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The pariah femininity hierarchy: comparing white women’s body hair and fat stigmas in the United States

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ABSTRACT
The corporeal turn in the social sciences has stimulated considerable interdisciplinary research into embodied stigmas, but these theories do not account for why certain traits become more stigmatized than others. This study argues that the ‘real women’ imagery associated with the Western Body Positive movement reveals a ‘pariah femininity’ hierarchy: fat women achieve representation significantly more often than hairy women. In order to identify the stigma differential that might account for this representational difference, this study comparatively analyzes the parameters of stigma that United States viewers associate with each trait. A discourse analysis of online feedback from campaign viewers yields two important findings: (1) white women’s body hair poses a relative threat to patriarchal gender ideology and (2) viewers associate women’s body hair, more so than women’s body fat, with feminism. These two findings have important implications for academic efforts to theorize corporeal stigma, hegemonic femininity, and feminist stigma management.

La jerarquía de feminidad paria: comparación de los estigmas sobre el vello corporal y la gordura de las mujeres blancas en Estados Unidos

RESUMEN
El giro corporal en las ciencias sociales estimuló una considerable investigación interdisciplinaria sobre estigmas corporizados, pero estas teorías no dan cuenta de por qué ciertos rasgos se vuelven más estigmatizados que otros. Este estudio sostiene que el imaginario de la ‘mujer real’ asociado con el movimiento occidental de Positividad Corporal revela una jerarquía de ‘feminidad paria’: las mujeres gordas adquieren representación significativamente con más frecuencia que las mujeres velludas. Para poder identificar el diferencial de estigma que podría dar cuenta de esta diferencia representacional, este estudio analiza comparativamente los parámetros de estigma que quienes miran en Estados Unidos asocian con cada rasgo. Un análisis discurso de comentarios en línea de observadores de campaña nos deja dos importantes resultados: (1) el vello corporal de las mujeres blancas presenta una amenaza relativa a la ideología patriarcal de género y (2) los observadores asocian al vello corporal de las mujeres, más que a la grasa corporal de las mujeres, con el feminismo. Estos dos hallazgos tienen importantes implicancias para los esfuerzos académicos para teorizar sobre el estigma corporal, la feminidad hegemónica y el manejo del estigma feminista.

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Introduction

The popular ‘postfeminist’ disclaimer ‘I’m not a feminist, but …’ has led scholars across disciplines to interrogate the source of this feminist stigma. This growing corpus reveals that feminism has become uniquely discrediting within patriarchy due to its association with presumed ‘man-hating’ (Faludi 1991; Aronson 2003; Zucker 2004; McRobbie 2009; Scharff 2013). According to sociologist Mimi Schippers, society treats women who claim the feminist label as pariahs as a result of this ideological construction. Schippers’ ‘pariah femininity’ concept has proven to be popular among researchers of various stigmatized femininities, including lesbians, derby girls, and fat women (Charlebois 2010; Finley 2010; Kazyak 2012; Healiccon 2013; Budgeon 2014; Gieseler 2014; Stone and Gorga 2014). However, Schippers’ original formulation does not account for the subordination of certain pariah femininities beneath others, a hierarchy which seems to manifest within the ‘real woman’ imagery associated with the Body Positive movement.

The skincare brand Dove originated this ‘real woman’ imagery in 2004, in response to budding public outcry over the exclusionary Western beauty ideal (Brodbeck and Evans 2007). After surveying women from across the world, Dove launched a groundbreaking advertisement campaign called ‘Real Beauty’ that showcased a line-up of plus-sized women in white bras and panties (Dove 2016). Dove then plastered these images upon billboards across the United States and Canada, inspiring controversy, commentary, and copycat imagery from competing businesses and grassroots ‘Body Positive’ organizations alike. Dove’s enormously successful campaigns have attracted substantive academic analysis and critique; however, this corpus has thus far focused on Dove’s rhetoric and marketing, ignoring the much greater ‘real woman’ imagery genre that ‘Real Beauty’ inspired (Deighton 2008; Millard 2009; Murray 2013; Johnston and Taylor 2014; Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014).

Content analysis of this genre reveals that certain bodily matter (such as fat) achieves routine representation while others (such as women’s body hair) remain inexplicably absent. Given evidence that ‘real people’ imagery reflects the gender ideals of the society that produced it, these patterns warrant closer analysis (Goffman 1979). In order to determine whether these disparate rates of representation reflect a pariah femininity hierarchy, this study turns to viewer feedback generated by the respective imagery in the following ‘real woman’ campaigns: Natural Beauty, Hair Everywhere, and Regular Women in Lingerie. The dominant discourses and top words from these three comment scripts indicate that viewers in the United States perceive white women’s body hair to pose a relatively direct threat to patriarchy compared to their body fat.

This comparative stigma analysis makes two important contributions to interdisciplinary feminist studies: it demonstrates that Goffman’s stigma typology can account for the contextual production of (embodied) pariah femininity hierarchies; it situates the feminist stigma within women’s body hair, as opposed to their body fat. The implications of these findings for feminist stigma management are considerable, since they imply that hypervisible ‘embodied feminists’ become subordinated beneath invisible ‘nominal feminists’ within the hegemonic gender order.
Pariah femininity

Schippers based her theory of ‘pariah femininity’ on Connell’s (1987, 1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that masculinity is both multiple and hierarchical; according to Connell, those who deviate from the hegemonic masculine ideal through gendered or sexualized axes become subordinated, stigmatized in association with femininity and homosexuality. More concretely, Connell defined hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell 1995, 77). Within this theoretical framework, Connell controversially denied the possibility of a comparably hegemonic femininity:

All forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men. For this reason, there is no femininity that holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men. (Connell 1987, 187)

Instead, Connell theorized that patriarchal society pressures women to perform ‘emphasized femininity,’ a form of oppositional gender expression that is ‘oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men’ (Connell 1987, 184). However, Connell also acknowledged that alternative expressions of femininity can function as strategies of resistance (Connell 1987, 185).

Schippers (2007) later modified Connell’s formulation to emphasize gender ideals instead of gender practices. According to Schippers, ‘it is in the idealized quality content of the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ that we find the hegemonic significance of masculinity and femininity’ (author’s emphasis, 90). These ideals are shaped by what Butler (1990) calls the ‘heterosexual matrix,’ the oppositional construction and valuation of genders within heteronormative society. Within this revised theoretical framework, Schippers produced the following definition of hegemonic femininity:

Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Schippers 2007, 94)

Schippers reasoned that women who reject this idealized model of gender expression become constructed as pariahs within patriarchal society as opposed to subordinates, because they:

… contradict or deviate from practices defined as feminine, threaten men’s exclusive possession of hegemonic masculine characteristics, and most importantly, constitute a refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony. (Schippers 2007, 95)

Of extreme pertinence to this investigation, Schippers cited feminism as one example of ‘pariah femininity.’

In essence, Schippers formulated a gendered stigma theory, but without addressing Erving Goffman’s stigma typology (Goffman 1963). Decades before Schippers, Goffman also observed the gender-relativity of stigma. According to Goffman:

… not all undesirable attributes are at issue, but only those which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be .... An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself. (Goffman 1963, 3)

In other words, traits are not inherently stigmatizing, but rather stigmatizing in context. Goffman further cautioned stigma analysts to pay heed to the stigma’s level of mutability, reasoning that society resents those who choose to be different while reserving some measure of pity for the disabled (Goffman 1963, 9). Stigmas that people choose presumably reflect their ‘blemishes of character,’ while stigmas that people do not choose signify superficial ‘abominations of the body’ (Goffman 1963, 9).

Goffman’s attention to stigma differences provides a critical supplement to Schippers’ theory of hegemonic femininity, given that certain stigmatized expressions of femininity receive more social sanctioning than others. Indeed, as sociologist Shelley Budgeon noted in her critique, Schippers’ original formulation does not acknowledge that ‘The privilege of particular femininities is sustained not only at the expense of other possible articulations but in a relation of interdependence with those femininities which visibly mark the boundary of socially ‘acceptable’ femininity’ (Budgeon 2014, 326). This article furthers Budgeon’s critique by identifying body hair, more so than body fat, as the corporeal boundary
of socially acceptable femininity for white women in the United States; this stigma differential accounts for the evident ‘pariah femininity’ hierarchy that emerges within ‘real woman’ imagery.

**Stigmas: hair and fat**

Like Schippers, feminist geographers tend not to use the word ‘stigma’ in their research, even when the subject matter is essentially the same: for example, Rachel Colls’ situates her research on fat’s positive resignification within the context of the United Kingdom’s ‘Size Acceptance’ movement and yet she does not use the word stigma once. This systematic oversight is unfortunate, given stigma theory’s potential to illuminate how and why society reacts so differently to theoretically similar forms of bodily matter.

Western women’s body hair and body fat should theoretically share a similar stigma. Both of these traits threaten the Western cultural ideal of the contained female body, compromising cultural myths of women’s naturalized hairlessness and hourglass figures (Longhurst 2001; Bordo 2003). Furthermore, both body hair and body fat are active and motile, components of women’s bodies that never truly go away; rather, these unruly bodily matters continually lurk just beneath the surface, rendering all women discreditable within the context of Western beauty culture (Colls 2007).

In addition to these theoretical similarities, white women’s body hair and body fat share a cultural history in the United States. In 1968 a group of white Women’s Liberationists staged a now-famous protest against beauty and diet culture at the Miss America Beauty Pageant, an event which inspired the cultural myths of ‘bra-burning’ and ‘man-hating’ feminists; this protest was disproportionately white in attendance because many black women were celebrating the first annual Miss Black America on the same day (Kreydatus 2008). Although body hair rebellion was but one of several feminist body practices at this time, psychological studies indicate that it lingers in Americans’ collective memory as the symbol of ‘man-hating’ feminism: college students associate women’s body hair with aggression, radical feminism, lesbianism and separatist ‘man-hating’ (Hope 1982; Basow and Braman 1998; Swim, Ferguson, and Hyers 1999; Basow and Willis 2001; Fahs 2011; Fahs and Delgado 2011; Fahs 2013, 2014; Herzig 2015).

However, it is important to note that this finding is not generalizable to women of color, due to the overwhelming whiteness of the participants; moreover, the one study that has addressed racial differences indicates that body hair might assume different meaning on black women’s bodies (Fahs and Delgado 2011). When Branne Fahs assigned an extra credit assignment to her Women’s Studies students to stop shaving for a semester and journal the experience, her students of color dropped out. They, unlike their white peers, experienced pressure from friends and family to represent their race with pride; apparently by keeping their body hair they reinforced racist stereotypes that black bodies are dirty and ape-like (Fahs 2011).

In this historical and cultural context, it is curious that women’s body hair has all but disappeared from the ‘Third Wave’ feminist incarnation of the protest against beauty culture. This most recent iteration is colloquially known as ‘the Body Positive movement’ in the United States, and the ‘Size Acceptance’ movement in the United Kingdom. Aided by social media platforms, Body Positive activists and researchers raise women’s awareness about body-shaming and Photoshopping by celebrating the beauty of ‘real women’ (Sastre 2014). Viral content routinely challenges issues such as sizeism, racism, ageism, and sometimes even able-bodiedism; however, even the most allegedly diverse campaigns tend to feature models who are uniformly hairless from neck to toe. In fact, after three years of daily internet searches for viral ‘real woman’ campaigns, I have found only two that feature women’s leg hair and underarm hair. Both of these exceptional body hair advocacy campaigns were released in 2014, following Cameron Diaz’s efforts to positively resignify pubic hair and Madonna’s viral Tweet of her ‘armpit’ hair (Diaz 2013). The first campaign was Ben Hopper’s black and white portrait series ‘Natural Beauty,’ which he released to the popular online news source Huffington Post; this campaign focuses exclusively on women’s underarm hair (Saul 2014). Two months later, the online news source Vice Magazine released a series by Arvida Bystrom called ‘Hair Everywhere;’ this mock American Apparel fashion spread features body hair on women’s underarms, legs, and pubic regions (Bystrom 2014). Significantly, all of the models in both of these campaigns are white, except for one black model in ‘Natural Beauty.’
Since June 2014 no other viral ‘real woman’ campaigns have included underarm hair or leg hair on the models. Articles occasionally proclaim the ‘trendy’ status of underarm hair, citing celebrity figures such as Miley Cyrus and Jemima Kirke or blue underarm hair dye, but the imagery that supposedly reflects ‘real women’ continues to omit body hair from representation (Associated Press 2015; Newman 2015). ‘Natural Beauty’ and ‘Hair Everywhere’ remain the exceptions that prove the rule: ‘real women’ can be fat, wrinkled, scarred, and disabled, but they cannot be hairy. This content analysis suggests that white women’s body hair, compared to other stigmatized traits, uniquely transgresses some implicit ‘boundary of ‘socially acceptable’ femininity’ in the United States. According to Goffman’s stigma typology, this stigma difference might be attributable to body hair’s relative social construction as mutable and masculine, a construction which signifies the woman’s unambiguous ‘refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by hegemony’ (Schippers 2007).

Methods

In order to compare the stigma associated with body hair- one of the movement’s least represented traits- to the stigma associated with body fat- the movement’s most represented trait- I selected a comparably viral fat advocacy campaign called ‘Regular Women in Lingerie.’ The series was endorsed by Huffington Post on November 20, 2013 and eventually acquired a comparable amount of ‘shares’ and ‘likes’ as ‘Natural Beauty’ (Krupnick 2013). The photograph series is comprised of selfies that customers sent the owner of Curvy Girls Lingerie, Chrystal Bougon, for her store’s website; these images include stigmatized fat features such as dimples, rolls, and cellulite. As with ‘Natural Beauty,’ most of the models in this campaign are white.

Next, I turned to viewer feedback in the comment sections of ‘Natural Beauty,’ ‘Hair Everywhere,’ and ‘Regular Women in Lingerie’ in order to identify the unique parameters of stigma that are associated with white women’s body hair, but not their body fat. I utilize online comments to mine stigma because past research into Computer Mediated Communication indicates that reader/viewer feedback is disproportionately negative in content (Pang and Lee 2008). Moreover, according to Douglas (1966), such expressions of disgust should illuminate the ideological boundary that each bodily matter threatens; in other words, this viewer feedback should reveal whether white women’s body hair poses a relatively salient threat to hegemonic gender ideology compared to body fat.

I understand my method of analysis to advance Colls (2007) work on ‘embodied topographies.’ Like Colls, I am interested in positively resignifying women’s body fat (and women’s body hair). However, unlike Colls, I do not approach this task by focusing on the personal meanings that women associate with these bodily matters; rather, I shift my focus outward, towards the meanings that others project upon these bodily matters. To specify the centrality of stigma theory to this endeavor, I call this method of analysis ‘embodied stigmagraphy.’ Although this particular embodied stigmagraphy only applies to white women in the United States- due to the overwhelming whiteness of the models and the viewers’ nationality- this method of analysis is theoretically applicable to any demographic.

My data analysis consisted of two stages. Initially I created transcripts of the most recent 500 posts from each of these three campaigns’ comment sections. I performed a close reading of the comments, manually coding emergent discourses and themes; next, I performed a round of closed coding, sorting comments according to the dominant themes that I observed during the initial round of open coding (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Krippendorff 2012; Tesch 2013). Ultimately the dominant themes for body hair included: man-hating, choice, disgust, and ‘Natural Beauty.’ The main themes for body fat included: lifestyle, disease/disability, acceptability, and motherhood.

Next, I compiled Word Clouds of each comment script, which I converted into tables of the most frequently used one hundred words in each script. These top word registers helped me to identify the viewers’ most salient associations with each trait, and their unique parameters of stigma. Seemingly irrelevant word categories within these top word registers directed my attention to dominant themes that had escaped my attention during discourse analysis.
Admittedly, the viewing audiences that produced the commentary under analysis are not representative of the United States population. Individuals can only post in the comment sections of these news sources if they possess Facebook user accounts. Additionally, only those who clicked on the links can see this imagery and post a comment. Finally, it is likely that the body hair comments include more men’s voices than the body fat comments because Vice Magazine is disproportionately popular among men while Huffington Post attracts slightly more female viewers than male viewers (Vice Media Kit 2013; Alexa Internet, Inc. 2015). Unfortunately, I could not include a Vice Magazine control for ‘Hair Everywhere’ because at the time of this research Vice Magazine had yet to publish any Fat Positive campaigns. I included ‘Hair Everywhere’ in addition to ‘Natural Beauty’ anyway for two reasons: the extremely thin models in ‘Natural Beauty’ generated valuable commentary about criteria for inclusion within the ‘Real woman’ imagery canon; ‘Natural Beauty’ only features underarm hair while ‘Hair Everywhere’ features body hair more generally. Given that the focus of this study is body hair stigma, it seemed prudent to consider the commentary generated by both of these campaigns.

Analysis
Gendered language registers more often in the body hair condition than the body fat condition, reflecting the relatively gendered meanings that viewers associate with women’s body hair. This difference is evident in the top word registers as well: while images of women’s body hair generated top words including gender, men, man, guy, dude, women, woman, women, ladies, and girls, images of women’s body fat only generated three gendered top words including women, woman, and ladies. As the following section reveals, women’s body hair appears to pose a primary threat to gender hegemony, while women’s body fat poses a primary threat to health ideology.

Fat stigma
The dominant ideology that Fat Positive images threaten is ‘biocitizenship,’ loosely defined as the ideological conflation between thinness, health, and personal worth (Halse 2008). Viewers’ allegedly objective concern for the women’s health produces top words such as: obese, healthy, unhealthy, overweight, health, heart, diabetes, and disease. Simultaneously, the viewers’ moral bias produces top words such as: problem, issue, imperfect, judge, shame, lazy, and wrong. It seems that the viewers of ‘Regular Women’ are primarily concerned with whether fat women deserve validation as beautiful and sexy, not whether they are healthy.

Ambiguous mutability
Significantly, viewers are conflicted about fat’s mutability. Words such as personal, preference, and choice all register in the body hair condition but they do not register in the fat condition; yet other top words that reflect fat’s mutability do register, such as food, exercise, and lifestyle. As this finding illuminates, fat defies easy categorization within Goffman’s mutable/immutable dichotomy: indeed, even Fat Positive researchers and activists disagree about whether to frame obesity as a disability rights issue or a feminist choice issue (Saguy and Riley 2005). Further complicating matters, systematic inequalities increase the chances of obesity among people of color and those who live in poverty (Kirkland 2011; Colls and Evans 2014). Reflecting fat’s ambiguous mutability, viewers appear to be conflicted about whether fat signifies a Goffmanian ‘blemish of character’ or an ‘abomination of the body.’ Some who construct fat as mutable espouse the type of victim-blaming rhetoric that Goffman anticipated:

Being obese is NOT normal. I’m so tired of this ‘it’s my thyroid, or my genetics’ BS. If you want to lose weight and be healthier, you will if you stick to it. If you don’t then, say hello to limited physical activity, higher risk for diseases, and a shorter lifespan.
This discourse conflates thinness with health, reflecting the prevalence of biocitizenship. Some defend their right to cast this judgment through an ‘I once was fat, but now am saved’ rhetoric:

I used to weigh 274 pounds and other women would tell me to ‘be happy in the skin I am in’ and there was no way that was happening. The skin I was in was on the border of diabetes and other health problems. I am now 100 pounds lighter and perfectly healthy - that is what one should celebrate.

This salvation discourse also reflects biocitizenship, by constructing personal worth and obesity as mutually exclusive categories. According to this passage, Fat Positivity threatens those who strive to embody the thin ideal; if fat women are allowed to be beautiful and happy, then the sacrifices that other women make to maintain their thinness become moot.

In response to this victim-blaming rhetoric, some of the presently obese emphasize their fat’s immutability and their allegiance to the biocitizenship lifestyle, ‘i am roughly 260 lbs and i watch what I eat every day and am very active. I have a medical condition that causes me to be this weight and I LOVE my body!!’ According to this discourse, those who invest effort into diet and exercise are proper biocitizens despite their fat. This discourse challenges the ideological association between thinness and health, but it simultaneously reinforces the compulsory status of the biocitizenship lifestyle. In effect, this rhetoric subordinates those with mutable fat beneath those with immutable fat.

Finally, a third discourse related to biocitizenship dismisses the relevance of fat’s mutability altogether, defending fat women's right to do with their bodies as they please: ‘Why does society get to decide what is beautiful? What do you care if they are unhealthy? To each his own. Live and let live.’ This discourse challenges the exclusionary beauty ideal that selectively assigns beauty to thin women, though it does not necessarily disassociate women’s beauty from their worth. Furthermore, this discourse problematically suggests that choice is equal for everyone, without addressing how race, age, and ability influence women’s relationships with their bodies and with society.

These three discourses demonstrate the ambiguity of fat’s mutability and the conflicting hierarchies that manifest within the biocitizenship framework as a result. Some argue that fat people are of lesser worth because they are fat; others argue that fat people are worthy so long as they eat healthy foods and exercise; and others argue that everyone deserves to be happy regardless of their lifestyle and/or body. These results confirm that biocitizenship assigns higher worth to active fat people than inactive fat people; indicating the presence of a fat stigma hierarchy. However, these pariahs are not subordinated on the basis of gender, so much as their thinness/health and therefore the biocitizenship discourses do not necessarily reflect a pariah femininity hierarchy.

**Bad mothers**

There is some evidence of a gendered element of the fat stigma, since the seemingly irrelevant top words register: *children* and *kids*. However, these words appear in polarizing contexts. Some viewers pardon the women for being fat so long as that fat resulted from reproduction: for example, ‘for crying out loud a lot of these gorgeous women in these photos are moms who have gained weight over the years of having children.’ According to this rhetoric, women who are fat due to reproduction deserve praise rather than condemnation; these hypothetical self-sacrificing women traded their figures for motherhood, thereby upholding Western gender ideals. On the other side of the spectrum, some construct fat mothers as bad mothers, as though their fat endangers the next generation:

I am glad that obese women can be comfortable in their bodies, however, it is not healthy. Further, the fact that they have children should help them want to be healthy! They should want to be great role models for their children!

According to this ‘what about the children’ discourse, thin mothers are better than fat mothers; in turn, fat mothers are better than fat non-mothers. Though this construction certainly reveals a stigma hierarchy among fat women, it is not necessarily a pariah femininity hierarchy; after all, viewers are ultimately concerned that these women will create more fat in society, regardless of the child’s gender.
**Body hair**

In comparison to women's body fat, women's body hair epitomizes Schippers’ definition of ‘pariah femininity,’ as traits that:

… contradict or deviate from practices defined as feminine, threaten men's exclusive possession of hegemonic masculine characteristics, and most importantly, constitute a refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony. (Schippers 2007, 95)

The following discourses and top words demonstrate that women's body hair epitomizes all three of these aforementioned threats, and disproportionately transgresses Budgeon's ‘boundary of ‘socially acceptable’ femininity.’

**Man-hating**

Whereas images of happy fat women only generated three gendered top words including woman, women, and ladies, images of happy hairy women generated nine, including the additional words: gender, men, man, guy, and dude. Unlike the gendered words in the body fat condition, these additional words do not describe the models; this section argues that they illuminate the distinctly gendered boundary that women's body hair threatens.

As the words men, man, guy, and dude indicate, many viewers construct women's body hair as something that has something to do with men. One dominant discourse constructs women's body hair as something harmful that women do to men, something that takes sexual pleasure away from them; this construction operates under a series of intertwined heteronormative assumptions. For example: ‘Look girls, you can flout this ‘re-defined’ quasi-feminist beauty all you want. Maybe it empowers you to try to look like men …. I don’t know. But I can assure you most men just find it gross.’ Another example of this discourse is, ‘Sorry … not dating a girl whose armpits look like mine. Not happening.’ According to these passages, women are ‘gross’ if they keep their body hair because it makes them look like men. Just as the biocitizen framework equates thinness with personal worth, this heteronormative discourse equates heterosexual appeal with women's worth; in order to secure status within this system, women embody emphasized femininity by looking as different from men as possible. If they refuse to remove their body hair, they become too similar to men and consequently challenge men's heterosexual status.

It is important to note that the women in these campaigns are presumed heterosexual: the word lesbian and its synonyms only appear once in the one thousand body hair comments that I analyzed, despite ‘Hair Everywhere’s’ inclusion of a picture of two women in bed together. In stark contrast, the word feminism registers as a top word in the body hair condition (and only appears once in the body fat script). In other words, it appears that viewers perceive women’s body hair to be politically rather than sexually motivated, and a reliable signifier of feminist identity. As a result of this construction, some self-identified heterosexual male viewers construct women's refusal to shave as a personal affront, indicative of ‘man-hating.’ For example:

after reading this article I recommend that you read the 10.000.000 articles about ‘why am I still single’ . It is not because hairy armpits are the problem. It is because of the ‘I wont conform’ attitude that feminism teaches nowadays.

This passage clearly associates feminism, but not necessarily lesbianism, with body hair, while it constructs hairy women as subordinate to hairless women within the heterosexual matrix. In this context, women's body hair operates as a reliable marker of a feminist ‘blemish of character.’

Another androcentric discourse constructs women's body hair advocacy as hypocritical, given men's hair removal practices: ‘When women stop worrying about my ear hair, nose hair, neck hair, and bald spot, then I’ll consider the point made in this article. I’m not holding my breath.’ This exchange economy rhetoric suggests that if men remove their body hair, women should have to remove their body hair as well. However, this logic overlooks the labor differential between maintaining an illusion of full-body smoothness and the selective grooming that ‘manscaping’ entails; moreover, studies indicate that men's body hair remains significantly more socially acceptable than women's, despite the increasingly normative status of male depilation (Boroughs 2012; Terry and Braun 2013).
Choice

Whereas viewers seem conflicted about fat’s mutability, viewers construct women’s body hair as an explicit matter of choice: top words include choice, personal, preference, want, and brainwash. Because women can (and are encouraged to) remove their body hair, women who keep it signal a politicized refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony (Schippers, 95). Viewers hold these women accountable for their own marginalization and even construct their deviance as an affront to gender-conformists.

Viewers are reluctant to acknowledge that social pressures influence their own actions, ‘I like to shave (legs every day) because I like the way it feels, not because of what someone else thinks looks good. What a dull world if everyone looked the same.’ This viewer constructs her decision to shave as one that contributes to aesthetic diversity, despite evidence that approximately 95% of Western women remove their body hair (Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi 2005; Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008; Boroughs 2012; Terry and Braun 2013). Of course, if shaving were truly a ‘free’ or ‘personal’ choice, it would be unlikely that 95% of women would follow the same course of action; nevertheless, neoliberal ideology rejects evidence of such social influence in favor of agency narratives. Hairless norm scholars Tiggemann and Lewis (2004) observed a similar phenomenon among their sample of 198 South Australian undergraduates; these young women agreed that other women are coerced into hair removal, but insisted that they remove their own body hair due to ‘personal preference’ and ‘choice’.

Some self-identified male viewers also insist that their erotic preference for hairless women is a ‘personal choice.’ This construction denies the possibility of an ‘erotic habitus,’ which sociologist Adam Green (2008) defines as ‘a socially structured set of erotic dispositions, schemes of perceptions and appreciations that interface with more idiosyncratic, biographical, and psychological factors [that] make certain objects more or less likely to be focal points of arousal’ (Green 2008, 615). However, heterosexual men in Western society may be more likely to find women’s hairlessness erotically stimulating for a number of socially influenced reasons: hairlessness is associated with emphasized femininity which accretes erotic value in the heterosexual matrix; hairy women ‘threaten men’s exclusive possession of hegemonic masculine characteristics’; and desire for ‘manly’ women compromises men’s status as heterosexual. By denying the influence of erotic habitus, this discourse naturalizes heterosexual men’s erotic desire for emphasized femininity, thereby reinforcing gender hegemony.

‘Real women

Finally, a third and unexpected discourse emerges within the comments generated by ‘Natural Beauty,’ that illuminates the hegemonic status of fat within the Body Positive movement: a heated debate about whether images of thin women qualify as ‘real woman’ imagery. It is true that all of the models in the body hair campaigns are thin, but it is also true that all of the models in the fat campaign are hairless. Indeed, this single-axis formula is routine within the ‘real woman’ canon, as one observant viewer explains:

It’s a lot easier to present fill-in-the-blank as compatible with female beauty if you juxtapose it with conventional standards for every other aspect of the model’s appearance. If the photographer had chosen women who were older, heavier, less-symmetric, and so on down the list of what’s expected to constitute beauty, too much of the audience would have just been unable to see them as beautiful.

Moreover, research confirms the efficacy of such a formula; images that selectively deviate from the beauty ideal through one experimental trait are easier for viewers to recognize as ‘beautiful’ (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004).

Despite the routine hairlessness of Fat Positive imagery, a sizeable contingent of ‘Natural Beauty’ viewers dismissed the first ‘real woman’ campaign in ten years to feature body hair because it omitted body fat. Indeed, the hegemonic status of fat within the Body Positive movement is evident within the top word registers: although the word hair does not appear anywhere in the comment transcript from ‘Regular Women,’ ‘Natural Beauty’ generated seemingly irrelevant top words including thin, skinny, and
This unexpected finding demonstrates how ‘the privilege of particular femininities is sustained … at the expense of other possible articulations’ (Budgeon 2014, 326). Based on the identity politics that emerge within this discourse, I conclude that fat operates as hegemonic within the Body Positive movement; compared to body fat, women’s body hair transgresses the ‘boundary of socially acceptable’ femininity’ within the Body Positive movement.

Conclusion

The sociology of gender posits that masculinity and femininity are both multiple and hierarchical; this study has advanced hegemonic gender theory by demonstrating that pariah femininity is also multiple and hierarchical. According to viewers of this Body Positive ‘real woman’ imagery, white women’s body hair poses a relatively direct threat to the hegemonic gender order, compared to their body fat. This is because body hair is socially constructed as relatively mutable and gender-inverse, key stigma characteristics that Goffman emphasized in his original stigma theory; as a result of Goffman’s explanatory power, I advocate for a reinvigoration of stigma analysis within interdisciplinary feminist studies.

This study has also confirmed that a cultural association lingers between white women’s body hair and feminism in the United States; however, it is important to note that this finding is not generalizable beyond this context. Future studies should determine how body hair stigma changes based on demographics including race, sexuality, and nationality. Future studies might also expand upon these findings through offline methods such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups; such methods might enable researchers to note differences of opinion among respondents based on their demographics. Finally, future efforts to map the pariah femininity hierarchy should identify parameters of stigma that are associated with other masculinized traits such as women’s facial hair, broad shoulders, and height.

Most pressingly, future studies into feminist stigma management should identify the implications of this association between white women’s body hair and feminism. All women grow body hair; therefore, all women (or at least all white women) are (dis)credible as feminists. Of course, not all women with body hair are feminists, and not all feminists are hairy. However, it would seem that feminists who keep their body hair experience the feminist stigma differently than those who remove it. As the popular disclaimer ‘I’m not a feminist, but …’ suggests, feminist pride transgresses the ‘boundary of socially acceptable’ femininity’, at least in the United States.

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