

**‘When there's no underbrush the tree looks taller’: A discourse analysis of men’s online groin shaving talk.**

Abstract

It seems many men continue to be obsessed with their penis and especially its size and look. Two thirds of men in a recent UK study (Veale et al., 2013) reported some dissatisfaction with their genitals. Arguably much of this anxiety is perpetuated by the media and marketers, but may also follow more general trends in male body image consciousness (Grogan, 2010; Flowers et al., 2013). Marketers have been quick to offer both surgical and non-surgical remedies to help change the size, shape and image of the penis, especially online. Stepping aside from more traditional scholarly foci on culture (Lehman, 2006), media (Lehman, 2007), social (Davison, 200) and personal relationship issues (Lever et al., 2006), I focus instead on how men account for pubic hair shaving to enhance image. I discursively analysis online electronic talk in response to an advert promoting male groin grooming showing the complex ways in which men discursively negotiate their interest in this non-typical gender practice. The analysis shows charges of vanity are swept under the carpet in favour of heterosexual pleasure, cleanliness, self-respect and individuality. The implications for understanding traditional and contemporary masculinities are also discussed.

*Key words:* body image, penis size, penis aesthetics, masculinities, discourse analysis,

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Introduction

Appearance for men (and women) is becoming an increasingly important feature of modern consumerist and individualistic societies and a key resource for identity construction (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Where once a man’s identity was largely drawn from work, sport and family discourses, the exponential growth in consumerism and the media has provided men with a multitude of alternative identity discourses; ones which they are tasked with, and accountable for, designing and maintaining (Giddens, 1991). The payoff for such identity and body work is social and psychological well-being. That is, as many marketers promote ‘look good, feel good’ (Featherstone, 1991, D’Alessandro and Chitty, 2011, Grogan, 2010). Whilst more traditional discourses clearly remain available and influential, men are increasingly held accountable if they fail to invest time and resources in their appearance (see Hall et al., 2012a; 2012b). As Grogan (2010) points out, these modern pressures often lead to men and boys (and women and girls) developing anxieties around body image - size, shape, colour, muscularity, thinness and tone for the body as a whole and its individual body parts.

Men’s genital size and shape appear to be no exception (Tiggemann et al., 2008; Veale et al., 2013; Wylie and Eardley, 2007). Indeed, the Online Slang Dictionary (<http://onlineslangdictionary.com/>) boasts one-hundred-and-sixty-five English slang terms for the penis. Many of these refer to size and specifically the penis as long and thick. For example; babies arm, bratwurst, chopper, dong, one-eyed-monster, one-eyed-trouser-snake, pocket rocket, pork sword, trouser meat, whanger

and so on. This isn't surprising given that penis size has traditionally been a symbol of masculinity particularly when erect. Wylie and Eardley (2007, p. 1449) point out, 'in many cultures it has come to symbolise attributes such as largeness, strength, endurance, ability, courage, intelligence, knowledge, dominance over men, possession of women; a symbol of loving and being loved' and also fertility. Given this symbolism, it's understandable that some men may feel inadequate if they don't meet perceived cultural norms. Indeed, two thirds of men in a recent UK study (Veale et al., 2013) reported some dissatisfaction with their genital size, and Tiggemann et al.'s (2008) research reported penis size as the third biggest concern for men (behind body weight and muscularity).

Much of this is arguably perpetuated by perceptions of the penis in the media. For example, the UK newspaper *The Daily Mail* (Gayle and Jones, 20 June, 2012) ran an article titled '*Sorry boys, size DOES matter: Scientific journal confirms men's worst bedroom fear*'. Apparently, researchers found that women who reported regular vaginal orgasms (as opposed to clitoral) said size is a key factor. Similarly, *Time* magazine (Szalavitz, 9 April, 2013) ran an article '*Size Does Matter: Study Shows Women Judge Male Attractiveness by Penis Size*'. Yet men might be consoled in other media articles such as '*Does size matter to women?*' (Burton, *Askmen.com*, 2013) reporting that 'women simply don't care about size. There will be the odd ones who say it is very important, but they are usually the ones who love aggressive sex'. With such mixed messages it's not surprising then that some men are sensitive about their genitals. For some, an inordinate fascination with size leads to the development of 'small penis syndrome' and associated psychological issues (Wylie and Eardley, 2007 see below).

Penis size is not the only concern for men. Besides the traditional importance

of symbolism and function, men are increasingly interested in its aesthetics. Langridge et al.'s (2013) paper elegantly presents an overview of recent trends in which long-standing penis anxieties have been re-frame within the context of health and aesthetics. New penis enhancement possibilities for size and aesthetics, not previously available, mean that men are increasingly confronted with ideas that they should change their penis. Marketers now capitalise upon, and promote, penis-related products, helping to increase mediated penis anxieties. Size and aesthetics concerns are reported to produce a multitude of psychological problems such as body dysmorphophobia<sup>1</sup>. Phillips and Castle, (2001) argue that about 15% of men have presented to physicians with this more severe body image disturbance condition which manifests itself as a preoccupation with an imagined or slight defect in the appearance of their penis, which has caused clinically significant distress or impairment in its function. Indeed, conditions such as erectile dysfunction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social phobia, relationship and emotional problems, along with anxiety and depression where also reported in Lever et al.'s (2006; see also Levine, 2000 for a more detailed examination) Internet survey of 52,031 heterosexual men and women. Kilmartin (2000, pp. 215–216) points out that psychological-based issues with the penis issues manifest because 'Real men are... described as having huge penises.' Wylie and Eardley, (2007) report 'these concerns, when severe, can lead a man to go to extreme lengths to try to change the size of his penis'

Many marketers now offer remedies and procedures for those interested in altering their penis. One only has to look in ones 'junk mail' box or conduct a simple 'Google' search to see the vast array of quick fix solutions such non-surgical remedies to extend and reshape the penis. These range from weights (BlueKink 11b weight) to

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<sup>1</sup>Dysmorphophobia or body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a psychiatric condition in which the individual has a fixation on a perceived imagine flaw leading to an inordinate amount of anguish.

electrical devices (X4 Labs Extender) and pumps (Bathmate Hercules hydro pump), herbal (Virectin pills, Ozomen oil) and pharmaceutical interventions (e.g. human growth hormone - hGH), self-administrable such as clamping (restricting blood flow) and Jelqing (massaging blood flow). On a more extreme level penile augmentation surgery procedures such as penoplasty or phalloplasty<sup>2</sup> are available. The numbers of men opting for these types of cosmetic procedures are steadily increasingly according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (see Aitkenhead, 2005).

The plethora of penis enhancement products, along with men's psychological presentation to physicians (Lever et al., 2006; Levine, 2000; Kilmartin, 2000; Phillips & Castle, 2001; Wylie & Eardley, 2007) are markers of men's penis size disturbances. Marketers such as Gillette - the global men's grooming giant (Forbes, 2012) – have been quick to furnish and contribute to such insecurities by expanding the use of their product range from facial hair to include non-head body hair removal. For example, a recent animated viral video advert (2009) shows men how to shave their groin. Apparently shaving the groin area makes the penis looks bigger and better, marketed with the amusing and catchy slogan 'when there's no underbrush the tree looks taller'. 'How To Shave Down There' (<http://www.gillette.com/en/us/mens-style/body-shaving.aspx>) is the most popular viral video out of the 7 specifically targeted at men with over 5,804,907 views and 5129 comments (as of 16.11.13). The popularity of its closest rival comes in with a mere 814,485 views and 814 comments.

There are two potential problems for men who openly ascribe to undertaking groin shaving. Firstly, to do so might imply one is concerned with their penis size and

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<sup>2</sup>Penoplasty refers to the enlargement of the penis by surgery. Although phalloplasty is often used interchangeably with penoplasty, phalloplasty more specifically refers to the surgical (re-)construction or artificial modification of the penis for cosmetic purposes.

secondly, genital grooming, like many modes of grooming for men, has traditionally been associated with women and femininity (Edwards, 2003). Indeed, Edwards (2003 p. 141-142) argues that men and image-enhancement practices are still considered ‘antithetical if not an outright oxymoron’. Other image-conscious research on the metrosexual (Hall et al., 2012a; 2012b), men’s health and lifestyle practices (Watson, 2000), obesity (Gough et al., 2013), illness (Robertson et. al., 2010) and body hair removal (Immergut, 2010) support this view, showing that men must simultaneously disavow any ‘inappropriate’ interest in their own appearance in order to maintain ‘manliness’, or risk being cast as vain, weak, effeminate or gay. In other words, they can’t appear to be feminine but neither can they get away with being a slob (Gill et al., 2005). Building on this work, I examine how men account for pubic hair grooming.

Focusing on men’s electronic responses to the Gillette groin shaving advert also offers three important points of entry into the study of men and masculinities. Firstly, examining men’s talk offers a key example of how masculinities are constructed and negotiated in situ, especially in relation to non-typical gender activities. Secondly, the focus on men’s groin shaving offers an important example of a wider trend in men’s image conscious practices (Hall et al., 2012a; 2012b). Lastly, examining masculinities in situ offers a critical point in which to consider the changing nature of, and engage with, theoretical concepts on masculinities. For example, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is understood to be the variety of masculine identities amassed around expectations of what masculinity is presumed to be; even though most men do not enact it all men are required to position themselves in relation to them (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Such masculinities are often portrayed in films by characters played by Vin Diesel – tough, emotionally stoic and muscular. Yet

many men reject some aspects of the dominant attitudes or traits in various contexts and are more willing to embrace traditional feminized ones instead (e.g. childcare and grooming). Anderson (2005) argues this indicates that masculinities are becoming more 'inclusive'. The final theoretical concept is the perspective that because of feminist equality pressures some men have found it difficult to orientate to traditional gender distinct identities or embrace aspects of femininity (e.g. work in traditional feminine jobs) and as such has resulted in masculinities in being in 'crisis' (MacInnes, 2001).

#### Data and method

The dataset is drawn from the premier Internet video publisher YouTube (Nielsen, 2009). Founded in February 2005, YouTube allows people to easily upload and share video clips on a range of topics including 'how to' demonstrations and adverts. As with other online sites, YouTube provides viewers with the ability to engage with the material they encounter through computer-mediated communication channels - text and video comments. These allow viewers to write comments on, and rate responses to, their favourite videos. More recently this has been extended to display first top-rated comments from others in one's Google+ Circles and comments with many 'likes' and replies. Replies can now be email threaded to follow specific conversations and creators. In addition, respondents can moderate other's responses to their material.

Two points need to be noted about these new developments. Whilst these help bring to life the electronic talk for respondents, threads (or parts of) can disappear quickly and become truncated, interfering with the context of the remaining text. Secondly, by providing email and social circle links, a greater potential arises for the

disclosure of respondents personal details via hyperlinks to home pages. Having consulted the British Psychological Society's *Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (2013) and the relevant university approved ethics I opted to anonymize all responses with made-up tags to minimize the risk of pseudonyms, tags and hyperlinks being identified by others. Attempts to access individual permission were dismissed since many had posted with pseudonyms and tags, and hadn't provide hyperlinks to personal details.

Having downloaded all 5129 comments from the Gillette video 'How to Shave Down There' I coded the talk by response type. Admittedly, some responses could have fitted into two or more response types. These I added an additional code to avoid overlooking their potential importance. Since my interest was on why men shave their pubic hair I further clustered responses drawing out the main themes (see table below)

Primary Coding	Post Numbers	Secondary Coding	Post Numbers
Abuse	51	Equality	53
Adverts	42	Cleanliness/hygiene	179
Curiosity	385	Individuality	98
Disbelief	199	Sexuality	274
Foreign language	11	Self-respect	146
Gratitude	137	Size	127
'How to' groin shaving advice asking	741		
	583		
'How to' groin shaving advice giving	633		
	157		
Humour	21		
It's gay or non-masculine	25		
It's marketing ploy	134		
Laughter only	119		
Non-genital 'manscaping' advice giving	989		
	423		
Non-genital 'manscaping' advice asking	22		
	287		
Personal experience statements	9		
Penis size statements	76		
Questions on a video for women			
Spam			
Redirection mistake			
Religious			

Video-related questions			
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The analysis I present is a selection of the accounts that emphasized eloquently the specific reasons for their groin shaving. I present the extracts in full as they appear on YouTube including spelling mistakes, colloquial language and emoticons.

Before analyzing the electronic data it's important to discuss the goals of discourse analysis in general. A general aim is to explore how 'versions of world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse' and so discourse analysis has 'a concern with participants' constructions and how they are accomplished and undermined' (Potter, 1997, p. 146). In other words, there are a multiplicity of versions of the world that can be worked up at any given time and on a moment-to-moment basis during conversational interaction. Yet the specific version(s) will depend on the topic of conversation (e.g. general, technical, delicate), whom one is conversing with (e.g. mother, close friend, employer), the context (complaint, justification), location (face-to-face, telephone, social media) and time.

In order to see how such things come into play within a stretch of talk I follow a step-by-step procedure identifying how each extract fits together and for what the respondent was achieving at each and every stage (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Each segment of text is analyzed for its individual, sequential, relational and contextual relevance following these three steps:

1. Locate the central themes that are named and/or implied in the talk.
2. Focus on the discursive activities with each text.
3. Look at how respondents construct accounts, produce descriptions, manage stake, frame specific activities and make connections for the implied social actions.

Although following these analytical steps allows us to see how versions of the world are worked up in talk-in-action, analysts need to be mindful of over analysing the text and drawing on their own knowledge of social norms and expectations. Edwards and Potter (1992) argue therefore, that to avoid analyst-lead interpretations of real-world phenomena, analysts should instead read the interactions, that is only what is made relevant, of the participants involved. This latter point is one of the major differences discourse analysis and other discursive methodologies (e.g. Critical Discourse Analysis or Foucauldian Analysis). Where discursive methodologies such as Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001, p.229-266) and Foucauldian Analysis (Foucault, 1980) become interpretative commentaries is when they attempt to make links between what emerges from a micro-analysis and the macro-issues such as the operation of power, ideology, and persuasion. What discourse analysis argues is that macro-structures can only be commented on if the participants in the interaction make it relevant. If not then it is simply an analyst commentary. I follow this perspective in the following analysis and discussion.

## Analysis

Whilst one would expect most respondents would be male given the focus of the video, certainty about male response can be gained through male indexing. Indexing can be explicit with traditional names for men (now anonymised), male positioning in relation to females (girls, women, their, us), male action references (Ffs i shaved down there before I watched this) and invoking typical masculine markers (have no pubes girls will give head easier). These are treatable as 'male' even without this identity being 'named out aloud' (Antaki & Widdicombe (1998, p. 4). In the

following analytical section I examine the response types; size, health and hygiene, heterosexual pay-off, equality, self-respect and individuality. For ease of understanding and reading I have loosely presented them within the analytical sections - (Dis)engaging with size, A female and heterosexual imperative, Gender distinction or equality? And Individuality and minimization.

As expected size was evident in many responses. The following two extracts show interesting ways in which men both engaged or disengaged with size concerns. The respondent in the next extract is orientating to Gillette's claim that 'the tree looks taller':

*(Dis)engaging with size*

Extract 1

Jimbob

1. Nope, it reveals nothing. Because no
2. matter how big dick is, it still is good
3. when it looks even bigger...

Jimbob's opening line 'Nope, it reveals nothing' contains a definitive 'Nope' and an extreme-case formulation 'nothing' (Pomerantz, 1986). As Edwards (2000, p. 348) points out, these serve to as discursive devices in 'defending positions against refutation, making complaints, and justifying factual claims'. Therefore Jimbob's initial sentence is readable as a refutation. In refuting people tend to, or are required by others, to provide an account for this discursive action (Potter 1996). Jimbob's account centers on the presumption that any practice that makes the one's 'dick' 'look even bigger' is 'good' regardless of 'how big dick is'. In doing so he is refuting Gillette's implied claim that this practice is for those with a smaller penis. What this

also does however, is reinforce penis size as a key aspect of masculinity (see Wylie and Eardley, 2007, p. 1449) and so any practice that increases size potentially also increases one's masculinity (Wylie and Eardley, 2007). In contrast to this response, the poster's comment in the next extract discounts size concerns.

#### Extract 2

Ontherodney

4. They put a negative spin on it with a
5. corrupt motive -- to "make the tree look
6. taller." Bad idea. Don't fall for that crap.
7. Most of us aren't trying to fool anyone. It's
8. just getting it cleaner and free of unwanted
9. hair. I don't see why they have to repeat that
10. juvenile deceptive crap. It sends a bad
11. message about insecurity and trickery.
12. Gillette hits a sour note for no reason. It's
13. about hygiene and natural beauty of the skin,
14. nothing else.

The overall context of Ontherodney's response is a critique of the advert for containing a 'negative spin', 'a corrupt motive' 'juvenile deceptive crap' regarding penis size. Indeed, penis size 'insecurities' are presented as predominantly adolescent ('juvenile'). Like Jimbob, Ontherodney's critique requires an account, which centers on the presented 'fact' that 'Most of us' (men) aren't concerned with trying to make our penis look longer; genital grooming is about 'hygiene and natural beauty'. In other words, cleanliness and aesthetics. The implication is that this pubic hair shaving is a common practice for men and a modern aspect of masculinity. What's also notable is that 'Most' is a 'softener' or 'non-extreme-case formulation' (Edwards, 2000, p.352). The use of softeners indicates the possibility of some readers undermining his claims (Edwards and Potter, 1992). That is, if a respondent anticipates others questioning their claims an account may be worked up beforehand,

especially if, like pubic hair shaving, it is a ‘delicate’ topic or non-typical gender activity (Silverman and Peräkylä, 2008). So, although Ontherodney positions pubic hair grooming as common for men, it also references it as non-traditional practice for some men – a point made more explicit in other responses as we will see.

The non-normativity of genital grooming for some men combined with his pragmatic justification ‘It’s just getting it cleaner and free of unwanted hair’ summons discourses of choice, individuality and self-respect (see Gill et al.’s, 2005 interview research on these as conventional category predicates of masculinity). Ontherodney is therefore, reframing this masculine activity with recourse to conventional masculine markers. In doing so, he masculinizes this activity but also inoculates it from charges of penis size and feminine interests (see Edwards and Potter, 1992 on ‘stake inoculation’). Since body hair removal has traditionally been seen as an activity of women and femininity (Edwards, 2003), and nearly two-thirds of men have genital dissatisfaction (Veale et al., 2013), it is hardly surprising that this topic is ‘delicate’, requiring careful management to avoid unwarranted charges.

In the following extracts Diamongeezer, Sammyboy and Justintime reframe pubic hair grooming as a requirement of female preference and heterosexual endeavor, albeit in differing ways:

*A female and heterosexual imperative*

Extract 3

Diamongeezer

15. Ffs i shaved down there before I watched this
16. video and now its icky as fuck. Btw if you
17. have no pubes girls will give head easier and
18. wont be disgusted by your pubes

Diamondgeezer's opener 'Ffs' (Acronym for, for fuck's sake; Urban Dictionary, 2014) acts an exclamation for the activity 'i shaved down there' which 'now its icky as fuck'. What's also evident is that the marker of time 'before' works to position himself as a novice who should have watched the advert before trying this activity. Yet we get a sense of the 'delicacy' in the account which he provides (Silverman and Peräkylä, 2008). Diamondgeezer manages his 'stake' (Edwards and Potter, 1992) in this practice by stating as 'fact' that 'girls will give head easier' (fellatio), which centers on pubic hair as unpalatable 'disgusted by your pubes'. This achieves several things. It places some accountability for shaving pubic hair with women's preferences but ultimately with men's own pleasure. The implied pleasure payoff 'girls will give head easier' draws on a classic marker of masculine status – frequent heterosexual activity (see Donaldson, 1993 for more traditional masculine markers). The final point to note is that by undertaking this reframing action Diamondgeezer deflects attention from charges that he is doing this to enhance his penis. Similarly, this framing of genital grooming as sexual pleasure and female preference is evident in the next extract, albeit differently:

#### Extract 4

Sammyboy

19. I really didn't want to do that but my girl said I
20. had to or else I don't get any :(

Sammyboy begins with by personalizing his account 'I', which is immediately followed by an extreme-case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) 'really'. The deployment of this maximizes the properties of his claim 'I... didn't want to' reducing the basis for others to search for an additional accounts – possibly penis size or ascetic

interests. Yet like other posters Sammyboy still manages his stake in this non-typical masculine practice by offering an account which centers on framing it as his girlfriend's demand ('or else') 'my girl said I had to or else I don't get any :('. Like Diamondgeezer the payoff is heterosexual activity.

#### Extract 5

##### Justintime

21. Most of the (str8) young males that I know say
22. they shave-off their bush. It is b/c females want
23. the guys to shave their bush so it doesn't scratch
24. their sensitive shaved pubic area during sexual
25. intercourse. Twenty years ago it was unheard of,
26. or weird, for a guy shave-off his bush

It would be easy to simply gloss this response as another '(str8) young male' justifying pubic hair shaving as a female requirement for intercourse. Yet that would miss many other important features of the text. For example, although 'most' is a softener (Edwards, 2000), it also acts an orientation device for him as a member of the collective category '(str8) young male' but in referencing 'their'. His membership of this category of men is affirmed by his access to other members 'young males that I know' and members' knowledge 'they shave-off their bush'. In doing so, Justintime sets up a contrast pair of identity categories - those who do/don't shave pubic hair (Smith, 1978). By invoking the commonality of 'Most' positions those who don't shave pubic hair as in the minority and therefore accountable for their non-activity. Like the previous two extracts this is accounted for by recourse to heterosexuality ('sexual intercourse') and what women want ('females want the guys to shave their bush'). Also like Diaomondgeezer, Justintimeprovides this as a 'factual' description 'so it doesn't scratch their sensitive pubic area', which works to strengthen his position. However, Justintime does still recognize that some might not agree with his

participation in this activity and so further positions this act as modern ('Twenty years ago it was unheard of...for a guy shave-off his bush') and in doing so is able to hold those who don't participate in this action as outmoded.

Implicating women for men's actions was a common feature of the dataset even when men (and teenage boys) did state that they 'shave their junk becuz it can get pretty sweaty and stuff down there' or 'i like the feel of no hair down there' for personal reasons. Yet what was also evident from all the comments that did reframe pubic hair shaving in this way was that none of them said that women wanted it removed so that their penis size would be enhanced (sexual activity and pleasure were instead foregrounded)

In the following sequence the debate centers on gender equity and whether this practice should be suitable for either sex as a practice for cleanliness.

*Gender distinction or equality?*

Extract 6

Silversimon

27. Why should women be
28. expected to keep it clean down there
29. but not guys? Its respect. I don't like
30. hair, and I'm sure women don't either.
31. They appreciate a clean shaven man
32. and I'm happy to give it them. Welcome
33. to the 21st century.

Dannyboy

34. Women shouldn't be shaving "down
35. there" either. You can be clean without
36. removing every piece of hair on your
37. body. Certain aspects of shaving (men's
38. faces and backs, womens legs and
39. underarms) I will admit make a person
40. look neat and contribute to a nice appearance.
41. Woman with matted leg hair under stockings
42. or men with messy long beards and shaggy
43. hair look gross. But this is an extreme.

Silversimon

44. I disagree, for one, I have a tongue ring, hair
45. wrappes around that easily. Plus, it dont matter
46. how short you trim it, you have the prickly
47. feeling on your tongue, and for some people,
48. its like a jungle down there. Disgusting. I dont
49. shave/remove hair all over my body, there are
50. many places I like hair to be, but thats just a
51. place I think is so 70's and its just gross looking.
52. Skin against skin will ALWAYS feel better
53. then skin against hair.

Silversimon links pubic hair shaving as an activity for keeping genitalia clean ('to keep it clean down there'). His questioning of gender inequity based on 'Its respect' identifies this as a typical activity for women and femininity, supported also by Silversimon's personalised perspective 'I don't like hair', which suggests others may not agree. Like previous accounts, Silversimon's presents this as firstly as a desire of women ('I'm sure women don't either') which is then upgraded to a factual based assessment ('They appreciate a clean shaven man'). This upgrading of his knowledge from 'presumed' to 'known' supports his discursive strategy of inoculation from charges of doing this for reasons other than equality. What's also interesting is that like Justintime, this activity is seen as a modern aspect of masculinity ('Welcome to the 21st century'), one that draws on contemporary notions of the equality of the sexes and a rejection of some aspects of conventional masculinities (see Anderson, 2005 for more on inclusive masculinities). In doing so, those who don't participate in this activity can be held accountable for being sexist.

Similarly, Dannyboy invokes a reverse style of equality ('Women shouldn't be shaving "down there" either'), presenting it as a critique ('You can be clean without removing every piece of hair on your body'). But risking advocating no body hair removal at all he genders aspects of body hair removal '(men's faces and backs,

womens legs and underarms)’ accounting for non-participation as ‘gross’. What is evident from Dannyboy’s post is that whilst he critiques modern body hair practices as ‘extreme’, he is simultaneously advocating the status quo. That is, gender specific grooming to ‘look neat and contribute to a nice appearance’ (see Immergut, 2010 for more detail on specific body hair removal).

Silversimon’s initial rebuttal centers on Dannyboy’s account as being outdated, since keeping pubic hair ‘wrappes around a tongue ring’ – aspects of some modern identities (Carroll and Anderson, 2002). Yet ‘I dont shave/remove hair all over my body, there are many places I like hair to be’ suggests he doesn’t want to risk appearing too ‘extreme’ and distances himself from Dannyboy’s more normative gender position. Interestingly the second way he manages stake is in recycling his earlier comment of this being a modern aspect of masculine identity (‘I think is so 70’s’). However, perhaps the most novel, and riskier, aspect of his account is advocating intimacy (‘Skin against skin will ALWAYS feel better then skin against hair’). Combined with supporting gender equality Silversimon’s account can be read as both an ‘inclusive’ masculinity (Anderson, 2005), but also a ‘gender rebel’ (Wetherell and Edley, 1999).

Positioning oneself as ‘gender rebel’ was a similar tact by Cityboy in the following extract. However, unlike Silversimon, he doesn’t draw on more modern ‘inclusive’ aspects of masculinity, but rather draws on more conventional ‘individuality’ (Gill et al., 2005).

### *Individuality and minimization*

#### Extract 7

Cityboy

54. I have been shaving down there for a long time and  
 55. I like and prefer it that way. To each his own and  
 56. everyone should respect that. I'm sure people have  
 57. searched much more weird and bizarre things than  
 58. that! Groin shaving is tame compared to things I've  
 59. seen here.

Cityboy's initial sentence ('I have been shaving down there for a long time') marks him as seasoned and perhaps a fair bit older than some of the other posters. What this does is lend authority to the account he is about to deliver. But rather than a simple account of personal preference ('I...prefer') and tolerance and respect ('each to his own'), Cityboy draws on experience to counter potential critiques ('Groin shaving is tame compared to things I've seen here). Indeed, in positioning himself as a 'man-of-the-world' and inviting others to recall their own experiences ('I'm sure people have searched much more weird and bizarre things than that!') he is able to trivialize this activity and anybody who wishes to challenge him.

This style of countering and reframing of groin shaving as seasoned masculinity, individuality and rebellious was also deployed by Davetherave. But what is interesting and novel about this response is the way the respondent is able to discount conventional gender-discrete activities.

#### Extract 8

#### Davetherave

60. I have pretty much always lived my life  
 61. in an unorthodox fashion. I never really  
 62. TRIED to be different for the sake of being  
 63. different...just interested in new and unusual  
 64. things and experimentation. You only live  
 65. once so I want to do more than everyday  
 66. mundane things to make life a bit more  
 67. exciting. And I do mean more exciting than  
 68. groin shaving...HaHah!!

As with other posters, Davetherave personalizes his account ('I have'). But whereas Sammyboy's deployment of 'I' positioned himself as like many other men ('I really didn't want to' but had to), Davetherave positions himself outside gender norms ('I have pretty much always lived my life in an unorthodox fashion'). In doing so he draws on the masculine markers of individuality ('You only live once'), rebelliousness ('unorthodox'), and a man-of-the-world ('lived my life...interested in new and unusual things and experimentation') (Anderson, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Gill et al., 2005; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). What also supports his masculinised account of groin shaving is that it is presented as authoritative, marked by experience and time ('I have pretty much always'), and additionally supported by the deployment of several extreme-case formulations ('pretty much always', 'never really' and 'everyday'; Pomerantz, 1996). What's also notable is the way he manages his 'stake' as non-accountable and an inherent aspect of his identity ('I never really TRIED to be different for the sake of being different'). In other words, his 'effortlessness' repertoire allows him to orient to potential critiques regarding vanity and sensation-seeking.

## **Discussion**

Clearly, in-depth discourse analysis of men and teenage boy's accounts of groin shaving can cast light on the manifold ways interest in penis size and aesthetic practices are accounted for in masculine ways. For example, in contemporary terms groin shaving was practiced for cleanliness 'hygiene and natural beauty' and gender equality 'It is b/c females want the guys to shave their bush'. Whereas, in more conventional terms it was had the additional advantage of having a 'dick' 'look even bigger', but also drawing on individuality 'You only live once', rebelliousness 'unorthodox' and worldly 'Groin shaving is tame compared to things I've seen here.'

Reframing this practice in masculine ways isn't surprising given hair-removal and image-consciousness has traditionally been seen as in the realm of women and femininity (Gill et al., 2005).

What was also noticeable was that only two respondents engaged with size issues (extract 1 & 2). Jimbob implied he already had a 'big dick' in stating 'look even bigger' whereas Ontherodney vehemently dismissed size concerns 'It's about hygiene and natural beauty of the skin and nothing else'. The absence of posts stating that they wanted to 'make the tree appear taller' is also not surprising since to suggest that is one's objective signals to other reads and respondents that one has penis size anxieties. Whilst it would be foolish to speculate on whether the respondents suffered more extreme psychological issues Wylie and Eardley (2007, p. 1449) document (e.g. dysmorphophobia), we do get a sense of the changing dynamics of heterosexual relationship and emotional interactions when respondents report shaving for women 'I really didn't want to do that but my girl said I had to or else I don't get any :('. But what is evident from an increasing number of men and teenage boys are willing to engage, whether by action or response (nearly 6m hits and over 5000 comments), with this non-typical gender activity is that it supports Veale et al., (2013) findings on men and boys fascination and dissatisfaction with their genitals.

Although some men talked about wanting to enhance the size and look of their penis there was no evidence to suggest these respondents had anxieties about penis size 'small penis syndrome' (Wylie and Eardley, 2007). One might speculate that men may not openly admit to shaving the groin for this reason since it would potentially invite ridicule. Perhaps an open, widely available public forum is not the best place to examine these issues. Yet what this study does show, is that penis size is not the only concern for men. Men seem to be increasingly interested in penis

aesthetics (see Langridge et al., 2013). New penis enhancement possibilities not previously available, mean that men are increasingly confronted with ideas that they should change their penis. As we saw marketers have been quick to capitalise upon and promote penis-related products. However, for men to invest in these they risk being cast as insecure or vain (Edwards, 2003). Therefore, men must simultaneously negotiate (dis)interest in their penis. The analysis demonstrated the complex ways in which men achieved this and how many men swept charges of insecurity and vanity under the carpet in favour of heterosexual pleasure, cleanliness, self-respect and individuality.

Framing groin shaving with more traditional masculine markers such as penis size 'look even bigger' (Jumbob, extract 1), 'one's own heterosexual sexual pleasure 'girls will give head easier' (Diamongeezer, extract 3), individuality 'You only live once', rebelliousness 'unorthodox' (Davetherave, extract 8) etc. indicates that the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' still has analytical mileage (Connell, 1995). That is, non-typical practices are reframed in traditional ways in order to avoid having one's masculine credentials questioned (see Hall et al.'s 2012a; 2012b studies of metrosexuality). However, we also saw the invocation of modern masculine scripts such as caring 'It is b/c females want the guys to shave their bush so it doesn't scratch their sensitive shaved pubic area' (Justintime, extract 5) and equality 'Why should women be expected to keep it clean down there but not guys? Its respect' (Silversimon, extract 6). These in combination with men's willingness to engage the traditional feminized practice of body hair removal suggest that some masculinities are becoming more 'inclusive' (Anderson, 2005). Whilst modern demands (e.g. to be well-presented) mean many men's masculinities are more inclusive they must also simultaneously reframe their non-traditional gender practices in more conventional

terms. Although there is an inherent tension here I would caution the reader in thinking this means masculinities are in 'crisis' (MacInnes, 2001). What this does suggest, is that masculinities are being reworked in light of contemporary demands in an image conscious society.

Clearly more work needs to be undertaken if we are to gain a clearer understanding of men's relationship with their penis, but also how masculinities and being reworked for contemporary requirements such as presenting the body as healthy and ascetically pleasing. Other research might focus on other aspects of men's body work such as 'back, sack and crack' 'manscaping' or changing masculinity pre-, peri-, post-penis augmentation surgery. Such insight may help practitioners how deal with men in vulnerable contexts e.g. during prostate screening or when managing sexually transmitted disease. Investing time in examining men's penis concerns and activities offers the potential to identify valuable insights in which to help men (and boys) deal with the demands or modern society.

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