it has to smell fresh. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

Overall, there was criticism of the social and commercial discourses that sought to promote genital cleaning products. One focus group participant indicated intimate hygiene products to be a popular practice some months previous to the focus group session.

The commercial component in propagating genital hygiene products was both identified and problematised by participants who considered the redundancy and possible harmful potential of such products. This is illustrated in the following discussion:

Carol: Or like, do you remember a few, I think it was like months ago, and it became really big to buy like wet-wipes for down there. And like, Libra had some and there were other brands. And it was like stay fresh. And it's all like well, no, you know, it cleans itself and in the shower is fine and you shouldn't put soaps down there and blah blah blah. Playing on the insecurities of yeah.

Iris: Cause a lot of that stuff has sulphates in it, which is really bad for your vagina and upsets the pH.

These sentiments were also reflected within another two focus groups' discussion of possible genital modification options:

Nelle: Cleaning, like incessant cleaning. I know that there's a lot of marketing around having a clean smelling vagina, and how bullshit that is really for health. ... And also washing vaginas and stuff, cause there's, you know, a lot of marketing around dirty vaginas and therefore you must wash. 'femfresh' bullshit, and that

Ling: Just exposing it to more potential [sentence cut off]

Nelle: And chemicals and toxins

How do you call it, the vaginal soaps? The intimate soaps? Can you include that somewhere in this modification, because they are modification of pH. They're modification of your normal bacterial flora in order to let the bad smell go away.

(Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

The capacity of advertisers to construct and perpetuate the notion that female genitalia is unhygienic and in need of specialised attention to regulate smell and hygiene is also criticised within academic commentary. McCartney (2012 p. 2) considered the advertisement of intimate hygiene products to situate normal genital function as problematic, stating 'women's genitals are simply being treated as a bait for insecurities and a marketing opportunity'.

For the purposes of whitening the vaginal and anal regions, bleaching washes and creams are an addition to the market for genital fashioning. According to news media, anal bleaching may be performed in a salon or conducted at home with use of a bleaching cream (Pelley 2012). The procedure is intended to lighten the skin around the anus and is conducted for purely cosmetic purposes (McBride & Fortenberry 2010 p. 129). The discussion of both whitening and hygiene productions is situated within understandings of female genitalia, in its natural state, as unpleasant and shameful. Whilst some bleaching options may be indicative of the increased popularity of various sexual practices, a pernicious mobilisation of race based assumptions and associations was identified by a couple of participants as having spurred the practice of genital whitening.

Throughout interviews, some participants considered pubic hair bleaching (n=1), vulval bleaching (n=1) and anal bleaching (n=1) as components of genital fashioning. Although participants strongly identified idealised female genitalia to be characterised by having a genital region of a pale, pink colour (further detailed in Chapter Five), few extended the discussion of desired appearance to an identification of the methods employed as a means

by which to achieve this idealised norm. For example, Alicia outlined idealised genitalia to have ‘consistent colouring throughout, usually pink, no dark colours at all’ without further specification of practices that contribute to the production of this idealised genital characteristic. A similar trend was noticeable in focus groups, which were more likely to discuss the idealised colour of female genital rather than the employable methods of whitening and bleaching. Pubic hair dying was discussed on one occasion in focus groups, as was the potential for anal bleaching.

According to the literature, genital fashioning practices, including anal bleaching, are predominantly discussed within the popular media (Moran & Lee 2016 p. 2). Academic research pertaining to such practices may be limited given the relatively recent emergence of the plethora of modification options, Herbenick et al. (2012 p. 683) stating ‘the ever changing genital products ... now include products marketed for vagina “lightening”, pubic hair dyes, labia dye, and anal bleaching’. As a result, little is known about the prevalence rates of such practices.

There was little discussion of perceived prevalence rates of bleaching. One interviewee considered that ‘some’ people would dye their pubic hair, but did not express a favourable opinion of the practice:

Pubic hair dying ... well, it’s ridiculous, but some people do it. But nobody sees it other than your partner. (Dawn, Focus Group Participant)

In general, focus group participants viewed bleaching negatively. Commercial interests were noted by an interviewee as a relevant factor in the promotion of whitening products:

I guess media plays in a way to just, hurt them into what they actually want to sell, their products, right now if whitening is in then I’m going to sell it to you to say that a white vagina is nice. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

Alexis's comment keenly identifies the commercial employment of discourses that position women's bodies as inferior and insufficient, a state to be remedied through the purchase of relevant beauty products (McCracken 1993 p. 9). Such discourses also frequently draw on broader constructions of associations with the female body. Alexis further considered the preferences for female genital colour as associated with long standing assumptions regarding ethnicity and sexuality:

Maybe it's white supremacy, but maybe it's got to do with fairness as well, when you talk about genitalia a lot it's like, you know it's often clean and pale and um anything dark even becomes something exotic. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

In response to reading an extract from *Cosmopolitan*, Alexis also identified the discourse which positioned darker female genitalia as 'dirty':

I think about the darker labia thing, I don't know, like even though the reply was that yeah you know you it comes in sorts of colours and everything, it kind of states that, we want that uniform colour throughout our whole body or whatnot and if anything is different we should try to make it the same and I don't know what lengths they would go to to make it seem less, I don't know, what was running through my head is like darker always comes across as dirty or as unappealing, they may go to lengths like bleaching it or god knows what, yeah, so. Yeah. I don't know how that would really impact in the long run but I'm pretty sure I've seen like bleaching stuff in the market already.

According to Braun and Wilkinson (2001 p. 22), there exists a relationship between the conceptualisation of female genitalia as smelly and as 'dirty'; 'smell is linked with notions of dirt'. However, more aptly reflecting Alexis's consideration of darker skin as being associated with dirt, Seifer (cited in Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 22), stated 'girl babies are given a consistent message of contamination, that what you have down there is dark, it's dirty, you don't touch it'.

However, it is also possible that the trend towards anal bleaching is resultant from increased visibility of the anus within pornography, and associated practices of anal intercourse (Pelley 2012). One focus group participant stated:

I know there's a trend of anal bleaching. That baffles my mind. But I know both men and women do that, and that's usually in porn. But I don't know anyone that's done that. Thankfully. (Marissa, Focus Group Participant)

Indeed, McDougall (2013 p. 778) notes the characteristics of idealised genitalia as depicted in mainstream pornography to display labia with 'no dark edges' and anuses which 'have been bleached'. Within a recent study, anal bleaching was discussed as a component in preparing the body for anal intercourse, the participant stating 'and bleach the area to lighten it up, you know, keeping it attractive' (Exner et al. cited in McBride & Fortenberry 2010 p. 129). The potential correlation between increased practices of anal intercourse and engagement with anal bleaching has also been considered within the popular news media (Pelley 2012). However, participants did not consider this factor and the lack of broader consideration for anal bleaching would suggest this was not considered a normative practice associated with genital fashioning.

Overall, genital hygiene and bleaching were an identified component of genital modification options, but are considered as nonnormative. The usage of such products is instead regarded as unnecessary and as promoted by marketing campaigns that employ broader discourses of female genitalia as unhygienic. The practice of bleaching was discussed as having racialised underpinnings which extended to pernicious associations with sexuality. However, the increased prevalence of anal intercourse, and pornographic depictions thereof, may also have influenced the practice of bleaching.

Female Genital Mutilation

Throughout focus groups and, to a lesser extent, interviews, participants included the procedure of FGM in their discussion of genital fashioning practices. Frequently, participants did not seek to distinguish FGM from options of genital fashioning; instead female genital mutilation was often positioned as analogous with, or on the continuum of, genital fashioning. To some degree, the participant discussion of FGM interrogated the concept of choice as the distinguishing factor between FGM and FGCS.

As previously discussed, the usage of the term 'Female Genital Mutilation' is employed within my thesis to refer to the various procedures of 'clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation' as predominantly practiced within a number of African nations, and some specific areas of the Middle East and Asia (Green 2005 pp. 153–154). Within the literature, FGM has also been referred to as female genital circumcision, female genital cutting and female genital surgeries (Green 2005 p. 154). The term Female Genital Mutilation is not unproblematic and debate regarding the usage of the term requires acknowledgment. Whilst key organisations, such as the World Health Organisation, have favoured the term Female Genital Mutilation over 'female genital cutting', considering the latter to be euphemistic, there also exists considerable criticism of the usage of FGM (Green 2005 p. 154). Predominantly, FGM is regarded to evoke negative and racialised perceptions of those having undergone the procedure; the phrase is perceived to elicit 'moral outrage' (Green 2005 p. 154). Despite this, the term FGM has been employed within my thesis to reflect the ways participants discussed and thought about the practices. Further to this, the term FGM was considered to ensure clear differentiation from FGCS.

Although my research was not designed to investigate FGM, on the occasion that participants chose to discuss these practices they were not prevented from doing so. Within

a majority of focus group sessions (n=7), participants identified the practice of FGM throughout their discussion of genital fashioning. FGM was usually mentioned during the participants' initial consideration of practices associated with genital fashioning:

My mind went straight to genital mutilation. (Carol, Focus Group Participant)

On occasion, FGM was clearly considered on a spectrum of genital modification procedures:

Nelle: I think of more sort of, in quotation marks, benign, but not really benign, things, like actions, like waxing or shaving. Cleaning, like incessant cleaning, I know that there's a lot of marketing around having a clean smelling vagina, and how bullshit that is really for health. Uh, then there's also obviously on the other side of the spectrum, um well yeah, there's FGM and stuff like that.

Ling: Oh the foreign stuff, yeah.

Participants frequently discussed the practice of FGM and did not seek to differentiate the practice from the discussion of genital fashioning practices, or, as seen in the previous comment, conflated discussion of both FGM and genital fashioning. Whilst identification of FGM was present within a majority of focus group discussion—and only a minority of interview sessions (n=2)—participants did not generally discuss the practice, or their thoughts thereof, in detail. In some instances, media discussion of genital fashioning was identified to include reporting of FGM practices. On a few occasions, lack of media reporting about FGM was lamented. However, throughout such considerations, there remained an evident conflation between the concepts of genital fashioning and FGM. Within Diane's initial contemplation about the media's effect on women's understandings of genital fashioning, she stated:

They don't broadcast what is actually done to little girls in third world countries, such as like the vaginal circumcisions, and things like that. (Diane, Interview Participant)

Indeed, on two distinct occasions, participants considered the similarities of FGM and FGCS.

And at what point do modification or fashioning become mutilation? ... Because essentially the removal of healthy tissue in a human is mutilation, regardless of where it's removed from. So, I mean, labiaplasty would be sort of straddling that as well. Yeah, I mean in order to not be mutilating it would have to serve some sort of therapeutic purpose um otherwise you are cutting away healthy tissue which is our definition of mutilation. (Sandy, Focus Group Participant)

Interviewee, Monica, was more direct in her consideration of similarities between FGM and FGCS:

The amount of women doing labiaplasty is on the rise and stuff like that, it's basically just like consensual FGM. (Monica, Interview Participant)

Contemporary discussion of FGM has problematically mobilised the 'rhetoric of choice' to distinguish the practice of FGM from FGCS (Braun 2009 p. 233). Both discourse and Australian legislation pertaining to FGM 'renders choice impossible for those involved in practices deemed "traditional"' (Sullivan 2007 p. 404). In contrast, FGCS is positioned as a procedure freely chosen by an autonomous, empowered consumer (Sullivan 2007 p. 404; Braun 2009 pp. 243–244). Braun's analysis seeks to interrogate the perception of FGM and FGCS as separated by choice, instead locating women's decisions to undergo FGCS as also contextualised by culture (Braun 2009 pp. 243–244). The participants discussion of FGM as comparable to FGCS served to critiqued the 'choice rhetoric' (Braun 2009) which has typically underpinned the distinction between the practices. As opposed to the prioritisation of neoliberal emphasis on choice, participants discussion of FGM, and its relationship to FGCS, centred on the locality of, and procedural and physical similarities of the procedures.

Overall, the underlying reasons for participants' inclusion of FGM in discussions of genital fashioning were generally unclear. However, it is evident that participants positioned FGM

as a component of, or analogous with, genital fashioning. As demonstrated by the cited discussions, FGM was not distinguished from FGCS as a result of notions of choice and agency. FGM was generally considered without the emotive ‘moral panic’ that has, on occasion, been identified to shape such discussion. Instead, FGM was plainly discussed as one of the procedures on the spectrum of genital fashioning.

Conclusion

Genital modification encompasses a variety of practices situated by participants on a continuum from expected to ridiculed. The practices of genital fashioning interact to produce the desired genital appearance. However, the individual practices of genital fashioning are also associated with distinct meanings. Practices of pubic depilation and FGCS work to normalise the female genital region given contemporary aesthetic standards for female genitalia. Nonnormative practices of genital modification include genital piercings and tattoos. Whilst such practices attract negative connotations, engagement with genital piercings and tattoos are perceived to imbue the individual with greater capacity for agency. Whereas, although vajazzling was considered a nonnormative practice, it was a practice derided by young women. Further to this, genital hygiene and bleaching products are genital modification options criticised as promoted and marketed via commercial interests rather than routinely practiced by women.

This chapter has detailed and contrasted the perceptions of genital fashioning practices as presented by participants. It has investigated the scope and definition of genital fashioning and, through this analysis, has addressed the first of my research questions: how do young women understand contemporary practices of genital modification? The individual practices of genital fashioning are positioned on a continuum, invoking different meanings and interpretations. Within the framework of postfeminist femininity, young women actively and

knowingly engage with the sexualised production of the female genital region. Participants discussion of normative genital fashioning practices demonstrates that, within contemporary postfeminist culture, there has indeed been an extension of female bodily requirements for presentation and alteration. The production of female genitalia in accordance with social norms requires increased levels of self-surveillance and body maintenance, such as the repeated removal of pubic hair. Practices of genital fashioning that were considered as non-normative were discussed by participants to allow for greater capacity for agency and individualised expression. Young women's negotiation of agency and genital fashioning practices will be further explored in Chapter Six.

This chapter is significant in providing an understanding of the scope of genital fashioning, as considered by young women, by which to further investigate the increasing trend towards the practice. The following chapter will analyse the representations of female genitalia within the public sphere with respect to the significance of visual comparison in the construction of the feminine form.

Chapter Five

Comparative Ideals

*We don't get born with these ideals, we source them from somewhere
(Eden, Interview Participant)*

Fashioning female genitalia is both a performative and productive act, dependent upon the portrayal of idealised standards by which individuals may be informed of genital 'norms'. Mass visual mediums are significant in the communication of genital appearance standards as genital fashioning increasingly emerges as a component of feminine production (McDougall 2013). The comparative and informative capacity of visual representations of idealised bodily forms is central to bodily production in accordance with social standards, which is an occurrence that may be seen to extend to the domain of female genitalia (McNamara 2006 p. 6). The significance of comparison was highlighted by an interviewee's consideration for options of comparative media, stating:

I think even if porn didn't exist, as a species human beings are, we have a tendency to compare and contrast ourselves to what's around us, and so if it wasn't porn, it would be something else. It would be just looking and each other ... and wondering if we're adequate enough. (Eden, Interview Participant)

There are difficulties associated with comparative awareness of female genitalia because it is a body site that is ordinarily hidden. It is the typically concealed nature of female genitalia, resulting in limited sources available for visual comparison, which reinforces the significance of texts depicting genitalia as central in the construction of conceptualisations of normality. According to McDougall (2013 p. 776), the intricacies of female genitalia are typically undisclosed; medical texts, for instance, generally encompass stylised line drawings, while

the primary sites that display clear representations of female genitalia are identified in literature as being hardcore pornography and vulval art.

Theorists have suggested the relative dearth of available realistic images of female genitalia for comparison is a potential reason for women's increasing demand for FGCS. Jeffreys (2005 p. 83) considers 'one reason that heterosexual women may feel their genitals require surgery is that they do not know what other women's genitals look like ... Women who do see other women's genitals in pornography are therefore unable to make realistic comparison with their own'. Therefore, given the typically concealed nature of female genitalia, despite its increasing literal and metaphorical entrance into the public sphere, contemporary representations of female genitalia may be understood as particularly significant in the creation and perpetuation of genital aesthetic ideals.

This chapter explores the theme of comparison, which emerged from the research data. As previously noted in Chapter Two, comparison is important for the replication of embodied beauty norms. I investigate the standard of comparison with which women engage, and the context in which comments and potential judgements about genital appearance are made. The primary sites of display within the public sphere are discussed with reference to literature and participant discussion. The sites critically examined include the mainstream media—of which advertising content is assessed as a component—pornography and the medical industry. Although visual comparison has been identified as means of communication of idealised standards, it is also proposed that increased comparative measures are a means by which to provide viewers with empowering alternatives. Drawing on focus group and interview data I argue that greater consumption of diverse representations of female genitalia has the potential to increase genital satisfaction and awareness of variety in genital appearance. Therefore, comparative representations of

female genitalia may be seen to perpetuate idealised genital norms but also have the capacity to combat routine images of normative genital representation.

Perceived Standards of Genital Appearance

It basically needs to look like Barbie
(Diane, Interview Participant)

The significance of culturally constructed genital ideals is especially pertinent to the display and representation of gender and femininity. As asserted by Green (2005 p. 177), ‘the fact remains, to be a woman is to have a specific culturally prescribed and approved form of genitalia’. Therefore, the analysis of contemporary understandings of normalised genital appearance may be positioned within broader discourses associated with femininity and the construction of the female body, whilst remaining critical to the exploration of comparison and female negotiation of genital fashioning trends. In response to viewing an extract from *Cosmopolitan* Australia (Appendix A) which contained expressions of concern about genital appearance, Alexis, an interview participant, identified the importance of questioning:

How am I comparing myself? To whom am I comparing myself? (Alexis, Interview Participant)

Within current literature, the idealised aesthetic standard to which women compare their genitalia has been identified as a hairless, ‘clean slit, a minimalist ideal for women’s genitals where the labia are symmetrical and do not protrude’ (McDougall 2013 p. 776). This aesthetic standard is depicted within predominately all mainstream representations of female genitalia, most notably pornography (Schick, Calabrese, Rima & Zucker 2010 p. 396). According to Koning et al. (2009 p. 69), the majority of ‘commercial’ photographic representations available within the public sphere have been digitally altered to resemble genitalia with small or invisible, symmetric labia minora, an awareness of which was noted by some participants (discussed in the following).

Focus group discussions may be differentiated from interview data in that whilst *practices* and the perceived normality of *practices* were discussed, there was significantly less discussion of overall genital appearance and idealised genital appearance. References to genital appearance were generally vague, for instance Summer stated ‘it has to look a certain way’ without clarifying or explaining what that may encompass. References to the ambiguous, undefined, ‘perfect sort of vagina’ (Olivia) perhaps indicate the perception of idealised genital aesthetic standards as pervasive; further detailing of what constitutes an idealised genital form considered as unnecessary within group discussion. Highlighting the significance of genital representations in the media, a comment from Jackie exemplified the way in which female genital ideals were referred to without explicit provision of aesthetic details:

I think that they get this idea, looking at those images in the media and that kind of thing, that this is what it should look like for everyone, if that makes sense. And they kind of standardise it out and then, a girl may look at that and go oh is that normal? Like should I, should I look like that, because I don’t look like that, and then that might, you know, influence whether they go through a ... labiaplasty.
(Jackie, Focus Group Participant)

It was considered within all focus groups that female genitalia without, or with minimised, pubic hair is normative in contemporary genital display. Preferences for female genitalia to have small or ‘normal’ labial size were mentioned within some focus groups (n=5) as a component of genital aesthetic ideals. The sole focus group participant to clearly delineate her understanding of societal perceptions associated with idealised genital appearance stated:

They’re told there’s one acceptable shape, that’s like no hair, and is small labia, and the clit hidden. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

Phoebe constituted the only focus group participant to mention clitoral appearance as a component of genital appearance standards. Similar themes emerged in interviews and the discussed standards of genital appearance were reflective of current literature detailing genital aesthetic norms. These norms were considered by Alicia to encompass:

Either a clean wax or a landing strip, and usually a small symmetrical labia minora, and consistent colouring throughout, usually pink, no dark colours at all. (Alicia, Interview Participant)

Echoing the focus group discussions, all interview participants identified some form of pubic depilation as normative, or as being presented as normative, particularly within the mainstream media and pornography. Within interview discussion, the most commonly identified forms of pubic hair styling included the complete removal of pubic hair, particularly via Brazilian waxing, the reduction of pubic hair in order to form a particular style, such as a 'landing strip', or bikini line hair removal so as hair would not be exposed in swimwear. Labial size also presented as a significant factor in the socially constructed idealised form of female genitalia. The majority of participants identified smaller labia as a perceived or commonly presented aesthetic ideal, pornography often cited as prominent in depicting female genitalia with this idealised labial size. Although mentioned by a smaller proportion of the interview participants, genital colour was considered a significant component of genital appearance; pale, pink and of even colour identified as forming the idealised standard, with negative connotations associated with darker colours.

The final components of idealised genital presentation, which were noted on a few occasions within focus groups, were those associated with smell and perceived cleanliness. This identification of presentational norms associated with a 'clean' (Nelle, Focus Group

Participant) genital region has been considered distinctly from discussion of depilatory motivations, which were also associated with hygiene and cleanliness.

Although not generally regarded to reflect genital ideals, some interview participants noted the positive display of piercings within pornography. It was considered that positive pornographic representations may contribute to the perception of piercings as constituting a component of an attractive or sexually appealing genital area.

Overall, participants' discussion described a particular 'type of vagina' (Rory), which is normalised within contemporary western society, and a standard against which women may be compared and measured. This sentiment was articulated by Rory, who considered that:

If people are exposed to that, they're going to start comparing and internalising that as the right way to be. (Rory, Interview Participant)

Interview participants generally provided greater detail of idealised genital characteristics than that which presented in focus group discussion. The genital standards identified by participants, which encompassed a hairless pubic region with minimised labia and clitoris, pale colour and pleasant smell, highlight contemporary discourses which 'ignore the fact that female genitalia come in an assortment of shapes, sizes and sensuality that are unique to each woman' (Green 2005).

However, participants demonstrated a clear awareness of the unrealistic nature of idealised female genital appearance norms within contemporary culture, which is a finding divergent from current literature. Moran and Lee (2013) found that exposure to images of modified genitalia may result in altered perceptions of normality given that Australian women, subsequent to viewing images of modified genitalia, regarded modified genitalia as 'more normal' than unmodified genitalia. Although participants in my research were able to

identify norms associated with genital appearance, they engaged in critical discussion of the presentation and promotion of such appearance standards. This may be further contrasted with the findings from Moran and Lee (2013 p. 764) in which young Australian female participants demonstrated uncertainty as to normal genital appearance. Indeed, in my research, the majority of participants specified popular representations of female genitalia and associated appearance norms as not reflective of reality. Most frequently, idealised genitalia—as presented within the mainstream media and pornography—were clearly noted in interviews as not representative of natural and diverse genital appearance; such representations were considered to be altered via surgical or digital methods.

Participant awareness in relation to the unrealistic nature of idealised genital representations indicates media and cultural literacy. Gill describes an individual to demonstrate media literacy ‘if they can discourse critically on the aims and techniques that comprise an image or text’ (2012a p. 740). Although, in her discussion, Gill suggests too much emphasis has been placed on media literacy, her definition helps to further elucidate the way in which the participants interacted and understood media representations of female genitalia. Even though participants outlined the social expectations with regard to genital appearance, they remained critical of the pressures placed on women in the pursuit of standardised genitalia. The seemingly contrary proposition that women are both influenced by standards of contemporary femininity in their own bodily construction whilst also critical of idealised appearance standards, is highlighted in Green’s (2005 p. 176) discussion of female engagement with practices of FGCS. Green notes the importance of:

... not claiming that women who choose cosmetic genital surgery are “cultural dupes” and the “unwitting victims of ideological manipulation”, rather ... we must consider women who engage in cosmetic surgery may do so to comply with cultural constraints of femininity while simultaneously not agreeing with them.

In questioning comparative standards, Alexis contemplated a *Cosmopolitan* reader's concern with genital appearance:

From what benchmark did they measure themselves actually to come up with these questions? (Alexis, Interview Participant)

Discussion presented by the participants elucidates young women's perceptions of idealised genital appearance standards and supports existing literature identifying contemporary norms associated with female genital presentation. In order to further examine the ways in which individuals receive communication and information of these idealised genital appearance norms, the sites of representation may be considered with regard to the increased locating of female genitalia within the public sphere.

Sites of Comparison Within the Public Sphere

It has been argued that female genitalia, and representations of female genitalia, are increasingly located within the public sphere; facilitating the broad dissemination of information relating to idealised and normalised genital appearance (Schick et al. 2011 pp. 74–75). The visual display of female genitalia within the public sphere provides a benchmark of 'normality' by which other female genitalia may be compared and assessed. The potential for these representational factors to impact on women's understanding and construction of 'normal' genitalia is highlighted by Braun and Wilkinson's assertion that:

Specific representational practices—be they linguistic or visual—feed into a broader symbolic and material context in which the meaning of women's bodies is negotiated and renegotiated. If women's understandings of the vagina are developed in relation to their socio-cultural and historical context, then representations of the vagina exist as cultural resources that women (and men) can use for making sense of the vagina. (2001 p. 18)

According to current literature, primary sites at which genital aesthetic standards are displayed or described encompass: the mainstream media, including pictorial indications in women's magazines (Bramwell 2002 p. 190); pornography (Braun 2009 p. 242; Davis 2002 p. 11; Jeffreys 2005 p. 83; Kapsalis 1997 p. 82; McNamara 2006 p. 7; Moran & Lee 2013 p. 374); artistic representation (Kapsalis 1997 p. 82; Zwang 2011 p. 83); medical texts (Kapsalis 1997 p. 82) and surgical advertisements (Ashong & Batta 2013 p. 154; Davis 2002 p. 12; Liao et al. 2012 p. 1). As contended by McDougall (2013 pp. 774–775), 'women ... are more likely to see other female genitalia today. The mainstreaming of the sex industry and increased exposure to nudity in magazines, movies and on the Internet has resulted in attention being drawn to female genitalia'.

Further to this, developments in sartorial options for women have been identified as impacting upon genital modification trends (McDougall 2013 p. 775), such as pubic depilation (Riddell, Varto & Hodgson 2010 p. 122). Braun, Ticklebank and Clarke (2013 p. 484) recently identified the beach as a public site pertinent to the display of female genitalia in accordance with socially accepted standards of presentation; it was considered unacceptable to have pubic hair displayed when wearing a bikini given that pubic hair is 'private' and must therefore remain absent from the public sphere. Whilst, the display of female genitalia at the beach was found within literature as significant in influencing women's engagement with genital fashioning, the beach was not discussed by participants in my research as a public site for comparison. Rather, sites presenting options for genital comparison were considered to include media and pornographic representations of female genitalia and, in some instances, peer groups and artistic projects. In order to critically consider the contemporary standards by which female genitalia may be measured and

compared, these primary sites of genital display and description will be investigated relative to existing literature and the data provided by research participants.

The Mainstream Media

I guess it's so pervasive we probably don't notice, I mean ... advertising is constant
(Nelle, Focus Group Participant)

The media as central in the dissemination of information of dominant beauty standards and ideals is significant in theorising women's understandings of genital normality (Koning, Zeijlmans, Bouman & van der Lei 2009 p. 69). Media representations of idealised genital standards may be examined within the context of a broader culture in which media images shape understandings of gender and femininity. Dominant images of idealised genitalia within the media facilitate the education about genital appearance standards and expectations, thereby providing the capacity for women to engage in comparison with idealised genital forms. Schick et al. (2011 p. 74) assert the potential for media images that are sexually explicit to be 'particularly influential in determining women's perceptions of their genital appearance'. However, in discussing the media as a site in which representational forms of female genitalia have entered the public sphere, it is critical to note the potential for such representational constructions to encompass both visual and linguistic descriptions of the vagina; it is the potential for individuals to be informed of acceptable genital aesthetic standards through written communication which enables the mainstream media to further contribute to the perpetuation of genital ideals.

The development of female bodily depilatory norms are, in part, resultant from magazine advertising (Hope 1982). Labre's previously noted (2002 p. 118) analysis of Brazilian waxing further details the increasing prominence of media discussion in relation to waxing practices. In explaining the increasing trend toward pubic waxing, Labre (p. 118) concludes the media to have 'helped promote this trend'. As previously discussed, Braun (2010 p. 1400) highlights

the relationship between practices of genital fashioning and the media. She notes the capacity of media and advertising to constitute forms of social control, exerting significant pressure on women to alter their appearance in accordance with culturally prescribed standards. Braun (p. 1401) further describes the increase in demand for genital cosmetic procedures as fuelled by media and advertising coverage and promotion of FGCS. Correlating with this, are the findings from Koning et al. (2009 p. 69), which note the heightened awareness of surgical labia reduction given increased media attention in recent years.

Given the capacity of the media to portray idealised genital standards and inform understandings of normative genital appearance (Koning et al. 2009 p. 69), focus group participants were requested to reflect on media discussions that they may have encountered in relation to genital fashioning practices (Appendix C). Although not all participants identified exposure to media discussions, only within one focus group was there no mention of media and media sources at any stage of the discussion. Throughout focus group interaction the media forms discussed consisted of marketing and advertising (n=8), television shows (n=6), documentaries (n=6), the Internet (n=6), celebrity discussion and promotion (n=3), women's magazines (n=3), books (n=2), radio (n=2), and movies (n=2). Also noted on a few occasions (n=3) were Facebook driven campaigns increasing awareness in relation to cosmetic surgery and genital diversity. Generalised mention of the media was made within a further seven focus groups, in one instance group discussion noting the prolific usage of Photoshop in media representations of female genitalia. Social media, such as Tumblr, was also noted on a few occasions, however, due to the complexity of discussion pertaining to the media, further analysis of user-generated media is beyond the scope of this investigation.

In further developing the themes as emergent from focus group discussions, interview participants were asked to consider the potential role of media influence on women's understandings of their genitalia, and genital modification practices. The following analysis seeks to outline the ways in which interviewees constructed the media as a site for information and comparison rather than as a source of influence. However, in some instances, it was not possible to clearly delineate this distinction as the popular presentation of genital appearance norms was regarded in of itself to be a source of influence, contributing to understandings of genital appearance or modification practices. Nevertheless, the media as discussed by interviewees consisted of television shows (n=6), magazines (n=5), advertising and marketing (n=5), movies (n=3), books (n=2), the Internet (n=1), and, on occasion, was clearly discussed as conflated with pornography (n=5). For the purposes of clarity, I address all participant discussion of pornography in the section following the mainstream media analysis.

The media representations of female genitalia, which were most commonly identified by interview participants as reflective of the normative genital standards, included minimised or absent pubic hair, minimised labial size and pale colour. Participants further discussed the media as presenting generalised but unspecified idealised normative standards. The media was regarded as significant in presenting understandings of modification practices; some of which, such as Brazilian waxing, were perceived as further normalised through media reporting; while others, such as genital piercings, were regarded as cast in a negative light. Highlighting the media potential for portrayal of aesthetic genital standards, is Monica's detailing of advertising content:

I think by advertising as well, like bikini ads, like for instance ... a woman's labia wouldn't be like massive for instance, it would be petite and small, she wouldn't

have any pubic hair emerging from the bikini line for instance. (Monica, Interview Participant)

The broad themes emerging from focus group discussions demonstrated participants employment of media portrayal as: a source of information which informed the participants understandings and knowledge of genitalia and modification practices; promotion of specific standards for genital appearance; a means by which to illustrate and expand upon the participants' explanations; and as having the potential to raise awareness of alternative genital appearance options and promote debate and diversity. All interviewees discussed the media as forming a site that may display or relay information or images of appearance or modification practices. Participants most frequently discussed the media as 'significant' and 'influential', but also cited the media as a 'primary source', and 'educational'. Monica detailed the capacity of the media to form a site of genital comparison, stating:

I think the way the media influences it is, it sets up like an ideal of what a woman's body, including like her vulva and her pubic region, what it's supposed to look like. (Monica, Interview Participant)

The consideration of genital representations in the media is situated within broader analyses of the relationship between the media and the establishment and perpetuation of homogeneous beauty ideals. As considered by Chapkis (1986 p. 40), advertising, whilst not the sole determinant of beauty standards, remains a significant factor in the cultural construction of beauty norms. Indeed, previous literature in relation to female body weight ideals has identified the usage of magazine advertisements as a standard of 'social comparison' (Groesz, Levine & Murnen 2002, p. 2). A number of interviewees also identified advertising as a significant component of the media, which may aid in the communication and promotion of vaginal appearance norms and modification practices.

Illustrating the commercial component of media information pertaining to standards of genital appearance, Alexis reflected:

I guess media plays in a way to just hurt them into what they actually want to sell
... Right now, if whitening is in then I'm going to sell it to you to say that a white
vagina is nice. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

This comment points to prevailing commercial interests associated with the promotion of body ideals. Labre (2002 p. 124) details the commercial benefit in inducing body dissatisfaction, as the 'solution' to the deficient body is subsequently marketed toward the consumer. Such is the case with pubic hair, a continually reoccurring process requiring ongoing maintenance.

The educational potential of the media and advertising in relation to genital fashioning practices was further highlighted by Ally:

I had no idea that vajazzling, like, I would still not know that vajazzling was a thing,
had I not seen some advertising for it. (Ally, Interview Participant)

Participant Readings of *Cosmopolitan* Magazine

To further understand the ways in which young women interact with media texts associated with genital display and presentation, interviewees were invited to read and comment on two extracts from *Cosmopolitan* Australia. Interviewee discussion of these extracts illustrates the way in which the media was seen to inform perceptions of female genitalia and associated modification practices. Generally, interviewees presented a critical reading of the *Cosmopolitan* extracts considering that, whilst the magazine was not specifically encouraging modification practices, the presence of discussion in relation to modification practices may constitute a source of influence and education which culminates in the

potential for women to subsequently regard practices as normative. This is illustrated by Nelle's comment:

I guess a lot of young women would be reading this and some of them may not even know what a Brazilian wax is or what vajazzling is, so, the way they phrase this, as if you're really really frequently asked and that every woman kind of thinks ... is a bit concerning because young women may actually be introduced to these ideas through reading it. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

The potential for *Cosmopolitan* to introduce its readers to perceived genital fashioning norms was also described by Ally:

Just like reading these two, it actually makes me think that vajazzling is more common; okay, so this is the train of thought, if like it's in *Cosmo*, the health impacts of vajazzling, it makes me think that maybe it's more common. And if it's more common maybe people I know have had their vagina's vajazzled. Maybe I should get my vagina vajazzled. (Ally, Interview Participant)

Some interviewees echoed research findings that younger women and adolescents are particularly susceptible to media standards (Groesz et al. 2002 p. 1).

All participants saw *Cosmopolitan's* discussion of diverse genital appearances as positive. However, some interviewees expressed scepticism given the perception of the magazine as containing contradictory messages; a small number of participants felt it was possible the magazine content more broadly would encourage practices of genital fashioning. Kaylee, for instance, stated:

I feel like it would just contradict everything else, because it's like showing these models and stuff, and then being like, oh you don't have to look like this ... it's like, your vagina is fine, your body is fine, then it shows women who are completely hairless, who are society's idea of perfect. (Kaylee, Interview Participant)

Pornography

The Porn Industry has kind of changed everyone's idea of how the vaginas are meant to look

(Patty, Focus Group Participant)

Perceived ubiquity of pornography

The description of pornography as a component of the media, or of the media as incorporating pornified images, positions the influence of pornography as ubiquitous. This perspective correlates with assertions of a pornification of western culture, in which it is perceived that there is increased acceptance and display of pornographic tropes within the mainstream media (Attwood 2011 p. 15; Dines 2010 p. 100). Eden's observations highlight the way in which participants discussed the relationship between the mainstream media and pornography:

I mean, what is porn? Like, where are the boundaries? Obviously if I go into a Club X and see the movies that would arguably be classed as porn, but what about, quite a racy billboard picture? Like, where is the line? And I think all those forms of media, because porn is media really isn't it, are factors in shaping women's ideas of their bodies or women's ideas about what the standards are. (Eden, Interview Participant)

The potential for pornographic aesthetic standards to be presented within the broader media is significant to the extension and mainstreaming of genital aesthetic ideals. For instance, Labre (2002 p. 120) notes the relatively recent promotion of Brazilian waxing within the mainstream media as subsequent to emergence of the hairless trend in pornography. The participants' identification of pornography as prolific is reflective of international studies examining young people's understandings of the media and pornography. This international research describes young people's perception of pornography as 'everywhere' given the abundant nature of contemporary sexualised media content (Haggstrom-Nordin et al. 2006 p. 389; Mattebo et al. 2012 p. 43). However,

mainstream media representations of female genitalia, whilst perhaps influenced by pornographic norms (Dines 2010 p. 100), may be differentiated from pornographic presentations of female genitalia based on the level of genital exposure; female genitalia typically remaining somewhat concealed beyond the bounds of pornography. Therefore, pornography remains the primary site at which explicit representation of female genitalia may be viewed for comparison (Schick et al. 2011).

Pornographic ideals

Within current literature, pornography has been identified as central to the construction of genital ideals. According to Braun's (2010 p. 1402) literature review, the 'narrow aesthetic' currently regarded as the genital ideal is associated with mainstream pornography. Reflective of the literature, the majority of focus groups contained discussion situating pornography as a site that depicts female genitalia, modification of female genitalia, and/or idealised genital forms. In order to further develop the themes emergent within the focus groups, interviewees were requested to reflect upon the notion of pornography as a factor associated with understandings of genitalia and genital modification practices.

Generally, interview participants referenced an unspecified but idealised form of genitalia as depicted in pornography. However, on six occasions participants detailed some of the genital characteristics they understood as portrayed in pornography, which included a (predominantly fully) waxed genital region (n=5), minimised labia (n=3), fair colour (n=2), genital piercings (n=2), anal bleaching (n=1) and vajazzling (n=1). Exemplifying both the discussion of a generalised pornographic genital form and the potential for pornography to normalise the perception of idealised, albeit unrealistic, genitalia, Monica stated:

Porn makes it seem like there's one type of vagina and a lot of people say that oh everyone knows that it's just like, not reality, but it does normalise that for sure ...

like in a lot of mainstream porn, they just make it seem like there's one type and everything else is deviant of that. (Monica, Interview Participant)

Echoing the previously outlined idealised genital aesthetic standards, the focus group participants primarily identified the depiction of genitalia within pornography as encompassing a hairless form (n=6), small or minimised labial size (n=2), a bleached anus (n=1), a symmetrical form (n=1), and a prepubescent appearance (n=1). Such perceptions are keenly reflective of research detailing the portrayal of female genitalia within *Playboy* Magazine which was predominantly found as unnatural in the representation of 'minimal' pubic hair and a 'invisible' labia minora (Schick et al. 2011 p. 78). As McDougall argues (2013 p. 778) the idealised genitalia to which individuals are exposed is perpetuated by softcore and mainstream pornography which portrays hairless genitalia which are 'neat, symmetrical and frequently digitally altered since this look is a prerequisite for publication [in Australia]'.

It was regarded by some focus group participants that there was limited scope and variation in the depiction of genitalia within mainstream pornography. However, variation, particularly with regard to pubic hair, was considered present within fetish pornography or pornography from the 1980s. The general perception of homogenous representations of female genitalia in accordance with idealised genital standards was illustrated by Phoebe's understanding of production standards in pornography:

Actually I was reading about this porn movie director, and that he admits that porn movies, they are made to show, they choose porn stars based on ... if their vagina is symmetrical, if they fit that pattern. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

However, one interviewee, who regarded only mainstream pornography to depict the limited options of idealised genital appearance, did discuss representational scope in pornography:

Pornography is okay, I think they usually show a reasonably wide variety. Obviously there's ... they do show it unrealistic at times, they show certain skin colours and waxing and all that kind of thing ... but I do feel like they show a reasonable range in sizing, shaping and colour and hair ... I feel like if you're consuming enough porn then you will get a reasonably broad range of appearances, and therefore a better understanding that there is a lot of diversity and you don't necessarily have to try to fit into or try to make yourself look a certain way. At the same time, I suppose if you go for just simple mainstream porn and you don't consume very much of it, you're going to get a very, a very narrow view of what it should appear. (Alicia, Interview Participant).

Alicia's view strongly correlates with Davis' (2002 p. 12) discussion of diverse genital representations within pornographic media. Two other interviewees noted the potential for 'fetish' pornography to depict genitalia divergent from the perceived mainstreamed ideal. However, the regard for the alternative depiction of genitalia within 'fetish' subsets of pornography was strongly problematised by the participants, as evidenced by the following statements:

Like there are niches of women with hair for instance and that's just like a kink almost, like a category from the mainstream. Which is really problematic because if women's hair is being fetishised, then a clean slate, like basically the area of a newborn, is the norm. (Monica, Interview Participant).

If you wanted to see something with a more natural looking genital, it would be a fetish video. And pubic hair is not a fetish, it's natural. So that would be like, I don't know, being fat is a fetish and it's not, not nice ... everything that isn't deemed normal, like to porn standards, becomes a fetish, and it shouldn't be that way. (Diane, Interview Participant).

As with the findings from the focus groups, all other interview participants discussed pornography as a uniform category. Such discussion may also be understood as aligned with broader, albeit criticised, discourses that position pornographic representations as

homogenous, invoking the narrative of ‘soft porn to stand in for all porn’ (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64).

Legislation about representing the labia in pornography

It is important to note that current Australian legislation restricts the portrayal of realistic genitalia within softcore pornographic publications. According to the Australian Classification Board, protruding labia minora deems genital representations obscene and therefore requiring of a higher classification. The Classification Board stipulates that softcore pornographic publications must only depict “discreet genital detail” with “no genital emphasis” (Sharp & Tiggemann 2016 p. 71). The underpinning implications of this legislation are perhaps a consequence of broad, long held disdain and disgust for female genitalia (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64). Historical representations of female genitalia, such as vagina dentata, evidence the way in which the female body has been regarded with fear and contempt (Braun & Wilkinson 2001 p. 24; Davis 2002 p. 9). Nurka and Jones (2013 p. 437) argue that there exists a ‘normalisation of revulsion’ with respect to the labia. According to Nurka and Jones, the legal restrictions on labial display are demonstrative of this revulsion and the way in which ‘labia are somehow more vile than other parts of human genital anatomy’. One of the participants specifically commented on the legislation

Apparently like something about the labia major and labia minor has to be changed because apparently, even in a pornography magazine, the vagina the way it *really* looks is too offensive. (Ally, Interview Participant)

Yet comparison with pornography was a major theme to emerge from the data.

Comparison and the role of pornography

Participant discussion identified pornography as significant in the increasing trends towards genital fashioning, given its role as a site of genital exposure. This was evidenced in Monica’s statement:

In other forms of media, whilst, like advertising and things, a woman doesn't have any hair, it doesn't really show. It suggests what is expected of the pubic hair, but in something like pornography it is there, it shows you, it clearly shows what is expected of men and women and their genitals. (Monica, Interview Participant)

The consideration of pornography as a comparative site given unrestricted exposure to female genitalia was further evidenced in the discussion between Nelle and Ling:

Nelle: I think that a lot of women, if they've been exposed to pornography, or if their boyfriends have been exposed to pornography, then they're, they feel this pressure and need to do it; like they've never seen anything else and they feel automatically like they're unnatural having an, you know, an extremely hairy ... pubic region.

Ling: Yeah ... I feel like this is very clearly an effect of pornography because that's the only medium where you'd see

Nelle: Naked women

Ling: Vagina's. Yeah. Not just the shaving but also the other stuff. Like the labiaplasty and the fact that women think that their labia are too big.

Nelle: Too big, yeah.

Ling: Or small ... 'cause that's what they're like in pornography.

As a result of clear genital depiction, representations of genitalia within pornography were generally regarded within focus groups as having the potential to create genital appearance expectations. Of the interview participants, only one interviewee expressed uncertainty, given her limited exposure, to the role of pornography and its potential relationship with genital aesthetic ideals. The interviewee did, however, detail her understanding of edited and photoshopped genitalia depicted in pornography as a result of censorship laws within Australia. The remaining interviewees all identified pornography as pertinent to the display, normalisation or education of genital aesthetics. The overwhelming majority of interview participants negatively framed pornography within their discussion, only a small proportion of the participants dually acknowledging the positive potential of pornography.

The relationship between pornographic depictions of idealised female genitalia, genital comparison, and the subsequent impact on the internalisation of cultural standards, was highlighted in Rory's response on the potential effects of pornography:

Well I think it sort of suggests that a particular ... image of, not just hair, but also a particular type of vagina and a particular type of labia, is the norm and that that's sexy and that's what's kind of yeah, acceptable. And I think if people are exposed to that, they're going to start comparing and sort of internalising that as the right way to be. And yeah, I think that would kind of creep into the practices they go on to participate in. (Rory, Interview Participant)

The identification of pornographic messages as associated with the increasing prevalence of genital fashioning practices corresponds with previous literature detailing the internalisation of cultural and social narratives that were seen to provoke genital grooming (Fahs 2014 p. 214). The understanding of female genitalia as subject to disciplinary practices, resultant of an internalisation of broader cultural standards, is situated within literature which considers the potential for women to internalise popular messages which position areas of women's bodies as disjointed, having the capacity to be individually modified and improved. Fahs (2014 p. 211), for instance, states that 'women have overwhelmingly learned to internalize notions of their body as not entirely whole'. The discourses as presented by participants seemingly position female genitalia as one such site which may be improved and altered, particularly given the benchmark of visual comparison as depicted within pornography.

Further exemplifying the participant's perspectives on the potential impact of pornographic comparison was Monica's regard for the effect of female exposure to pornography:

That definitely influences perspectives because it calls their appearances into doubt and whether it's normal. (Monica, Interview Participant)

Monica's consideration of the potential for doubt is particularly pertinent in light of Davis' (2002 p. 10) assertion with regard to FGCS that the drive to pursue cosmetic surgery is influenced not merely by 'desire but by concern or self-doubt'. The pervasive genital ideal has been identified as potentially contributing to women's experience of 'negative feelings about their genital appearance' (Schick et al. 2010 p. 396). The extension of bodily construction in accordance with socially constructed ideals to the genital region indicates support for the conceptualisation of female genitalia as requiring alteration in order to comply with encroaching demands of femininity. McDougall (2013 p. 777), for example, juxtaposes the feminine genital absence with the male genital region. Researchers have previously suggested, but not substantiated, that pornographic representations of idealised genitalia 'encourage' participation in practices of genital modification (Schick et al. 2011 p. 81). The participant discussion of pornography as a comparative measure which is influential in shaping understandings of normative genital appearance is supportive of this literature. The way in which pornography functions as an illustrative and comparative measure is further demonstrated through anecdotal reports from surgeons which describe patients as providing pornographic images to exemplify their desired genital appearance (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 63; McNamara 2006 p. 7).

Critical discussions of pornography

The majority of interviewees expressed a critical reading of pornography, considering pornographic representations as unnatural—a finding only indicated within focus groups but substantially more prevalent within interview discussion. Demonstrating strong media literacy, participants discussed pornography as not 'real'. Participants were aware that genital representations were skewed by digital editing or individual models having undergone surgical alteration. Exemplifying the way in which participants discussed their perception of pornography as artificially constructed was Kaylee's statement:

Porn definitely has an influence on how women view their genital areas cause in porn its always like, even with the whole body of a woman, it's always like altered breasts, altered butts, altered vaginas, and it's all completely fake really, and their labias are always very small and there's no hair, and women aren't like that.
(Kaylee, Interview Participant)

These findings indicate that young women are both aware of the unnatural pornographic representation of genitalia and dually consider women as subject to the influence of these images. To date, narratives of women's acknowledgement of the unrealistic nature of pornography have seemingly been absent in research pertaining to genital modification practices with such research identifying the 'unnatural' (Schick et al. 2011 p. 79) pornographic representation of genitalia without investigating women's awareness of this. However, the critical narratives as presented by participants have been previously identified within studies examining young people's usage and perception of pornography. Mattebo et al.'s (2012 p. 46) investigation of young peoples' reflections on pornography identified the potential for women to consider pornographic bodily representations to contribute to the construction of normative aesthetic ideals whilst acknowledging the naturally unattainable potential of these aesthetic characteristics. As with Mattebo et al. (p. 46), interview participants in my research acknowledged the potential impact of pornography but critically discussed pornography in a reflexive capacity. Extending previous literature pertaining to female genital modification, this finding is crucial to understanding the way in which young women currently conceptualise the multiple factors associated with genital fashioning. Whilst pornography may be a factor of influence in its comparative capacity for genital fashioning, women simultaneously recognise the unnatural nature of such representations.

It is uncertain the extent to which women are considered consumers of 'softcore' pornography and, therefore, subject to the representations of idealised genitalia contained

therein (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64). However, there remains the potential for women to receive communication of the ideals portrayed in pornography via indirect means. According to Sypeck, Grey, Etu, Ahrens, Mosimann and Wiseman, female exposure to explicit images with a male target audience may be limited, but:

women may still be affected by such images. To the extent that these media depictions influence men's preferences, the nature of the images will also indirectly influence how women perceive themselves to the extent that their self-image is responsive to positive or negative appraisals by men. (2006 p. 231)

The participants' discussion did note the potential for the indirect influence of pornography via the exposure of sexual partners to pornographic material. Further to this, other theorists (McDougall 2013 p. 776) contend that softcore pornography is increasingly more likely to attract female consumption, as opposed to male, as it is 'women who prefer to see idealised body types'.

The perspectives as presented by participants were seemingly reflective of the critiqued 'porn thesis' which rests on the concept of female internalisation of pornographic norms, subsequently impacting upon decisions for genital modification (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64). Given popular media and academic assertions of the correlation between pornography and increased engagement with practices of genital modification (see Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 63), there exists the potential that the participants invoked media rhetoric with regard to the impact of pornography. However, of the interviewees, only two participants drew on media and news sources in detailing their understanding of the impact of pornography on engagement with practices of genital modification. As such, it would be mere speculation as to whether it was direct consumption of pornography—a couple of participants specifying personal engagement with pornography—or exposure to media opinion, which informed participant accounts. Nevertheless, whilst the origin of the participant perspectives cannot

be determined, it remains significant that young women perceive pornography as pertinent in the trend towards genital fashioning. Identification of correlation between the consumption of pornographic images and modification practices are both indeterminate and beyond the scope of this research. However, it remains that pornography provides a source of genital representation by which women may engage in self-comparison and assessment.

Medicalised Representations of Female Genitalia

Do you know if it's written by a Doctor?
(Ebony, Interview Participant)

The medical industry is of further significance in the construction of conceptualisations of both 'normal' and the converse state thereof, 'pathological', female genitalia to which women may be measured and assessed. Representations of 'normal' and healthy female genitalia have previously been noted as limited within medical literature (Lloyd, Crouch, Minto, Liao & Creighton 2005 pp. 644–645). Furthermore, the medical industry's dominant portrayals of female genitalia are contextualised by the emergent commercial components and interests which seek to profit from medical procedures, such as FGCS (Braun 2010 p. 1401). Prolific online advertisements for FGCS have been identified as one of the means by which pictorial representations of desirable female genitalia have entered the public sphere (Andrikopoulou et al. 2013 p. 648). According to Conroy (2006 p. 107), the western medical industry is central in the construction of understandings of pathological and diseased genitalia, thereby 'promoting the fear in women that what is natural biological variation is a defect, a problem requiring the knife'.

Representations of female genitalia within medical texts may be understood to have problematic theoretical underpinnings. Kapsalis (1997 p. 83) proposes that medical texts may have a blurring of boundaries with pornography given the unique nature of both these mediums in the display of visual representation of female genitalia. According to Kapsalis

(1997 p. 83), 'since gynaecology and pornography often represent exposed vulvas, there is always the possibility that a representation in one sphere may exceed its boundaries and find itself within another domain'. Therefore, the medical industry ought not to be regarded as disassociated from social and cultural discourses but as an active component of the social production and reproduction of understandings in relation to the body and pathology. In this way, the medical industry is conceptualised as embroiled within social constructions and understandings of sex, gender, and the female body. Braun (2010 p. 1402), for instance, highlights the potential for surgeons specialising in FGCS to be personally influenced by broader social and cultural appearance ideals. Given that literature has indeed identified the limited scope of genital representations within medical texts, there is a resultant potential for medical professionals to construct their knowledge and assessment of 'normal' genitalia from a variety of sources, including that of popular culture (Andrikopoulou et al. 2013 p. 650).

According to Andrikopoulou et al.'s (2013 p. 650) investigation of medical texts, there was an evidenced 'absence of accurate and consistent descriptions of normal female genitalia in the standard textbooks used by medical students and trainees'. Within the medical texts examined there was the reportedly prolific usage of an 'almost identical line drawing'. Further research of the language employed within advertisements for FGCS noted the predominate failure to acknowledge genital variation as normal (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 378). Instead, medical discourse was utilised to cast large or asymmetrical labia as necessitating surgical intervention (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 378). This analysis of cosmetic surgery websites provides insight into the intersection of culturally constructed understandings of the body and the medical discourses that pathologise 'the normal' (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 387). Literature has further demonstrated the limited scope of depictions of female genitalia

within medical texts. Howarth, Sommer and Jordan's (2010 pp. 76–77) analysis of anatomy texts, for instance, finding only 29 of 220 textbooks analysed to include clear and comparable depictions of the vulval area; while the medical representations of female genital morphology showing 'reduced proportions' in comparison to depictions of genitalia within feminist publications and pornography.

As outlined in Chapter Four, participants frequently discussed surgical procedures in terms of perceived benefits and risks; the medically indicated need for surgery contrasted with the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal; the sought aesthetical ideal; and the motivational factors for undergoing cosmetic procedures. Yet few participants discussed the medical industry as significant in presenting a genital standard by which female genitalia may be compared or measured. Within the focus groups, only on limited occasions was the comparative potential of medical texts highlighted, participants noting the failure of such texts to provide individuals with adequate representations of female genitalia. This was evidenced in Phoebe's statement:

How are they going to compare themselves? They just have the porn stars. Not even the anatomy books, the books we use to learn biology, they don't show us clearly that there are different shapes. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

Phoebe's comment reflects existing literature, which has found limited representations of female genitalia within medical literature (Lloyd et al. 2005 p. 644) and echos sentiments expressed within another focus group by Ling who considered her experience with medical diagrams relative to the other participant's discussion of high school sexual education class:

When I did sex ed, [they] had only the medicalised inside of the female reproductive diagram, and a penis, but not the picture from underneath of the female genital region. I don't know if there's really that much medical importance to having that image because that's not part of the body that reproduces. But I

understand why you think we need them, because there's no alternative. (Ling,
Focus Group Participant)

Within the remaining focus groups, the relative dearth of discussion identifying the medical industry to constitute a site providing information or representations of female genitalia may indicate the usage of pornography as a primary site for visual genital comparison, or be reflective of the limited nature of medical representations of female genitalia. Whilst the complicity of the medical profession in the 'generating [of] genital ideals' (McDougall 2013 p. 778) has been noted within literature, the belief as reported by surgeons specialising in FGCS that women are seeking an aesthetic as depicted in pornography (Green 2005 p. 174) is perhaps supported by the lack of participant discussion in relation to the medical portrayal of female genitalia. The discussion as presented within focus groups suggests that not the medical industry, but pornography, is a primary site at which aesthetics associated with female genitalia may be viewed, and thus support the notion that 'pornography is instrumental in spreading the clean slit ideal' (McDougall 2013 p. 778). The inseparability, however, of the medical profession in creating and perpetuating cultural standards associated with aesthetic ideals cannot be discounted. As outlined by Brush (1998 p. 30), the practice of cosmetic surgery casts the 'natural' body of women as deficient and inadequate when contrasted with the culturally contingent norm.

Further to this, interviewees did not consider the medical industry as complicit in the perpetuation or creation of norms association with genital appearance, but more often regarded the industry as impartial and able to provide contrasting information to that presented within the mainstream media and pornography. Of the interview sessions, only one participant clearly identified the potential for the medical industry to constitute a

representational means by which idealised genitalia may be portrayed. In evidencing her opinion of pubic hairlessness as a contemporary norm, Rory stated:

The anatomy text books and ... now they're drawing them without hair, or that's been the push. So I think that shows that there's kind of this sort of normative standard of hairlessness which has maybe arisen over the past few years. (Rory, Interview Participant)

The general absence of discussion in relation to the medical industry's potential to construct and display visual representations of female genitalia, to which individuals may compare and contrast other genital forms, indicates that the medical industry is not typically regarded as a site of comparison amongst young women. However, the interviewees provided elucidation into the way in which they understood the medical industry to interact with societal ideals of genital appearance and fashioning trends. Rather than an active component in the creation and perpetuation of cultural aesthetic norms (Braun 2010 pp. 1401–1402), it can be seen that the medical industry was regarded as an independent source aiding in women's understandings and interpretations of their genitalia and associated practices of modification. This was demonstrated by interviewees' responses to an article which appeared in *Cosmopolitan* Australia (Appendix E) advising on the health risks associated with Brazilian waxing and vajazzling, as detailed by GP Penny Adams. Half of the interviewees specifically noted the presence of a medical source and/or medical advice within the *Cosmopolitan* article. Although one interviewee, Ally, questioned the information provided, the majority of participants, who considered the incorporation of medical advice within *Cosmopolitan*, discussed the medical advice as providing impartial information. Ally's distrust of the content within the *Cosmopolitan* article was demonstrated through her statement:

These magazines aren't medical magazines, it's just like some agony aunt ... makes me a bit wary of it. Oh there you go. GP Penny. Penny. Doctor Penny. Okay, anyway, still highly sceptical. (Ally, Interview Participant)

This may be contrasted with Ebony's response to the article, who at first questioned the information but upon noting the details as provided by a medical professional then accepted the veracity of provided guidance:

Ebony: Whether or not the first article is quite correct, I'm not one hundred percent. Oh, I suppose it would be. I don't know. Do you know if it's written by a doctor?

Interviewer: Yes, it is.

Ebony: Oh okay. Well then great ... yeah, no, it's good.

The remaining four participants, who noted *Cosmopolitan's* usage of medical information, identified the potential for medical opinion to be used to condone fashioning practices; the inclusion of professional medical opinion as positive; the inclusion of such as evidence that women may not feel comfortable in seeking medical advice in person; and the medical view of fashioning practices as differential from common perceptions of the practices as 'innocuous' (Rory, Interview Participant). As indicated by some participants, the capacity for the medical profession to provide perceived legitimacy and further establish genital fashioning practices as unproblematic and normal, was outlined by Monica:

Instead of saying no you probably shouldn't engage in these types of practice because it's really harmful, they're kind of perpetuating it and like, they've used the authority of the gynaecologist saying it's designed by them so here's what you can use after you wax. (Monica, Interview Participant)

However, the medical industry was also cast as impartial and as constituting a source of legitimate information in relation to female genital appearance. Dianne expressed that

women may feel the need to seek medical assistance due to genital concerns as a result of the mainstream media or pornography:

The media and porn and everything has sort of taught women and everyone that, your vagina is one colour, and that is like pink, so, people who don't have an all pink vagina freak out thinking; some people have probably gone to the doctor about it. (Diane, Interview Participant)

In this way, the medical industry may be interpreted to provide a means by which women may gain information viewed as objective and separate from cultural and social conceptualisations of the 'normal' genital aesthetic. Diane's statement is also suggestive of the pathologisation of genitalia, wherein the narrow ideal for female genitalia casts healthy, diverse genitalia as abnormal (Braun 2010 pp. 1401–1402). Discussion within focus groups and interviews indicate a perception of the medical industry as having the capacity to provide information differential to that within the mainstream media. However, it was also apparent that participants perceived the medical industry as currently lacking in options and diversity of representational portrayals of female genitalia. Unacknowledged was the problematic, circular nature of the medical profession's interaction with cultural norms, resulting in the reinforcement of social constructions of idealised genitalia which may subsequently receive medical legitimacy (Braun 2010 p. 1402). As contended by Andrikopoulous et al. (2013 p. 650), the lack of diverse genital representation within medical literature 'could contribute to insufficient professional competencies and confidence in examining women and girls who are increasingly presenting to doctors with genital appearance concerns'.

Overall, my data suggests that the medical industry is not currently perceived as a site for comparison in relation to genital aesthetics. The relative insufficiency of genital depictions within medical texts being one possible explanation for the lack of participant discussion in

relation to the medical portrayal of genitalia. However, while occasionally perceived as failing to provide sufficient information, the medical profession was generally regarded by participants as impartial and objective in relation to aesthetic ideals, which were seen not as reinforced within the medical profession, but as created and perpetuated within the mainstream media and pornography. In this way, the medical profession was generally situated by participants as one possible means of remedying perceptions of misinformation in relation to aesthetic genital ideals.

The Potential for Positive Comparisons

*I think comparison is a really big thing, 'cause you don't see a wide variety of
vagina's*
(Patty, Focus Group Participant)

Participants problematised dominant media representations of genitalia and considered increased exposure to alternative depictions of genitalia to balance and alter understandings of normative genital appearance. Recent findings from Sharp and Tiggemann (2016 p.75) demonstrate the potential of community initiatives to combat the current dearth of information pertaining to normal unmodified genitalia. Examining the effectiveness of two online resources, a video explaining the practice of digitally altered genital representations and a website containing images of diverse genital appearance, Sharp and Tiggemann (p. 75) determined the resources to contribute to 'a small decrease in women's level of dissatisfaction' of their genital appearance. Whilst the video resource was found to have significantly more potential in educating the research participants about the practice of digital alteration and increase perceptions of normality, the photographic array was considered to have only a slight, statistically insignificant, increase in perceptions of genital normality². The potential for alternative images of bodily representation to impact upon

² The photographic array of diverse female genitalia, as drawn upon by Sharp and Tiggemann (2016), was obtained from a section of the Labia Library website, which is an initiative by Women's Health Victoria. In my

individuals' self-perception may be understood in the context of broader studies of body (dis)satisfaction. Media literacy interventions prevent 'internalisation and social comparison processes' associated with lowered body satisfaction resultant from exposure to idealised aesthetic standards represented within the media (Yamamiya Cash, Melnyk, Posavac & Posavac 2005 p. 75). Research on the effects of media images has further found that women exposed to 'heavy' models experienced minimised 'body image disturbance' in comparison to women who had been exposed to images of 'thin' models (Posavac & Posavac 2001 p. 325).

In contrast to Sharp and Tiggemann's contention that the depiction of genital diversity in a photographic format may not sufficiently 'impart the important message of genital appearance diversity' (2016 p. 76), participants in my research indicated that exposure to alternative genital representations had positive effects in increasing genital satisfaction and awareness of diversity. For example, Andy in considering her viewing of an artistic project comprised of a variety of genital plaster casts, stated:

So there's this sculpture and it's a series of casts of dozens or maybe even hundreds of women's vaginas and they are all shapes and sizes. I mean none of them are sort of, I don't find them very attractive, so I guess that made me think mine is perfectly fine just as it is and so I wouldn't go down the path of having anything, any surgery in that area. (Andy, Focus Group Participant)

Visual comparison was clearly mentioned as a significant factor in understandings and perceptions of female genitalia within a majority of focus group sessions with the potential for positive self-comparison to genital depictions noted within most of these discussions. On

capacity at WHV, I have conducted analysis on a significant number of survey responses to the library. These results have not yet been published, but have been presented at The World Congress on Public Health 2017. The results from my analysis contradict the findings from Sharp and Tiggemann, and lend weight to the notion that exposure to photographic depiction of genital diversity has positive impact on women's perception of normality.

one occasion it was considered that contemporary images to which women may compare themselves are unrealistic and it was, therefore, regarded as necessary to have alternative measures for consumption and comparison. Although not consistently outlined by participants, specified sites of positive comparison were noted as consisting of: vulval art projects—an exhibition at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania was specifically noted on a couple of these occasions; grassroots awareness and educational projects conducted via blogs and Facebook—with one participant acknowledging the rationale and need for the campaigns but detailing perceived deficiencies within them; exposure and display of peers and family; and attendance at nudist camps. Evidencing the participant discussion of such sites are the following quotes from focus groups:

I've got a friend who put something on Facebook which is all like ... she put up all these pictures of different vaginas, and like just awareness that they are all different and that they are all normal ... I think that's good for people to be aware of cause, yeah, if you're just doing, seeing movies and watching porn there's not real scope. (Summer, Focus Group Participant)

It wasn't until like maybe schoolies, you know, when you're 18 and you're all wasted, that I think my friends started comparison and were talking about it, and to be honest I'm pretty certain that people showed each other their, there was a bit of display going on, but then I started to understand, like it was, my friend Spencer's was like my friend's Mona's, and mine was more like Maya's. It was kind of like, you know, they are all different. (Aria, Focus Group Participant)

The quote from Aria reveals the potential for young women to partake in genital self-comparison with their peer group to establish notions of normality. In previous research, young women's general engagement with social comparison amongst peers was found to result in increased body dissatisfaction (Romo, Mireles-Rios & Hurtado. 2015 p. 5). In my research, two instances of discussion within separate focus groups specified participant exposure to a peer's genitalia. On both occasions, participants reported increased feelings of

normality and satisfaction as a result of viewing their friends' genital regions. One participant stated:

Looking at myself in the mirror doesn't upset me because I know my friends look the same, or look a little bit different, or you know, none of us are perfect.
(Marissa, Focus Group Participant)

Through participant discussion, it was demonstrated that comparison to diverse genitalia enabled participants to resist pressures to undertake modification, particularly with regard to practices of FGCS. I suggest that given the ordinarily idealised nature of genital representations, viewing realistic genitalia as a result of peer comparison aids in conceptualisations of normal, healthy genital diversity. Also within focus group discussion, there was debate regarding the merits of viewing siblings and mothers' nude; it was suggested that family nudity normalises the body, particularly during development, given the ordinarily 'taboo' nature of genital representations.

Whilst current literature keenly identifies the increased proliferation of images for comparison within contemporary society (Schick et al. 2010 p. 396), predominantly positioning such images as contributing to negative perceptions of 'natural' female genitalia (Schick et al. 2011 p. 79), the potential for explicit images of unedited female genitalia to positively counteract the saturation of modified representations is, largely, yet to be considered. It is the participant discussion, which highlighted the existence of visual depictions of female genitalia within the public sphere and extended narrative, asserting that exposure to genital representations is unavoidable and, therefore, it would be beneficial to increase the level of such exposure to greater proportions:

I think sometimes at the end of the day, because we're exposed to so much, we should probably try to expose ourselves to more ... I think the more you're exposed to it in the end, because you can never be exposed to nothing, it's going

to help because you're going to collect more opinions from each side. (Marisa, Focus Group Participant)

This was further echoed within another focus group:

If you stay in the society, the things that people or the media exposes, if you just stay there and don't look for different things, we're going to get crazy. We're going to be like everybody, like ashamed and sad, and like I have to change, I have to get surgery ... so we have to try to surround ourselves with positive things to try to change the way we see our bodies. (Phoebe, Focus Group Participant)

Phoebe's comment further demonstrates the way in which participants perceived comparison to be utilised as a means of education and resistance to genital fashioning practices. However, discussion of comparison, particularly within a positive context, was not considered in individual interviews as within the focus groups. Interviewee discussion of comparison was specifically framed as problematic on a few occasions, given the measures and media to which individuals may currently be exposed. Nevertheless, some interviewees stated the need for increased awareness and discussion of genital diversity; one of the participants remarked, in response to reading an extract from *Cosmopolitan* Australia, that it was positive for *Cosmopolitan* to refer readers to a website displaying unedited, diverse images of genitalia (The Labia Library).

I argue that if exposure to modified images of genitalia may affect the way in which women perceive the normality of genital standards, the inverse may also be possible. However, to date, literature is limited to Sharp and Tiggemann's research, as previously noted. Participant discussion provides insight into the way in which young women consider a possible means of counteracting the proliferation of idealised standards of genitalia, with the display of diverse genitalia regarded as positive in the education of 'normal' female genital appearance.

Conclusion

Critical investigation of the comparative capacity of genital representations in the public sphere has demonstrated the significance of visual mediums in the trend toward genital fashioning. The comparative nature of genital representations is of importance to the production of a body in accordance with social standards of presentation and display. Whilst female genitalia is commonly concealed, it is paradoxically frequently linguistically and visually displayed within the public sphere. In general, the portrayal of idealised genitalia within the public sphere was perceived to be a minimised, hairless form. The increased presence of genitalia within the public sphere was enabled through advertising, fashion magazines and pornography. This idealised norm was considered as emergent from pornographic standards, which evidenced the ubiquity of pornography. In some ways, genital modification was discussed as an expression of new femininity, as depicted in mainstreamed representations of genitalia. The standard with which women may engage in self-comparison was often problematised; however, sites depicting diverse genital representations were positively considered to aid in awareness of genital normality. Through exposure to genital diversity, some women experienced an enhanced capacity to resist pressures to engage in genital modification. Awareness of natural diversity helped women to withstand internalisation of broader social norms, and consider their own genital appearance more positively.

Chapter Six

Social Pressure and Contextualised Choice

You don't actually have to do it, you just feel like you have to
(Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

In this chapter, I address the way in which participants framed choice, as contextualised by both direct and indirect social and cultural forces. In the preceding chapters, I established the normative nature of idealised genital appearance and associated practices. This chapter furthers the discussion, and considers the ways in which women are encouraged to pursue the current genital ideal.

I begin by discussing the broad social expectations associated with genital appearance. Participants discussed social norms as an indirect, intangible form of pressure. Following this, I consider the key groups of people who directly influence women's participation with genital fashioning practices. This includes sexual partners, peer groups and family members. I argue that male sexual partners form the most significant source of pressure on women's capacity for agency, particularly with regard to decisions of genital depilation. Established in this chapter is the capacity for pornography to form an indirect influence, via male sexual partners, on young women's involvement in genital fashioning practices. Finally, I discuss the way in which women conceptualise their agency, given this social context. Returning to Gill's (2007a) concept of contextualised choice, I contend that the participants are keenly aware of the social limitations framing women's decisions for modification.

Throughout this chapter, I draw upon Bartky's understanding of disciplinary power, which is 'everywhere and ... nowhere' (1997 p. 103). The choice to undertake genital modification is

impacted upon and contextualised by a number of overlapping, powerful, social influences.

As described within an interview:

I think it's just like, it's definitely not one thing, it's just all encompassing really.
But yeah, there's some subtle and also not so subtle ways of influencing our ideas
about what genitalia is supposed to look like. (Monica, Interview Participant)

The following analysis elucidates and critically discusses these 'all encompassing' and varied social influences.

Social norms

According to many participants, idealised standards for female genital appearance create widespread expectations to which women subsequently feel compelled to adhere. In this way, the existence of social norms pertaining to genital presentation and appearance was considered a significant source of pressure and influence, which encourages women's participation with genital fashioning. It is important to discuss social norms within this context of social pressure. The participants' discussion revealed not only that social norms exist, as considered within previous chapters, but that these social norms are distinctly important in influencing and pressuring women's decisions to undertake genital fashioning. Therefore, the following discussion does not seek to identify what currently constitutes genital appearance norms, as this has already been addressed, but rather, I will consider the way that the existence of social norms forms a source of pressure.

Traditionally, compliance with modes of femininity has been identified as enforced through a combination of social factors. Returning to Bartky, the enforcers of the disciplinary regime of beauty are 'everyone and yet no one in particular' (1997 p. 103). The social construction, and continued reproduction, of feminine standards presents one further site of influence that poses restrictions on women's options for embodiment. The significance of beauty

norms is documented in Toerien and Wilkinson's (2004) analysis of depilatory practices. According to Toerien and Wilkinson (p. 89), 'social constructions have concrete effects on our lives, opening up (and closing down) possibilities for the types of practices that are conceivable and appropriate in our society'.

As identified in the proceeding chapters, normative standards have been prescribed to female genitalia. Indeed, it is arguable that unattainable standards of femininity have not merely been extended to the female genital region, but are, according to Dodge (2014 p. 138), 'exemplified by cosmetic vaginal surgeries that are undergone due to cultural pressures to achieve what is perceived as "normal"'. A significant number of participants understood idealised hairless and minimised genital standards to create pressure for female engagement with genital modification. This is demonstrated by Rory's comment:

I think there's an idea of a standard now. There's sort an idea that there's a way that you're supposed to be and practices that you're supposed to do. I think there's a sense of pressure that would come off that. (Rory, Interview Participant)

The significance of social norms as forming a source of pressure was also described by Ebony:

There's a social pressure to be as beautiful down there as possible. (Ebony, Focus Group Participant)

As suggested by Attwood, Bale and Barker (2013 p. 47), women's apparent motivations for undertaking FGCS procedures as associated with femininity and attractiveness is indicative of the extension of 'cultural norms about gender and beauty'. According to Cox (2016), contemporary cultural representations of idealised female genitalia have shaped beauty ideals and normalised 'a culture of genital modification'. This was reflected within a few of

the participants' discussion of pressures associated with the increased normalisation of genital fashioning. Olivia stated:

More attention is being drawn to that area so I guess more women would sort of feel under pressure to have a perfect sort of vagina. (Olivia, Focus Group Participant)

Previous literature has considered the relationship between constructed feminine norms and hairlessness, emphasising the significance of the norm in understandings of feminine identity (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 895; Toerien et al. 2005 p. 405; Labre 2002 p. 128). Some participants further considered the potential for engagement with genital norms to impact on identity:

Like the main reason people do it is because, like, of societal pressures and that one's self-esteem is contingent on conforming to those societal expectations as well. (Monica, Interview Participant)

However, it is critical to note that the idealised genital norms considered by participants result in some specific practices of genital modification being more or less mandated than others. Previously considered in Chapter Five, those practices that work to produce a nonnormative genital appearance were considered to imbue the individual with greater capacity for agency. In contrast, practices such as FGCS or genital depilation, were discussed by participants as producing norms of idealised genital appearance. For this reason, the discussion of influences and pressures associated with genital appearance pertained to perceived normative practices of genital fashioning. For instance, there was no perception of women encountering pressure to have a tattooed or pierced genital region. Instead, participants identified social pressure to conform with idealised standards primarily through hair removal.

Sexual Partners and Genital Fashioning

Sexual partners were discussed by participants as the most direct and significant form of influence on women's decisions to engage with practices of genital fashioning. There was a general consensus throughout discussions that sexual partners are a key motivating factor in women's determination to undertake genital modification. Participants identified two ways in which sexual partners may impact upon women's partaking in genital modification: directly, through partners' explicitly expressed demands for genital presentation; and indirectly, through the perception of partner expectation about genital appearance.

The potential for sexual partners to have a role in women's motivations for engaging with the practices of genital fashioning has been previously considered within academic literature. However, noted within Butler, Smith, Collazo, Caltabiano and Herbernick's (2015) investigation of pubic depilation, 'the extent to which individuals partake in self-care practices because of sexual partner preferences is not well understood'. Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 895) also identified the current lack of information in relation to the influence of sexual partners, and recommended that future research investigate whether women feel pressured by sexual partners to engage in pubic depilation. As such, the following discussion contributes to understandings of the way in which young women experience partner influence and pressure with respect to genital presentation. The analysis commences with an outline of how participants considered partners a direct influence on women's engagement with genital fashioning, particularly with regard to pubic depilation. Following this, the impact of perceived partner expectations for genital appearance is addressed. Finally, an explanatory note is provided which details the participants' perception of pressure to emanate from specifically male, rather than female, sexual partners.

Partner Preferences

Participants identified sexual partners as a direct source of influence and pressure for undertaking of genital fashioning practices. For instance, in speaking of why women chose to engage with genital fashioning, an interviewee explained:

Women are only really doing it a lot of the time because of their sexual partner's influence on them. (Kaylee, Interview Participant)

The significance of sexual partners was also identified within focus group discussion:

Interviewer: So why do you think some women might want to alter their genitalia?

Iris: To make it more appealing ...

Carol: Yeah ...

Iris: For their boyfriends.

Carol: Or their husbands too.

Iris: Sure, husbands, whatever. Partners.

The potential influence of sexual partners has been previously indicated by Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008 p. 895) finding that the presence of a sexual partner was associated with the frequency and amount of pubic hair removal. DeMaria and Berenson (2013 p. 230) also found the cessation of pubic depilation occurred when not sexually active. Moreover, the participant discussion provides evidence that young women encounter direct requests for genital modification, depilation in particular, from sexual partners. Within a focus group discussion of pubic depilation, Jackie detailed:

I've definitely felt pressured before. Especially when I was in high school. Like I was dating a guy in high school, I definitely felt pressured to do it. (Jackie, Focus Group Participant)

As a means to illustrate overt partner pressure, a small number of participants outlined their experience of receiving specific requests from sexual partners for their engagement with

genital modification. In every instance, requests detailed pertained to pubic depilation. An interviewee described her early experience with pressure from a partner, stating:

I remember when I dated my boyfriend at 14, he preferred it if I'd shaved.
(Dianne, Interview Participant)

A similar experience was outlined within another focus group:

I've heard their husbands even ask them to get labiaplasty. Even my ex-boyfriend asked me to shave ... I was pressured into it. (Iris, Focus Group Participant)

Within previous research, men have also been described as the creators of genital appearance ideals (Braun & Kitzinger 2001 p. 268). Dines (2010 p. 99) has also outlined young women's experience of having sexual partners express a desire for a depilated pubic region. According to Dines (2010 p. 99), in an attempt to demand a particular aesthetic from women, sexual partners had threatened to withhold sexual intercourse if a girlfriend failed to engage with pubic depilation. King's research further documented many instances in which 'partners' preferences and desires influenced the women's decisions to alter their genitalia' (2015 p. 132). Young women's engagement with genital fashioning as a means to sexually appeal to one's partner was further noted by Hammon (2014). A few of the participants within Hammon's US study, whilst having previously only engaged with pubic depilation, stated they would consider other options of vajazzling for the benefit of an intimate sexual partner (2014 p. 22). McDougall (2013 p. 777) has further asserted that women frequently seek labiaplasty 'in order to appear attractive to (hetero)sexual partners'. Whilst it has been reported that surgeons performing plastic surgery have attempted to screen for women experiencing undue influence from sexual partners (McDougall 2013 p. 782), recent research has established a positive correlation between consideration of labiaplasty and frequency of negative comments about genital appearance from sexual

partners (Sharp et al. 2015 p. 190). Indeed, research has found a high percentage of women report negative feedback about their genital appearance and presentation as a result of engagement (or lack thereof) with genital fashioning (Hammons 2014 p. 23).

A few participants discussed instances in which women had, as a consequence of genital appearance, encountered a negative reaction from a sexual partner. Participants generally described such occurrences as having been encountered by their friends or peers. In one of these instances, the repercussion extended to the public shaming of a women who had failed to engage in 'appropriate' depilation. Nelle described:

One of my friends, she slept with somebody and then he went and told a lot of people that she was too hairy for him. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

An interviewee outlined another experience of one of her friends:

A friend of mine, she had a partner who told her that having any hair down there was absolutely disgusting and now she Brazilian waxes 'cause she just, you know, he was a dick anyways but now she can't stand the thought that someone else might think that. (Ebony, Interview Participant).

These accounts of negative partner reactions highlight the significance of sexual partners in women's engagement with genital fashioning. Bartky describes failure to comply with idealised standards of bodily presentation as resulting in sanctions, including the 'refusal of male patronage' (1997 p. 104). Indeed, Bartky explains that for 'the heterosexual woman, this may mean the loss of a badly needed intimacy' (p. 104). The fear of rejection as a result of natural genital appearance and/or inadequate engagement with genital fashioning was detailed by Nelle:

In my experience and also in the experiences of my friends, even before they've engaged in any kind of sexual activity with men, they've been really anxious about what these partners will think of them. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

Indeed, female trepidation of male judgment is warranted given the documented rate at which male commentary on female genital appearance occurs. A recent UK study revealed nearly 40 per cent of women seeking labiaplasty had encountered negative comments, primarily from sexual partners, about their labial appearance (Veale, Eshkevari, Ellison, Costa, Robinson, Kavouni & Cardozo 2013 pp. 59–60). Research on Australian male perceptions of female genitalia revealed that almost half the participants had previously negatively spoken or thought about female genitalia (Horrocks, Iyer, Askern, Becuzzi, Vangaveti & Rane 2016 p. 309). The authors of the study considered that such perspectives are likely communicated to women. For instance, Horrocks et al. (2016) stated, ‘it seems unreasonable to expect that these sorts of discussions are not reflective of discourse in the wider population or that such perceptions do not impact on women’ (2016 p. 309). Advertising messages for FGCS also reproduce narratives highlighting the significance of sexual partners’ concerns (Liao et al. 2012 p. 3). The participant discussion provides evidence that male perspectives on female genital presentation are indeed disseminated to women. Exemplifying this, participants described conversations in which male friends outlined their preferences for female genital appearance:

I’ve known people, like guys, who actually buy shaving equipment for their partners. (Kaylee, Interview Participant)

I did actually have a conversation recently about this, and it was with a couple of my male friends. And they were talking about, and I just happened to eavesdrop, and they were saying what to do if a girl doesn’t, the words they were using, were take care of down there. As in shave. (Jackie, Focus Group Participant)

Participant description of overt male commentary with regard to female genital appearance and presentation served to further establish the direct influence of male sexual partners. The pressure exerted by sexual partners extended to specific requests for genital

modification. Women also risked negative repercussions if they failed to present a genital region in accordance with the desires of their sexual partner. The negative commentary about women's genital appearance effectively 'othered' women who failed to adhere to the genital ideal. For risk of casting themselves as 'othered', it is possible that participants only discussed the reception of negative feedback in relation to the experience of people known to them. The us and them paradigm generated by social ideals that was discernable in participant conversation is considered further in this chapter with respect to agency and choice.

Perceived Expectations

Participants also considered the way in which women's engagement with genital fashioning may be motivated by conceptions of a male sexual partner's expectations about a particular type of genital appearance. However, as a component of this, the participants also discussed the *perception*, rather than direct expression, of sexual partner expectations as impacting upon women's decisions to engage with genital fashioning. It was often described that sexual partners may expect a genital appearance in accordance with idealised genital standards, but some participants acknowledged the mere perception of sexual partner's expectations may motivate female participation in practices of genital fashioning. Illustrating this is an interview participant's comment:

I guess that some women would do it because that's what they want themselves but I think there's a huge, huge pressure and expectation from partners that women's bodies, vaginas, are going to be presented in a particular way. Or even if it's not coming from the partner, even if it's not actually coming from the men I think that's the perception that women have, whether or not that's the case, I don't know. (Rory, Interview Participant)

The nature of influence described by Rory as emanating from an unclear source is further reflective of Bartky's description of disciplinary power as 'everywhere and ... nowhere' (1997 p. 103). According to Bartky (p. 103), the dispersion of disciplinary power results in the perception that acts of femininity are freely and naturally undertaken—a concept which will be later discussed within the discussion of agency.

Conceptualisations of preferred genital appearance may be commonly drawn from popular media discussion, which typically present genital ideals as lacking in variation (Butler et al. 2015). However, emerging literature has found partner preferences for genital pubic hair to have significantly more variation than commonly reported. According to recent research, 'there is no single style of pubic hair that either sex prefers on an opposite-sex sexual partner' (Butler et al. 2015). Mullinax, Herbernack, Schick, Sanders and Reece (2015) also determined that, in general, male sexual partners prefer diversity and variety with regard to genital appearance. However, the literature does not present unified findings with regard to male preferences for genital appearance. A recent Australian study found male sexual partners to have specific preferences for pubic hair appearance, complete hairlessness or trimming being the preferred standard (Horrocks, Iyer, Askern, Becuzzi, Vangaveti & Rane 2015). This preference was also found within the study from Mullinax et al. (2015). Further to this, within the study from Mullinax et al. (2015), male sexual partners clearly identified genital appearance 'dislikes'. When discussing aesthetics of female genitalia, men usually discussed their preferences with regards to size, utilising negative words such as "big", "flappy/flabby", "protruding" or "too long" (Mullinax et al. 2015 p. 428). Almost half the male participants within Horrocks et al.'s (2015) study also preferred a genital appearance in accordance with idealised standards of minimal labia. Although there are disparate findings

within the literature, the participants strongly considered there to be a common belief that male sexual partners have genital expectations.

Participants demonstrated a perception of partners as having expectations via their recounting of instances in which they had engaged with genital modification prior to sexual activity:

Because Steve is my only sexual partner, and before we got married, 'cause I waited for marriage, I went and got waxed. (Patty, Focus Group Participant)

When I first got together with my boyfriend, and we were each other's only sexual partner and we were the first people we were together with and stuff, and even when I first got together with him I went and got my vagina waxed completely. (Betty, Focus Group Participant)

The participant framing of depilation prior to sexual activity demonstrates that the practice is indeed motivated for reasons pertaining to perception of partner preferences, particularly for new sexual relationships. Further to this, the participant consideration of, and subsequent compliance with, perceived partner expectations demonstrates the importance of a sexual partner's preferences for genital presentation.

Within a US study, engagement with fashioning practices prior to sexual activity was also found. According to Herbenick et al. (2012 p. 682), on days that women had depilated their pubic region, women were more likely to report sexual interest and engage in sexual activity with a casual partner. Herbenick et al. speculated that pubic depilation was more strongly associated with initial sexual presentation within new relationships given that 'women and men are both likely motivated to present themselves in an attractive light to sexual partners—perhaps particularly newer sexual partners' (2012 p. 683). The potential for women to engage with genital modification practices as motivated by the perception of a

sexual partner's expectations may be further understood with respect to Bartky's (1997 p. 101) identification of the 'panoptical male connoisseur'. According to Bartky, this panoptical male 'resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment' (1997 p. 101). Perhaps this is particularly apt for an area of the body that is typically hidden except to sexual partners.

Preferences of Male Sexual Partners

Overall, throughout participant consideration of sexual partners, it was *male* sexual partners who were identified and discussed. None of the participants directly discussed female sexual partners as exerting pressure with regard to practices of genital fashioning.

Whilst inquiry was not made into participants' sexual orientation, a few participants openly identified as lesbian. These participants, on occasion, noted the presence of idealised genital standards within same sex relationships. In a focus group, Nelle described normative genital ideals as being significant to women who are same sex attracted:

I have a little sister, she's 14, and she's same sex attracted like I am. And she has a girlfriend at the moment, and anyway, point is, she recently told me that she started shaving her pubic area ... It is sad, because even in a same sex attracted young person who is a female, she's still subject to that kind of pressure. You'd think to some extent that she wouldn't be as much because she's already not participating as much in the heteronormative ideas of gender roles and stuff like that, but that the same time she's still very susceptible to it. (Nelle, Focus Group Participant)

Indeed, the presence of idealised genital standards within same sex relationships was generally attributed to culturally pervasive heteronormative standards. Within a focus group, Monica explained her understanding of why women engage with practices of genital fashioning:

As you were saying, catering to the male gaze. But that does definitely seep into lesbian relationships still. But that doesn't necessarily say that that's something other than a patriarchal force. That just indicates how penetrative patriarchal force is. Pun intended. (Monica, Focus Group Participant)

The participants presented a narrative that positioned men as responsible for emergence of genital ideals, which are considered to subsequently permeate *all* sexual relationships.

Whilst this does not preclude female partners exerting pressure or influence with regard to genital appearance, this was not discussed by the cohort of women that I interviewed. As a result, the preceding analysis represents the views as expressed by participants and frames the discussion of sexual partners within the context of *male* sexual partners.

Pornography as an Indirect Pressure

Throughout interview and focus group sessions, the participants discussed the way in which pornography forms an indirect source of pressure on women's participation with genital fashioning. As detailed in Chapter Six, participants discussed pornography as key in depicting and perpetuating idealised standards of female genitalia. However, participant consideration of the role of pornography in influencing women's engagement with genital fashioning was nuanced. Participants further understood pornography to have an indirect influence via male sexual partners. Perceived partner preferences for genital appearance were described by participants as emanating from pornography. Participants outlined that sexual partners exposed to pornography are likely to 'expect' correlating ideals from women. In this way, women feel subsequently pressured to conform to the norms depicted in pornography.

Within contemporary literature, women's decisions to engage with practices of genital fashioning have been considered as directly influenced by the aesthetic norms depicted within pornography. Indeed, Nurka and Jones (2015 p. 63) highlight the considerable

academic discussion that attributes demand for FGCS to pornographic imagery. In *The Sexualisation Report*, Attwood, Bale and Barker also critically note the proliferating claim that ‘women are seeking to have genital surgery such as labiaplasty because of the influence of pornography’ (2013 p. 47). Moreover, the potential for pornography to have an indirect influence on women correlates with a previous supposition from Schick et al. (2011 p. 80). In their study of genital presentation within *Playboy* magazine, Schick et al. (2011) suggested that the genital ideals portrayed within the magazine may be imparted to women via the male readers.

The way in which participants described the influence of pornography as propagated by sexual partners was detailed in the following comments:

My boyfriend watches porn ... like sometimes I feel like there's this sort of pressure to remove pubic hair and whatever because that's what he's seen. (Janice, Focus Group Participant)

Porn definitely has an influence on how women view their genital areas cause in porn it's always like ... altered vaginas, and it's all completely fake really ... so I definitely think that people, if their partners, or like men, are watching porn, they expect women to look like this and then women want to look like that to make the men happy, 'cause that's what they've seen in porn. So I definitely think porn is like a big thing there. (Kaylee, Interview Participant)

On a number of occasions, participants did directly identify pornography in and of itself as significant component in women's decisions to engage in genital fashioning. However, on each of these occasions the participant subsequently elaborated and discussed the role of pornography in relation to the impact of pornography on sexual partners. For example:

Porn would be a massive thing as well. I think, men from watching it, would maybe have a certain expectation of what their partners, what they might want in their partners. I think women would pick up on that as well. (Rory, Interview Participant)

So porn I think is one thing that has a massive influence on how women perceive themselves. For example, porn is probably something that, this is probably an assumption, that guys use more than girls, I don't know if that's actually true, but I think that they get this idea, looking at those images ... that this is what it should look like for everyone. (Jackie, Focus Group Participant)

The consideration of partners as influenced by the aesthetic standards depicted in pornography has been previously identified within literature. Jeffreys' (2005 p. 80) explained female engagement with practices of genital modification as motivated by 'the desire to please the kind of male partners who find the look of pornography ... sexually exciting'. Cox (2016) also considered the capacity of pornography to change male viewer's expectations for genital appearance. Whilst female viewership of pornographic material is growing, overall female consumption of pornography is not yet deemed significant and males remain the primary consumers of pornography (Attwood 2005 pp. 71–72; Dines 2005 p. 100). As detailed in Chapter Five, pornography forms the primary site of genital representation given the ordinarily publically concealed nature of female genitalia. As a result, some participants expressed an understanding that a sexual partner's exposure to pornographic material would shape expectations and perceptions of bodily normality. Jeffreys (2005 p. 80) has previously asserted that pornographic viewership has resulted in the male perception of idealised genitalia as natural. According to Jeffreys, this conditioning results in subsequent consideration of unaltered, natural female genitalia as 'distasteful or less than exciting'

(2005 p. 79). Indeed, participants occasionally described the expectations formed from pornographic viewing as reasonable.

It makes me annoyed but it's also completely understandable that men and even boys who have grown up like, 'cause they don't really teach much sex ed in school so kids who basically only learn from the internet or from porn might not necessarily have understanding of the difference in appearance, so porn is like a natural and normal thing and they grow up expecting everyone to look like that. (Diane, Interview Participant)

And of course the men may also justifiably say, we've never seen a vagina that looks this way because when we're watching porn or when we're watching TV or whatever it is, this is what we're shown, so this is what we're familiar with, and then we see something and react badly because that's not the reality that we've been sort of exposed to. (Sandy, FPG)

The participants positioned men's internalisation of pornified standards as 'justifiable' given the generally limited options for viewing realistic representations of female genitalia—an ordinarily concealed body site. This is especially pertinent for younger generations who, according to Dines, are likely to view pornographic representations of female genitalia prior to sexual engagement. Dines (2010 p. xi) asserts that boys first view pornography, on average, at eleven years old. However, this narrative also removes men from the responsibility to be informed, and condones male expectations for idealised genital appearance.

Overall, the way in which participants described pornography cast the medium not as a motivational factor associated with genital fashioning, but as an informant of standards of genital appearance. A circular nature of pressure and influence can be identified with respect to pornography and male sexual partners. Pornography was considered as significant in forming male sexual partner's expectations of female genital appearance. Women

subsequently experienced feelings of pressure in meeting the expectations of sexual partners as dictated by pornography. In this way, pornography was detailed as an indirect influence on women's participation in genital fashioning practices.

The Influence of Peers and Family

Throughout interview and focus group sessions, an individual's peer group and family members were regularly discussed as another direct form of influence on women's decisions to engage with genital fashioning practices. Siblings made specific comments with regard to genital appearance and presentation. In some instances, siblings were also discussed as significant in initial genital fashioning practices. Frequently, participants mentioned how they referred to family to gauge and identify the normality of genital fashioning. Participant discussion revealed the way in which peers and family may act as informants of 'normal' fashioning practices, and enforcers of genital ideals.

Ordinarily, women are educated as to acceptable modes of femininity through socialisation processes. According to Black and Sharama (2001 p. 110), women's understandings of femininity, and conceptualisation of their own feminine identity, is collectively constructed through not only media knowledge, but through family, peers and partners. Whilst motivational factors for body hair removal have been previously found to relate to social norms and social acceptability (Kwan & Traunter 2009 p. 56), only limited studies have considered the impact of peer groups and group membership on genital modification, such as pubic depilation. Within this context, Veale et al. (2013 p. 60) found that of UK women seeking labiaplasty, 14.2 per cent had received a negative comment about their genitalia from a peer, and 10.7 per cent from their mother. According to O'Dougherty, Schmitz, Heartst, Covelli and Kurzer (2011) studies have demonstrated the role of peer groups and social networks in exercising social control through the reinforcement of social norms via

both positive and negative comments. The following analysis furthers elucidates the way in which peers and family members affect women's understandings of their genitalia, and 'acceptable' genital presentation.

Participants specifically identified an individual's peers and social circle as a significant factor in decisions to engage with genital fashioning. Routinely, friendship circles were perceived by participants to have collective standards for engagement with contemporary appearance norms, and thus engagement with similar practices was encouraged, or mandated, via group membership. For example, within a focus group, Eden stated:

I suppose just social norms and standards in different peer groups. And maybe after discussions with your peers you might feel pressured to conform to a certain norm. (Eden, Focus Group Participant)

Participants frequently discussed their personal practices of genital fashioning in conjunction with that of their peer group. In this way, social groups were demonstrated to form a source of validation for decisions of genital fashioning. Throughout interview and focus group sessions, it also became evident that discussion of genital fashioning practices is common amongst friendship circles. For instance, Lane stated:

With my friends I had this interesting discussion. [Unclear], who went to her gynecologist because she'd been using the razor and had an ingrown hair which had turned into a pimple of some sort. And the gyno pretty much told her, do not shave ... Which led to a huge discussion because we were like uh really? 'Cause somehow we don't see it [not shaving] as an acceptable practice. (Lane, Focus Group Participant)

Collective practices as a result of group membership were, on one occasion, discussed as supporting a participant in her decision *not* to engage with contemporary norms for genital

grooming. Within a focus group, Willow described her dual experiences of receiving pressure and support from peer groups with regard to depilation decisions:

I went to a really low socio economic public school where it was expected, and it was kind of talked about ... and then I came to queer feminist circles and everyone was like what do you want? Leave me alone, it's my body, it's my choice. There was almost a sense of activism around it. (Willow, Focus Group Participant)

In an Australian study, Sharp et al. (2015 p. 190) also documented the significance of peer influence and engagement with genital modification practices. According to Sharp et al. (p. 190) female discussion of genital appearance with friends was positively associated with increased consideration of undergoing labiaplasty. Sharp et al. (p. 190) concluded that 'conversations about genital appearance with friends may direct women's attention to this issue, reinforce its importance, and advocate genital appearance ideals'. This explanation supports the participant's understandings of the way in which peer groups establish collective norms of genital appearance.

Peers were further discussed by participants to educate women about genital ideals, and enforce the ideals through critique. Indeed, a few participants discussed their experience of receiving criticism from peers, particularly in relation to their genital depilation practice. This is exemplified by the following focus group extract:

The day I decided it had to go, a girl had come up to me, I was probably in grade 6 at this point ... I had this girl come up to me and I was sitting on like this long pole thing at the pools, and I hadn't even thought of it at this point, a girl comes up and goes ... oh I just wanted to tell you you've got like, hair, down there, and I'm like, I know. I hadn't even looked at it that way. It was at that moment that I looked at it and went like oh, 'it's not meant to be there'. (Faith, Focus Group Participant)

As highlighted by Jones, Vigfusdottir and Lee (2004 p. 325) criticism from peers is another way by which appearance values and the significance of (un)desirable appearance attributes may be reinforced. It was demonstrated from participant discussion that criticism from peers plays an important role in informing and enforcing norms of genital presentation.

Within focus group and interview sessions, family members—siblings, in particular—were also discussed as important, influential factors in women engagement with genital fashioning. Participants discussed examples of modification practices, as engaged with by family members, as a means by which to establish a social barometer for the normality of such practices. For instance:

Like, my mum and my sisters all, you know, get waxed and stuff like that. I mean, it's not as if they were like, you need to go get waxed, they were more just like, it's just something that they did so it wasn't as if, like if I went to do it and they hadn't already done it, it would have been like uh what are you doing, that's weird. It's just a common thing to do. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

Siblings were discussed as demonstrating acceptable standards for feminine production and also providing direct criticism of unacceptable embodiment. The influence of siblings was stated as particularly significant in some of the participant's initial uptake of genital fashioning practices. Participants stated:

'Cause I wax as well, and I originally did it because I was kind of like, peer pressured into it, but by, I had my younger sisters like I can't believe you don't get it all removed. (Summer, Focus Group Participant)

Why did I start? Probably from an older sibling and like sort of role model doing it, I think, oh I should do it as well. (Olivia, Focus Group Participant)

The influence of family members on women's engagement with genital fashioning has generally yet to be considered in contemporary literature pertaining to genital modification.

However, family influence has previously been identified as significant in broader socialisation processes, particularly with learned beauty practices (Clarke & Griffin 2007 pp. 701–702). According to Guizzo (2012 p. 117) social factors, including family, are central in young girls' education about bodily appearance and beauty. Whilst mothers have previously been considered as a particular influence on young girls (Clarke & Griffin 2007 p. 714), participant discussion reveals the potential for siblings to act as informants and enforcers of genital ideals.

Overall, the participants framed peers and family members as important forces that inform, influence, and pressure, women's decisions to engage with genital fashioning. However, subject to depilation practices within a friendship circle, peers may provide solidarity in decisions to defy normalised trends. Siblings were particularly important in women's initial uptake of genital depilation practices. Given the nature of dispersed and multifaceted social influences and pressures, it is important to consider the participants' understanding of their capacity for choice with regard to genital fashioning.

Contextualised Choice

Participants discussed social limitations and pressures as framing women's capacity for choice with regard to modification decisions. Social sanctions were considered as one way in which women's choices are contextualised. However, participants considered it an individual's responsibility to withstand social pressure—a narrative which is dependent upon neoliberal discourse. Participants distinguished between the individual who failed to withstand social pressures, and capitulated to genital ideals, and the free choice to engage with genital fashioning for self-motivated reasons. In this way, the participants, on occasions, separated their own experiences of genital fashioning from their social environments.

Throughout this thesis, I have employed Gill's explanation of contextualised choice as way by which to negotiate the concepts of choice and agency. According to Gill, agency is exercised within a given structure and women make choices within a cultural context (2007a p. 73). The participant discussion of women's capacity for agency with regard to genital fashioning keenly identified and acknowledged the context in which women make genital fashioning decisions. Genital norms and collective societal pressures and influences, detailed in the preceding section, were described by participants as forming the context for women's choices. The way in which participants discussed women's capacity for contextualised choice is demonstrated by the following comments:

It is a matter of choice, but then you don't make choices in a vacuum. (Janice, Focus Group Participant)

Coming back to the social norms, it can play a role in conditioning and influencing that choice, so it's not necessarily just an objective individual choice, it's informed by what's going on around you and what you perceive to be expected. (Eden, Focus Group Participant)

Dodge argues (2014) that the cultural significance placed on the appearance of female genitalia renders female 'choice' to undergo genital modification problematic. Dodge considers that genital modification 'could be perceived as a form of self-regulation that is influenced by cultural standards and constructed norms of femininity' (p. 140). On numerous occasions, participants critically appraised women's capacity for choice with regard to genital fashioning decisions, given the perceived strength of social norms and influences. In this way, participants demonstrated nuanced insight with regard to the relationship between culture and beauty practices. This is evidenced in the following focus group extracts:

It sometimes, it doesn't feel like much of a choice ... I think sometimes, it's always a choice, but sometimes it can feel a little bit less. (Willow, Focus Group Participant)

One of the issues is trying not to be judgmental of people's free choices but also really challenging how free they can possibly be if they're only given a sort of ideal of this is what, you know, the female is supposed to look like, so they make a free choice to have surgery, but its like, it's not really that free if the society isn't supporting their natural state. (Sandy, Focus Group Participant)

Participants discussed social sanctions as forming a limitation on women's capacity for choice with regard to genital fashioning. Jefferys (2005 p. 174) details, with respect to Bartky's work, the consequences and sanctions faced by women who fail to appropriately engage with cultural beauty practices. According to Jefferys (p. 175), sanctions faced by women include outcasting and a loss of membership in critical social networks. Potential sanctions and the subsequent impact on choice was described by Nelle:

A lot of the time they're pressured into doing it as well, so I don't think there's a lot of free and active choice in that situation, nor would I find, I think that women who undertake it just because they feel pressured to by society, I think that also brings an issue of choice in because these women feel like they have to do it or they're going to be looked down upon and criticised and stuff like that. So I don't think that's choice either. (Nelle, Interview Participant)

The capacity for women to adopt postmodern narratives of choice, whilst simultaneously expressing confusion about the social limitations of choice has also been reflected in other research. New Zealand participants within Braun et al.'s (2013 p. 483) research have employed postmodern interpretations, prioritising individual choice with respect to female pubic depilation, whilst demonstrating conflicted understandings given the context in which these choices are made. Braun et al.'s conclusion highlights the notion of contextualised choice:

It seems that the nuancing of this theme of choice, then, is that pubic hair removal should be up to the individual, but this ideal is in reality regulated by other factors—hence it is choice, within limits. (2013 p. 483)

The overall culmination of the social factors and influences, has led theorists to debate and problematise the concept of both choice and agency, with regard to female decisions to engage with genital grooming (Gill 2007a p. 72).

However, despite the participants' acknowledgement of the cultural context for genital fashioning, participants also considered it an individual's responsibility to withstand societal pressure. The individual was prioritised and held responsible for their submission to external pressures. The individual who capitulated to social pressures was discussed as lacking in personal strength. This framing of individual responsibility is demonstrated in the following comments:

I think its like with anything when people are like oh I have to do this, you don't have to do it, you just feel like you have to. And I think it comes back to a person say like, having a strong sense of self, that if they don't want to do anything they don't have to do anything. (Sookie, Focus Group Participant)

At the moment there's lots of influence from society about that is quote perfect, I think sometimes if you're not strong enough to realise that that's someone else's personal ideal then you might be sucked into that and then it doesn't really become a matter of choice of what you really want and just adapting to pressures. (Summer, Focus Group Participant)

The role of the individual, as considered by participants, is reflective of neoliberal and postfeminist discourse, which casts the individual as fully responsible for their decisions and outcomes, irrespective of the severity of social constraints (Gill 2007a p. 74). Braun (2009 p. 236) has also considered the way in which neoliberal rhetoric has shaped the discussion of choice in decisions of genital alteration. According to Braun, neoliberalism emphasises the

individual capacity for agency in which choices are 'removed from any contextual constraints, structural or otherwise, free from the influence of cultural norms and expectations' (p. 236). This perspective has been employed within surgical arguments for female genital cosmetic surgery. Indeed, the concept of autonomy and free choice underlies the ethical basis for cosmetic surgery (McDougall 2013 p. 781). The employment of choice discourse is critical in the Western differentiation of practices from those which are structurally, and unacceptably, forced upon women (Braun 2009 pp. 236, 244). The neoliberal prioritising of free, decontextualised, choice also renders the individual responsible for failure to adequately produce the body. The 'choice' to engage with practices of genital fashioning is undertaken within a context of late modernity wherein the body becomes a project for which one is held responsible for the (un)successful production (Budgeon 2003 p. 37). Despite the participants' generally reflexive discussion of the cultural and social context encompassing genital fashioning decisions, it appeared discussion of choice reflected and reproduced neoliberal discourses that frequently accompany advertisements for genital fashioning options. It remains possible that such public and widespread discourses of choice had been internalised by the participants.

Doing it for yourself?

Gill (2007a p. 74) details the postfeminist conceptualisation of individuals as imbued with agency, free choice practiced within a market based society. The capacity to choose 'porno chic' represents a mode of empowerment, driven by rhetoric which positions the consumer as actively deciding to 'make herself feel good, feel confident' via engagement with beauty practices (Gill 2007a p. 74). Participants also framed their discussion of genital fashioning choices within this discourse. When considering women's capacity for choice, participants described women as imbued with agency in their decisions to engage with genital fashioning

when it was done for ‘the right reasons’. The ‘right’ reasons for undertaking genital fashioning were described as self-motivated and included a desire to embody sexual confidence.

Employing rhetoric popularly used to promote genital fashioning, participants cited ‘doing it for yourself’ as a means to exercise agency. According to McDougall (2130 p. 782), the choice to engage with genital fashioning is frequently presented through the media and advertising as ‘empowering’. Within consumer culture, choice has been positioned as a means by which engagement with otherwise problematic factors may be recast as empowering. Braun (2009 p. 236) states that ‘choice has been a central mechanism by which consumption, actions or representation otherwise cast as conforming to patriarchal, heterosexist gender relations are reframed as positive and empowered individual choices or even as “pampering”’. Indeed, reflective of the participant discussion, Braun (2009) also found the discourse of ‘doing it for oneself’ as critical to the discussion of choice and FGCS. Practices of genital depilation have been previously promoted as ‘pampering’ and ‘self-indulgence’ (Gill 2007a p. 75). Labre (2002 p. 127) has also highlighted the potential for women to experience pleasure related to a perceived increase in sex appeal as a result of genital fashioning. Furthermore, according to Labre (p. 127), the internalisation of discourses casting the natural female state as distasteful leads women to view their own body with disgust. In other words, relief and pleasure are subsequently generated via engagement with disciplinary practices. In this way, women may regard engagement with genital fashioning as a means to care for oneself.

Demonstrating the way in which participants considered agency as exercised through the choice to engage with genital fashioning for self-oriented reasons, are the following comments:

I suppose the right reason would come from uh, I suppose ... if you wanted to modify your vagina it would come from a feeling of self satisfaction ... that would be the right reason, rather than the wrong reason, would be to satisfy others. Yeah and I think that's probably where it would be right or wrong in my opinion. (Ally, Focus Group Participant)

I think that's okay if you're doing it for yourself or if you feel sexy doing it for somebody else 'cause like you've got agency there, but if it's kind of like you just feel expected to do it then that's the wrong reason. (Kaylee, Interview Participant)

Participants described the 'wrong' reasons for partaking in practices of genital modification as succumbing to pressure from sexual partners. There emerged a clear distinction within participant discussion, wherein the participants separated their own self-oriented engagement with genital fashioning from those individuals that succumb to external pressures. However, understandings of 'doing it for yourself' are complicated by both the undeniable presence of social influences, and lack of physical gains resultant of the typically painful and costly nature of genital fashioning. Whilst women may experience feelings of sexual agency via engagement with genital fashioning, this is the ultimately the result of being considered sexually attractive and is representative of narratives of the aforementioned porno chic empowerment. Indeed, a number of studies have previously found sexual attractiveness as a principal motivating factor in women's pubic hair removal (Tiggman & Hodgson 2008 p. 295; Smolak & Murnen 2011 p. 515).

Also within literature, there has emerged the narrative that distinguishes between the unhealthy capitulation to a partners' desire as a result of bullying, and the 'free' choice to sexually appeal to one's partner. McDougall details the forces underlying decisions to undergo FGCS, stating, 'some women may genuinely wish to please their partners, and themselves, and this influences the choices they make about their bodies, while others may indeed be in abusive relationships' (2013 p. 782). The participant discussion seemingly

reflected this statement, and women who ceded to partner pressure were considered to be in unhealthy relationships. Within a focus group, Janice explained:

Maybe for women that don't have good relationships with their partners ... they might feel pressured. They might mistakenly think that I'm only attractive if I've got a hairless vulva and things like that, and that's where it gets, yeah, they don't really have a choice. It's not informed by what they want but rather what everybody else wants, they're trying to fulfil what everybody else wants. (Janice, Focus Group Participant)

In this way, the participants effectively othered women who internalise the genital ideal, whilst ignoring their own contextualised participation with fashioning practices. This differentiation between their own engagement with genital fashioning and that of the other has previously emerged in other research. An Australian study on body hair removal determined that 'women can recognize the normative pressures on them in general to shave, but are unwilling to accept these as the rationale for their own specific behaviour' (Tiggemann & Hodgson 2008 p. 890). However, considering one's own practice of physical discipline as freely chosen for reasons of bodily comfort conceals the social powers and influences that casts the natural female body as unacceptable (Gill 2007a p. 75). According to Tiggemann and Lewis (2004 p. 386), if women gave clear recognition to their subjugation to normative cultural pressures, the 'problem' of the undisciplined body 'could be located more squarely at the societal level, rather than as a problem with the individual woman's body'. It is perhaps the lack of formal sanctions, as discussed by Barkty, that resulted in the participants distancing themselves from cultural context—a position which is popularly supported by the ideology of contemporary consumer culture.

Participants also considered the way in which decisions to engage, or not engage, with genital fashioning may impact upon individual's capacity to successfully operate in society.

Participants identified this as another important component in discussions of choice and agency. Individual engagement with beauty practices has been previously discussed as a means by which to achieve greater social capital in that conformity to idealised feminine standards is broadly perceived as a means to social power (Walter 2010 p. 4). Pitts (2003 p. 51) has also previously linked the successful reproduction of beauty standards with a perception of upward mobility and personal satisfaction. Juxtaposed with this, ‘appearance-related worries for women include harassment, mistreatment, and discrimination’ (Pitts p. 51). Barkty (1997 p. 105) describes the potential for engagement with beauty practices to benefit the individual whilst disempowering the larger group. This understanding may also be applied to practices of genital fashioning. In an analysis of FGCS, Braun explains ‘thus, whereas surgery might provide “genital liberation” for individual women, it does nothing to improve the context in which women “choose” these procedures’ (2010 p. 1403). This concept was echoed by a participant who conveyed her understanding for women’s engagement with practices as a means to avoid negative repercussion:

Because making the choice to do something to your genitals or to fit in these expectations is, I guess, whilst its harder in a way obviously because it takes time and all this stuff, it’s a lot easier to exist in society whilst making that choice.
(Nelle, Focus Group Participant)

This understanding further draws on the concept of contextualised choice which generally underpinned participant discussion of, at the very least, others’ engagement with genital fashioning. However, as with broader critiques of beauty practices, decisions to engage with genital fashioning result in a contraction: ‘if she fails at beauty conformity, she is powerless and condemned ugly; if she is successful, she is still powerless in a regime that defines her value and worth by her appearance’ (Kwan & Trautner 2009 p. 59). This sentiment was also identified in participant discussion:

You're damned if you do, damned if you don't, if a woman was to say take a stand and [unclear] principles not remove any of her hair, they'd be like oh you know, she's a feminist, she's you know, assertive, she's this she's that, or if she just goes along with social pressure, people would say oh you know she just she's conforming, so its like sort yeah making a personal choice. (Janice, Focus Group Participant)

The nuanced understanding of choice, agency and social context as presented by participants perhaps best reflects Davis's (1995 p. 67) theorising of cosmetic surgery. Also emphasising the cultural constraints on choice (p. 66), Davis (p. 67) called for a complex appreciation of cosmetic surgery, which is both oppressive and liberatory. Engagement with beauty practices, such as genital fashioning, occurs within structural boundaries, and may provide women with an array of pleasures, pains and consequences. One participant perfectly described the complex interplay of factors affecting the choice to engage with genital fashioning:

Here comes the paradox of it, if it makes a person feel better because they like a piercing or jewellery or whatnot, or being waxed, being clean, or wanted to appeal better to their partner, and it helps their self-worth, then I say its okay, fair enough, go for it. But see, the paradox comes because they want to do all this because the media influences them and says I'm better because it's fairer, I feel more sexy because I'm hairless, so it's like a spiral. But hey ultimately, I mean if they can live with themselves, then I would say those are for the right reasons. (Alexis, Interview Participant)

Alexis's comment summarises the nuanced way in which participants sought to explain and conceptualise agency. Overall, participants framed engagement with genital fashioning as allowing for the personal exercise of agency, which is dually complicated and contextualised by the presence of social forces and influences. Neoliberal rhetoric permeated the participants' narratives as it was considered an individual's responsibility to 'live with themselves', bearing the weight of their decision, and subsequent outcome.

Discussion of agency with respect to genital fashioning reveals the participants' awareness of cultural context constraining their options. Whilst this may be pessimistically framed and situated within understandings of problematic constructions of women's coerced compliance to appearance standards, there also exists a more optimistic interpretation. Davis's reading of agency within the context of cultural beauty norms may be applied as a means by which to appreciate the participants' discussion of choice. Following Davis (1995 p. 66), I contend that the participants were knowledgeable actors, who were aware of cultural limitations but made decisions to best operate in accordance with what they considered as their own needs and desires.

Conclusion

This chapter has evaluated the ways in which women's capacity for agency is contextualised by a variety of social influences and contributes to current understandings of the social environment in which women make decisions for, or against, genital modification. I contend that women do exercise agency, with knowledge of their limitations, within a specific cultural context. Male sexual partners were the most directed and significant form of pressure on women's decisions to engage with genital fashioning. The pressure exerted by male sexual partners was discussed to encompass specific requests for genital modification, pubic depilation, in particular. However, women also anticipated perceived expectations and feared rejection as a result of incorrect embodiment of genital ideals. Participants regarded male sexual partner's preferences for genital appearance as emanating from pornography. In this way pornography was described as forming an indirect source of influence on women's engagement with genital fashioning. It was discussed that sexual partners exposed to pornography are likely to 'expect' correlating ideals from women.

More direct pressure also emanated from family members and peer groups. Friendship circles were described to have collective standards for genital fashioning; peers both educated women of genital ideals, and enforce the ideals through critique. Through direct pressure and influence, siblings were discussed as especially important in participant's initial decision to uptake genital fashioning. Whilst partners, peers and family are evidently one directed form of Barkty's (1997 p. 103) disciplinarians, diffused disciplinary power was also detailed to emanate from the less tangible source of social norms.

Given these social influences and pressures, the participants considered women's engagement with genital fashioning as contextualised. As explained by Gill (2007a p. 72), the context to women's choices is beyond the scope of individual determination. In this way, women exercise agency within a given structure. The recognition of structural constraints to individual choice has previously emerged within sociological theory (Marx 1852). However, it is of note that within my research, it was the participants themselves who identified structural limitations to their choices. Indeed, it is not merely my own theoretical understanding which resulted in the conclusion of contextualised choice. Rather, the participants directly articulated their decisions to engage with genital fashioning as undertaken within the context of social pressures and the existence of social norms. Young women did not discuss themselves to have the capacity to impact on broader, preexisting social conditions. The standards, which are applied to female genitalia, were discussed as pervasive and beyond their control. Instead, women detailed their capacity to determine only their own choices within these overarching conditions. Despite this, participants indicated a distinction between those who capitulated to social pressures, and those who freely engaged with genital fashioning for self-motivated reasons. Ultimately, responsibility

to withstand pressure, and bear the consequences of decisions, cast as individual despite the social context, was considered to reside with the individual.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this thesis, I have examined young women's understandings and experiences of genital fashioning. I have considered the ways in which young women conceptualise fashioning practices. Also identified, are current genital ideals and key sites of genital representation. Young women's experience of pressure and influence, and their experience of choice and agency was further discussed. In conclusion, I review the key findings from each chapter and revisit the limitations of my study. I also discuss the answers to the questions I posed within the introduction and outline the contribution of my research findings. I finalise this chapter, and thesis, with recommendations for future research and intervention strategies.

Chapter Review

In answering my research questions, I structured my thesis in accordance with key themes emergent from participant discussion. I sought to sequentially address the critical concepts and build the discussion upon findings from previous chapters.

In the introductory chapter, I proposed the concept of genital fashioning and the context in which the trend has emerged. I considered the way in which female genitalia has entered the public sphere through discourse and representation. Discussion of genital ideals and fashioning practices are now routinely present within the mainstream media. Academic inquiry has, within a limited context, begun to investigate the trend toward genital fashioning. Such research has primarily been conducted within the field of feminist studies and body modification research. Current studies have most extensively examined the practice of pubic depilation, the most common practice of genital fashioning. The social context in which pubic depilation has emerged as a normative practice has been a

predominant feature of existing research. In particular, the trend toward genital fashioning has been examined as an outcome of the sexualisation and pornification of western culture. Increased advertising has also been considered to contribute to the uptake of some genital fashioning practices, such as FGCS. Research pertaining to FGCS has also emerged within medical and sociological literature. However, identified in the chapter, are unanswered questions with regard to genital fashioning practices, and young women's understandings and experiences of the trend.

Subsequently, in Chapter Two, I reviewed current research on practices of genital fashioning. I provided an overview of the emergence of genital depilation as a norm, as well as key reasons for engagement with the practice. Broader examinations of body hair removal, cosmetic surgery and makeover culture provided a basis for interpreting some specific practices of genital fashioning. Depilatory norms for the female body were discussed to now extend to the genital region. Also detailed was the association of public depilation with feminine embodiment and prepubescent appearance. The existing literature on the prevalence of female genital cosmetic surgery was discussed and debates on the influence of pornography were reviewed. The medical portrayal of female genitalia was also discussed as problematic in its limited representation of diversity. Information and debates pertaining to genital piercings and tattooing were considered with respect to body modification literature. Finally, to underpin the discussion of genital fashioning norms, I outlined the ways in which social comparison enables the adoption and embodiment of feminine beauty practices.

Following this, I positioned my research approach within existing frameworks of knowledge. Chapter Three, outlined the theoretical and methodological basis for my research. Conceptualisations of the body as socially constructed and mediated underpin my research. I utilised theory from Bordo (1993, 1999), Bartky (1997, 1998) and Butler (1988, 1989, 1990,

1999a, 1999b) to situate the body as produced via disciplinary practices in accordance with dominant social scripts. I considered the way in which femininity is imprinted on the body and creates a gendered identity. The body, and gendered identity, is materialised by and through the continual reenactment and reproduction of normative gendered standards. Contemporary cultural shifts have also impacted on bodily production, and the types of femininities, which are now considered normative. I provided a description of sexualisation and postfeminism as a means to understand these emergent cultural discourses. Postfeminist narratives were considered to further affect contemporary conceptualisations of agency. Within this framework, individuals are positioned as making individualised free choices, frequently exercised via consumption. I outlined theoretical responses to postfeminist narratives, which seek to critique such notions of choice, and highlight the social and cultural context in which choice is exercised. In the chapter, I situated my theoretical understanding within a post-structural feminist perspective. Correspondingly, I detailed my selection of Gill's concept of 'critical respect' as a framework to underpin my qualitative research approach.

In Chapter Four, I provided an overview of the scope of practices identified by participants as components of genital fashioning. In this way, a general understanding of genital fashioning and the practices of cosmetic alteration was provided. This understanding is significant given the emergent nature of my research topic. To date, existing research has not considered the full scope of genital fashioning practices. The interconnected nature of genital fashioning practices illustrates the way in which female genitalia is a new site for alteration, subject to idealised standards. The consideration of the range of practices of genital fashioning is key to differentiating my work from contemporary literature. I discussed genital fashioning practices as situated on a continuum. The participants presented a nuanced view of

practices and considered pubic depilation and FGCS as means by which to normalise female genitalia in accordance with contemporary appearance standards. Genital tattoos and piercings were discussed as a personal choice and means of self-expression. Participants derided other practices that were discussed as nonnormative, such as vajazzling. Bleaching and hygiene products were also considered nonnormative and criticised as solely developed for commercial interests. Overall, participants detailed the perceived normality of practices as determined by the extent to which the practices worked to produce the body in accordance with social ideals.

The second chapter of analysis, Chapter Five, considered the construction of contemporary genital ideals and the way in which these ideals are communicated to women. Representations of female genitalia are critical to establishing notions of ‘normal’ genital appearance. Contemporary genital ideals were described by participants to be hairless, with a minimised labia, pale colour, and ‘clean’ smell. I investigated the way in which repeated homogenous representations of female genitalia create widespread understandings of ‘normal’ genitalia. Comparison has been previously discussed within literature as significant in producing and reproducing feminine standards. Representations of female genitalia—an ordinarily concealed body site—are especially significant given the relatively limited opportunities for comparison. Whilst participants were critical of genital ideals, they also emphasised the pervasiveness of idealised representation of female genitalia within the mass media, including advertising, and pornography. In fact, pornography was discussed as a particularly significant site of comparison, as a result of clear genital depiction. In contrast with current literature, which regards the medical industry to be one component in generating genital ideals, participants did not discuss the medical industry as a key site of comparison. Further to this, the medical industry was generally considered by participants to

be impartial in the discussion and representation of female genital appearance and associated fashioning practices. Participants also did not discuss advertisements for female genital cosmetic surgery as a potential site of genital representations. In the chapter, I demonstrated that young women are aware of the unrealistic nature of idealised genital representations within contemporary society. I considered that alternative representations of diverse female genitalia have the capacity to aid in women's feelings and perception of 'normal' genitalia. Exposure to a variety of diverse genitalia was discussed to enhance young women's contentment with their genital appearance. Given the current significant levels of exposure to representations of idealised female genitalia, I contend that increased exposure to diverse representations of genitalia have the capacity to combat contemporary ideals.

Following this, in Chapter Six, I considered the ways in which young women engage with genital fashioning practices as 'expected' or motivated by external influences. Given the labour, pain and cost involved in genital fashioning, I sought to understand what motivates women to engage with these practices. Whereas the previous chapter had outlined contemporary ideals of genital appearance and sites of genital representation, in Chapter Six I furthered the analysis and considered the existence of social norms with regard to genital appearance to form, in of itself, a source of pressure and expectation.

Male sexual partners were also discussed as impacted by idealised genital standards. Participants considered that male partners 'expect' women to embody idealised genital standards. Some women had experienced direct requests from male sexual partners for their engagement with genital depilation. However, male sexual partners also formed an indirect influence. Young women considered that the perception of male expectations with regard to genital appearance impacts upon women's engagement with genital fashioning practices. Narratives in which women had experienced negative repercussions from sexual

partners as a result of genital appearance served to reinforce this notion. I further discussed the capacity of pornography to serve as an indirect influence via male sexual partners who subsequently convey expectations to women.

Other significant sources of influence and pressure, which were discussed, were peers and family members. Siblings were identified as particularly important in influencing young women's initial uptake of genital fashioning practices. Given the context of these pressures and expectations, I examined the way in which young women conceptualise their choice with regard to engagement with genital fashioning practices. Young women are not cultural dupes, and demonstrate keen awareness of the social pressures and influences with regard to genital appearance and associated fashioning practices. As a means to understand young women's engagement with genital fashioning, I reintroduced Gill's concept of critical respect. Through this lens, young women were perceived to make genital fashioning choices within the limited context of social pressure and influence. However, participants were also considered to draw on neoliberal ideology to cast the individual as responsible for their own capitulation to pressure. In this way, participants sought to differentiate their participation in genital fashioning ideals as self-motivated from those that 'give in' to social pressures. I considered the way in which participants discussed the 'wrong' reasons for engagement with genital fashioning as a result of partner influence. Participants contrasted this with self-motivated reasons for genital fashioning, perceived to pertain to comfort and sexual appeal, as a way to exercise agency.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study are that it is a small-scale qualitative research project which means the results cannot be broadly generalised, but instead provide in depth insight into the way in which a particular group of young women consider their engagement with

genital fashioning. The female participants were not representative of all women. The vast majority of participants had, or were in the process of obtaining, higher education. Moreover, information was not obtained with respect to the participants' sexual orientation. Given the broadly heteronormative influence with regard to genital fashioning practices, investigation of same sex oriented women's relationship with genital fashioning may yield different results. Future research may investigate a larger, and more diverse, cohort of women. There is also currently a lack of statistical research pertaining to the full spectrum of genital fashioning practices. I recommend further quantitative research in this area.

Key Findings

In the introduction to this thesis, I stated that uncertainty remains as to young women's own conceptualisations of genital fashioning practices. I questioned whether women experience these practices as a component of hygiene regimes, beauty and fashion regimes, a factor in the creation of a sexualised body, and/or a factor in the construction of identity. Revealed throughout my investigation is that genital fashioning practices are, in some ways, conceptualised by young women in all of these ways. Just as varying forms of feminine embodiment invoke distinct meaning and interpretation, different practices of genital fashioning are associated with distinct meanings.

Some participants contested the capacity for genital depilation impact on genital hygiene. However, young women also identified the practice to contribute to *feelings* and perceptions of cleanliness. Participants further discussed the potential for engagement with genital fashioning to produce a more sexually appealing body, in accordance with idealised genital standards. Contemporary fashion trends, including beachwear, fitness leggings and short skirts, were considered to reinforce the necessity of engagement with genital

fashioning practices given the potential for the genital region to be revealed in form or pubic hair displayed.

Engagement with genital fashioning was considered a component in readying the body for sexual activity. Young women described the importance of having a 'proper vagina' for sexual activity, which reflects and reproduces standards of hairlessness and minimised labial form. Idealised genital standards were described to emanate from pornographic representations of genitalia. These standards were perceived by participants as communicated via male sexual partners. However, it was also demonstrated that participants garnered awareness of pornographic norms via a variety of sources, including broader media discussion. The presence of mainstreamed discussion about genital appearance is demonstrative of the sexualisation of western culture. Failure to present a genital region in accordance with appearance norms results in young women fearing negative repercussion or judgment from sexual partners. Young women's perceived expectations of male sexual partners have emerged as a consequence of personal experience, shared anecdotes, media discussion, and the perception that male viewers of pornography prefer pornographic genital norms. These perceived expectations serve as a source of disciplinary power impacting on women's engagement with genital fashioning.

Agency and Resistance

There was a demonstrated element of resistance from young women with regard to the trend toward genital fashioning. Young women expressed significant criticism of contemporary ideals for genital appearance and the associated pressures experienced by women. Participants demonstrated an awareness of the unrealistic nature of contemporary genital ideals. There was a general consensus that it was wrong for sexual partners to influence or pressure women's engagement with genital fashioning practices though many

had experienced this. Advertising and marketing campaigns were also identified and criticised by participants for contributing to pressures associated with genital appearance. In particular, the promotion of feminine hygiene products was identified by participants as particularly pernicious in creating unwarranted anxiety for the purposes of commercial gain.

Participants further described the potential for resistance and agency through engagement with practices identified as nonnormative. In particular, tattooing and piercings were discussed as subversive given that the produced appearances do not conform to contemporary ideals for genital appearance. A significant example of resistance and reclamation was provided by one participant who tattooed her genital region as a way in which to reclaim the site after sexual abuse.

Participants adopted postfeminist understandings of freedom and choice. Many participants sought to cast their engagement with genital fashioning as freely chosen and done for self-motivated reasons. It was clear that participants felt compelled to claim agency, especially because the disciplinarian enforcing social standards is not immediately identifiable and social sanctions were often nebulous and indiscriminate. However, whilst asserting their agency, participants also acknowledged their restricted feelings of choice. Their negotiation of agency as shaped by social forces resulted in a nuanced understanding of choice, within a context.

Some participants attempted to distance themselves from social pressures and considered their own engagement with practices of genital fashioning as self-motivated. In this way, young women sought to notionally separate their experience from one viewed as subjugated and instead emphasised their own capacity for agency. This was evidenced when participants detailed their engagement with pubic depilation to be motivated for reasons of

personal comfort and stated that sexual partners must respect their choices and ‘love me the way I am’. Despite some participants stated disregard for their male sexual partner’s preferences for genital appearance, their continued engagement with genital fashioning evidences the way in which the postfeminist narratives are mobilised with respect to genital fashioning: genital fashioning is not considered as undertaken for male sexual pleasure, but instead actively chosen as an empowering means to enhance self-comfort, sexual appeal and confidence. Within these narratives, female participation in painful, time consuming and costly beauty regimes is cast as a practice of self-care. This understanding neglects the gendered power dynamics and social sanctions which, for many participants, cast some form of genital fashioning as an imperative.

There were a limited number of participants that actively sought to resist normative standards for female presentation. They described their limited or complete refusal to engage with body depilation, including pubic hair removal. These participants frequently explained their rejection of normative standards as a result of holding strong feminist views.

Research Implications

This thesis has investigated the growing trend towards fashioning the vagina. The research questions which I sought to address are:

- 1) How do young women understand contemporary practices of genital modification?
- 2) What do these conceptualisations of genital fashioning indicate about femininity in contemporary Western society?

The perspectives as presented by young women demonstrate the strong connection genital fashioning has to contemporary understandings of femininity. The analysis has demonstrated that genital fashioning is important to women’s feminine embodiment and

identity. Female genitalia are now subject to specific standards of appearance. Participant discussion revealed the way in which broader social messages have constructed female genitalia as a body site requiring alteration in order to achieve 'normalcy'. 'Normal' female genital appearance was discussed to encompass an idealised genital form, consisting of minimised labia minora, hairlessness, symmetry, and pale colour.

These contemporary genital ideals have been communicated and represented via mass media, such as the mainstream media and pornography. Genital ideals are understood by young women to create expectations, especially from male sexual partners, for their genital appearance.

Practices of genital fashioning are further conceptualised as situated on a continuum and are understood in varying ways. Practices that aid in the construction of a idealised genital appearance, such as pubic depilation, were discussed by young women as normative. These practices were also considered to be more strongly socially mandated than practices that were discussed as nonnormative, such as vajazzling. Nonnormative practices of genital fashioning were perceived by young women to have negative associations, which may dissuade women from engagement. However, participants also stated that female engagement with nonnormative practices of genital fashioning may imbue the individual with a greater sense of agency as they knowingly subvert feminine ideals.

Overall, the young women I interviewed were critical of dominant genital ideals and associated expectations for genital appearance. However, despite the reflexive criticism of genital ideals, the majority of participants acknowledged their own engagement with genital fashioning practices. Although young women considered their own engagement with genital fashioning practices as self motivated, they considered that other women may more strongly

experience feelings of pressure and influence which impact on engagement with genital fashioning. Failure to embody the genital ideal was considered to present risk of judgment or rejection from male sexual partners. In this way, young women understand their capacity for choice and agency with regard to genital fashioning as contextualised; the participants emphasised their capacity for choice within a limited context framed by repercussions, expectations and cultural ideals.

My research findings contribute to current knowledge and debates of body modification, femininity and genital fashioning. Female genitalia have indeed become a site for a alteration and beautification. Young women perceive genitalia as subject to a range of ideas about presentation and appearance as promoted within pornography and the mainstream media. Further to this, young women experience anxiety about genital appearance, particularly in the context of sexual presentation.

My research further elucidates the way in which young women understand and conceptualise genital fashioning practices. This is particularly significant given the current lack of information pertaining to some practices, such as vajazzling and pubic tattoos. Moreover, it determines the sites which young Australian women consider most pertinent to the display and representation of genital ideals.

In order to broaden understandings of 'normal' genital appearance, I suggest increased representation of diverse genital appearance within the public sphere. As considered by participants, current exposure to images of idealised genital appearance is widespread. However, exposure to more diverse genitalia has the potential to alter both men and women's conceptualisation and internalisation of standards for female bodily appearance. Male sexual partner's increased education of genital diversity may be particularly significant,

given their role in influencing women's engagement with genital fashioning practices. Representations of diverse genitalia within the public sphere would also provide alternative appearance standards, which women may choose to embody.

An example of a public health program that successfully increases awareness of female genital diversity has been created by Women's Health Victoria³. The Labia Library is an online initiative, which displays forty photographs of unedited, diverse female genitalia (Women's Health Victoria, 2011). Further possibilities for diverse representations of female genitalia in the public sphere are enabled through artistic projects. Currently, a notable work is 'The Great Wall of Vagina' by Jamie McCartney, containing 400 plaster casts of female genitalia (The Great Wall of Vagina, n.d.).

Further to this, I also recommend legislative change. Representations of female genital appearance have been demonstrated to impact on women's own perception of genital normality. Increased diversity of genital representation is important for generating awareness of normal, realistic diversity in female genital appearance. However, as discussed in Chapter Five, diverse genital representation of the labia minora is prohibited through legislation (Sharp & Tiggemann 2016 p. 71). As discussed throughout the thesis pornography is more widely available and accessed than ever before (Dines 2010 p. xi). Women have previously demonstrated a preference for softcore pornography, impacted upon by this legislation, than other forms of pornography (Sharp & Tiggemann 2016 p. 71). Moreover, softcore pornography is available for sale to persons aged as young as 15 years; hardcore pornography being restricted to those aged over 18 years (Sharp & Tiggemann 2016 p. 71). Therefore, the legislation impacts on young men and women's exposure to representations

³ Survey results demonstrating the effectiveness of the project in increasing awareness of normal genital diversity were presented by Alexandra James and Amy Webster at the 15th World Congress on Public Health, Melbourne 2017

of female genital appearance. I would recommend permitting the realistic portrayal of female genitalia within all pornographic material as a means to foster awareness about normal genital diversity.

Conclusion

This thesis has identified and examined young women's understandings and experiences of genital fashioning. It is a unique contribution to literature in the consideration of all genital fashioning practices. Genital fashioning has been demonstrated to aid in the production of a previously ignored body site in accordance with contemporary idealised standards of appearance. However, engagement with genital fashioning practices can have different meanings and interpretations, as well as varying opportunities for agency.

Young women engage with genital fashioning within a context shaped by social influences and pressures. I suggest that our embodied identities and lifestyle choices are, from even before birth, *always* constrained by broad social, cultural, and economic factors. Within contemporary discourse, young women are exposed to postfeminist messages that assert individual capacity for agency, expression and (somewhat compulsory) assertive sexuality. Dually, young women experience a variety of social pressures and influences from the mainstream media, sexual partners and peer groups, which encourage their participation in practices of genital fashioning. These contradictory social expectations were negotiated by the participants who recognised capacity for agency within the context in which pornographic tropes have become ubiquitous. This finding contributes to broader debates about agency and choice within a postfeminist, sexualised context.

Overall, genital fashioning has emerged as an extension of beauty regimes. Idealised bodily standards are applied to female genitalia, which has emerged as a site for comparative

evaluation and improvement. Partaking in self-surveillance, young women experience distress in their attempts and failures to adhere to appearance norms.

Debate and judgment frequently accompanies discussion of female engagement with beauty practices. Discourse surrounding genital fashioning, FCGS in particular, is no exception. However, the young women in my research were generous in their expression of understanding other women's decisions for genital modification. Whilst holding a variety of both positive and negative views about genital fashioning, the participants consistently respected the rights of other women to engage with the practice. The participants' appreciation for women's choices was grounded on a shared understanding of the contradictory and complex cultural context currently inhabited by young women.

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APPENDIX A—Focus Group Research Flyer

Brazilian Waxing • Vajazzling • Labiaplasty • Genital Piercing

All these practices are contemporary forms of genital modification.

What do you **think about this?**

Seeking women aged between 18 and 30 to participate in a PhD research project...

Your participation would involve attendance at a focus group for 50 - 60 minutes in which you can **share your experiences, thoughts and stories** while chatting with other women and snacking on some light refreshments. Or perhaps you would like to participate with some **friends...**

Your insights and perceptions of the practices associated with genital modification will assist in understanding how women construct their body, identity and gender with respect to social pressures and influences.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information,
contact Alexandra James at [REDACTED]

Chief investigator Associate Professor JaneMaree Maher

School of Social Sciences

Monash University

This research has ethics approval - MUHREC Reference Number: CF14/3999 - 2014002045



MONASH University

APPENDIX B—Interview Research Flyer

Brazilian Waxing • Vajazzling • Labiaplasty • Genital Piercing

All these practices are contemporary forms of genital modification.

What do you **think about this?**

Seeking women aged between 18 and 30 to participate in a PhD research project...

Your participation would involve attendance at a single person interview for 20 - 40 minutes in which you can **share your experiences, thoughts and stories** while snacking on some light refreshments.

Your insights and perceptions of the practices associated with genital modification will assist in understanding how women construct their body, identity and gender with respect to social pressures and influences.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information,
contact Alexandra James at [REDACTED]

Chief investigator Associate Professor JaneMaree Maher

School of Social Sciences

Monash University

This research has ethics approval - MUHREC Reference Number: CF14/3999 - 2014002045



MONASH University

APPENDIX C—Focus Group Discussion Questions

- **What were your thoughts when you first heard about this project?**
- **Can you tell me what you would associate with the term genital fashioning or modification?**
(Prompt: Any specific practices?)
- **What are your opinions and thoughts about genital modification practices?**
(Prompts: Reasons? Associated benefits or drawbacks?)
- **Can you tell me about any recent media discussion, or discussions you may have had or overheard, about genital fashioning?**
(Prompts: Media articles offering options or advice? Any discussion amongst friends?)
- **Can you share with me any experiences you or your friends may have had in relation to genital fashioning?**
(Follow up: Were there any circumstances around this experience that stood out for you?)
- **Why do you think women might want to their genitalia?** (Prompt: Does modification or not have any bearing on a woman's identity? Does modification relate to hygiene? Is it a matter of choice?)
- **Are there any stories you may wish to share with me in relation to our discussion today?**
- **Can you tell me about your relationship to feminism?**

APPENDIX D—Interview Discussion List

Can you tell me about what role the media might have in women's understandings of their genitalia and modification practices? (Prompt: In what way do you think the media may affect women's understandings of genital modification practices?)

Some of the focus group participants discussed the idea of social norms. Can you tell me about the social norms that may be associated with women's engagement with genital fashioning?

In the focus groups, pornography was often mentioned as a factor associated with understandings of genitalia and genital modification, what are your thoughts on this? (Prompt: In what way do you think pornography may affect women's understandings of female genitalia and genital modification practices?)

Sexual partners were identified within some focus groups as impacting upon women's engagement with genital modification, what are your thoughts on this? In what way do you think they may impact on women's engagement or non-engagement with genital modification?

What would you consider the 'right' reasons and/or the 'wrong' reasons to engage in female genital modification?

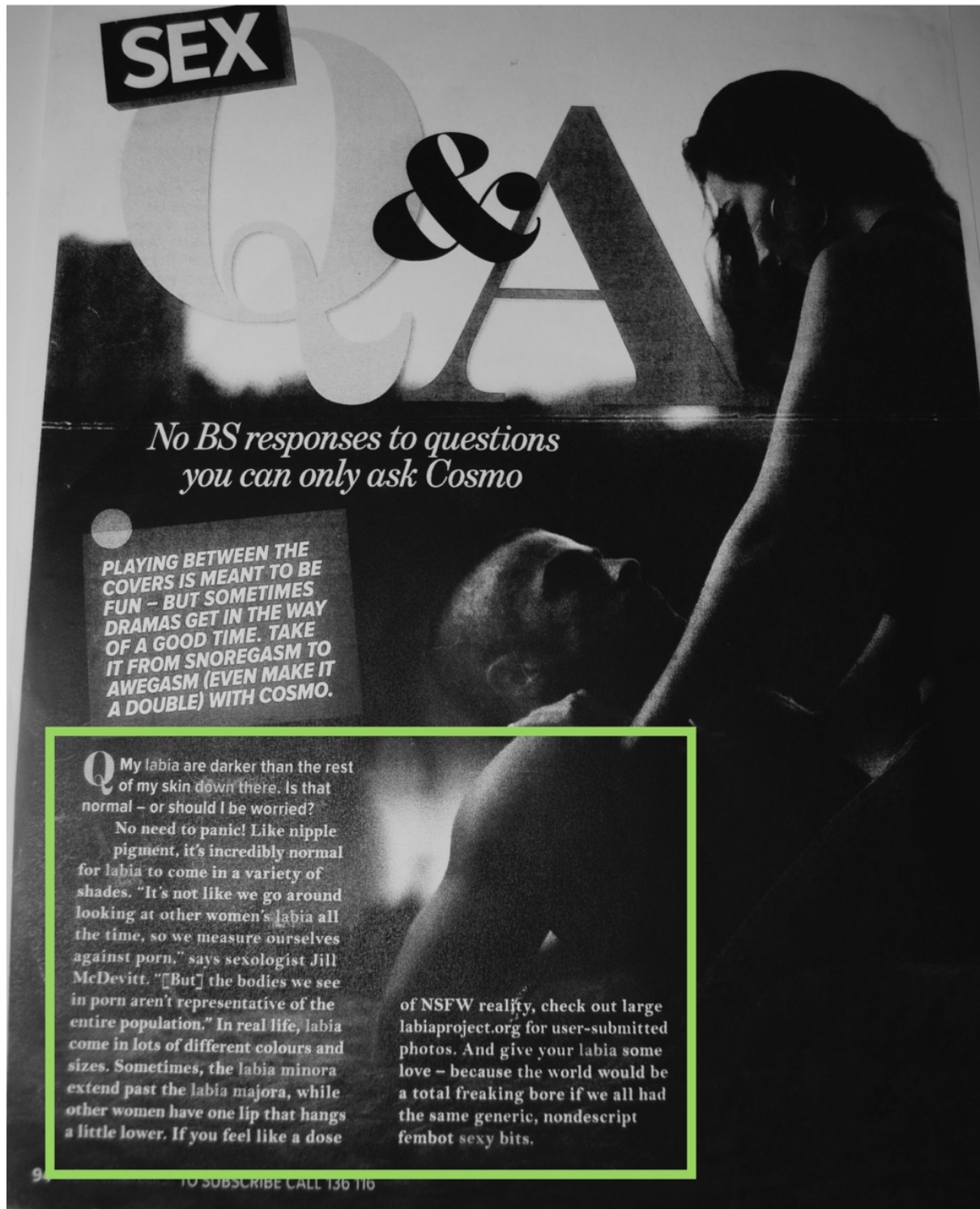
Participants would then be requested to read the highlighted sections from an article published in Cosmopolitan magazine (as attached to this amendment application). The following questions would be asked:

What are your thoughts on this article?

How do you think this may impact on women's perceptions of their genitalia and associated modification practices?

What are your thoughts on this information being made available in women's magazines such as Cosmo?

APPENDIX E—Cosmopolitan Magazine Extracts



SEX

Q & A

No BS responses to questions you can only ask Cosmo

PLAYING BETWEEN THE COVERS IS MEANT TO BE FUN – BUT SOMETIMES DRAMAS GET IN THE WAY OF A GOOD TIME. TAKE IT FROM SNOREGASM TO AWEGASM (EVEN MAKE IT A DOUBLE) WITH COSMO.

Q My labia are darker than the rest of my skin down there. Is that normal – or should I be worried?

No need to panic! Like nipple pigment, it's incredibly normal for labia to come in a variety of shades. "It's not like we go around looking at other women's labia all the time, so we measure ourselves against porn," says sexologist Jill McDevitt. "[But] the bodies we see in porn aren't representative of the entire population." In real life, labia come in lots of different colours and sizes. Sometimes, the labia minora extend past the labia majora, while other women have one lip that hangs a little lower. If you feel like a dose

of NSFW reality, check out large labiaproject.org for user-submitted photos. And give your labia some love – because the world would be a total freaking bore if we all had the same generic, nondescript fembot sexy bits.

94 TO SUBSCRIBE CALL 136 116

ly love

HEY
VAGINA,
ARE YOU
OK?

Q&A

We know your va-jay-jay will thank us for it

If our private parts were a bit more public about their problems, they'd most likely be a lot happier. But in the meantime we have to speak up on their behalf, so *Cosmo's* GP Dr Penny Adams gave us the low-down on all of your down-there queries.

If your lube's rubbing you the wrong way, swapping to a water-based one can help.

Q Is my vagina more vulnerable if I get a full Brazilian wax?

A Yes, because pubic hair acts as a protective barrier for abrasions and injuries and helps prevent infection. To help your skin after hair removal Dr Adams recommends Amele products – which were specifically designed by a gynaecologist and dermatologist.

Q Some days my vagina smells different than on others. Why is that, and is it “normal”?

A A healthy vagina has a natural

Q I find that some lubricants have a burning sensation. Am I allergic or is it just the tingling ingredients?

A Lube causing a burning sensation is common. It may have irritating ingredients like spermicide, glycerin, methylparaben or propylparaben (which are common preservatives). Tingling ingredients such as menthol and citric acid can also rub you the wrong way. If it feels uncomfortable, try a sugar- or glycerin-free lube, and opt for water-soluble or silicone-based products to

Q Could it affect the health of my nether regions if I get vajazzled?

A You have to be careful frosting your privates because you need to be waxed first, meaning your skin will be raw and susceptible to infection – especially if you're gluing the gems on straight away (potentially trapping bacteria). Allow skin at least two days to recover, and make sure the therapist is experienced and hygienic.

Q If his penis touches my back