

Male Body Depilation: Prevalence and Associated Features of Body Hair Removal

Michael Boroughs,¹ Guy Cafri,¹ and J. Kevin Thompson^{1,2}

In order to investigate the relatively new phenomenon of male body depilation, 118 male university students provided details regarding the reduction and removal of their body hair using a questionnaire developed from the results of structured interviews (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002). It was found that well over one-half of the sample (63.6%) was engaged in *body depilation* (i.e., the reduction or removal of body hair below the neck). The sites, methods, reasons, and injuries related to body depilation were assessed, as well as its effect on affective dimensions. Findings are considered in light of these ramifications and how they may contribute to a better understanding of men's body image.

KEY WORDS: body image; men; hair; depilation.

During ancient times Egyptian and Greek cultures placed a premium on the appearance of a hairless male body, and ancient Egyptian men often shaved their body hair with pumice and razors (Luciano, 2001). In the modern era however, *body depilation* (i.e., body hair reduction or removal below the neck) has typically been culturally sanctioned only for women (Basow & Braman, 1998; Hope, 1982; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998) and is strongly normative within contemporary Western culture (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, 2004). With few exceptions, men have not engaged in body depilation because the presence of body hair has traditionally been symbolic of masculinity and therefore associated with men's attractiveness and virility (Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Lewis, 1987; Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998). It appears, however, that the hairless male body ideal has come back into vogue (Luciano, 2001). According to popular press accounts, this shifting ideal has influenced many men both to remove and reduce their body hair (Gomes,

2001; Smith, 2000; Stuever, 2000). In fact, Boroughs and Thompson (2002) found that appearance concerns motivate some men to shave or trim many parts of their bodies, including most notably: abdomen, chest, groin, and legs. Consequently, the aim of the current study was to investigate the prevalence and characteristics of body depilation, as well as its related social and affective features. This information will provide a greater understanding of male body depilation and also inform our understanding of the rapidly developing field of men's body image.

Although a few researchers have examined the idealization of body hair on the male body, data have not indicated that less body hair is necessarily considered ideal (Dixon, Halliwell, East, Wignarajah, & Anderson, 2003; Lewis, 1987). Results from previous studies, however, may have been due to a number of methodological limitations. For instance, Dixon et al. (2003) found that women rated male silhouette figures as more attractive if they had hair on the chest and abdomen. One shortcoming of the study conducted by Dixon et al. (2003) is that it only investigated women's attitudes toward the presence of body hair on men and did not examine men's attitudes toward hair on their own bodies. Another shortcoming of the study is that the location and amount of body

¹University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.

²To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Psychology, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620-8200; e-mail: thompsonjk2003@yahoo.com.

hair were not examined as variables (i.e., excessive body hair and/or hair on certain parts of the body where it may not be considered appealing). Generally, the findings from previous research do not preclude the possibility that men remove body hair to approximate a hairless ideal of attractiveness. Given that anecdotal reports support an emerging hairless ideal (e.g., Luciano, 2001) and data that indicate that men are removing hair in order to increase their attractiveness (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002), there is sufficient reason to suspect that body image concerns are a critical underlying factor that influences body depilation.

Clearly, there is a need to confirm the numerous anecdotal accounts and preliminary data that suggest that body hair removal is indeed a new and potentially important component of body image for men. Therefore, the current study had several objectives: (1) to estimate the prevalence of body depilation in a sample of men, (2) to assess the characteristics of body depilation by examining the various body sites where hair reduction and removal take place, (3) to determine the reasons for body depilation and the methods used to reduce and remove body hair, and (4) to assess the social and affective variables related to body depilation.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred eighteen men completed questionnaires to investigate body depilation. Sixty-nine (58.5%) of the participants were European American, 17 (14.4%) were Latinos, 18 (15.3%) were African American, eight (6.8%) were Asian American, five (4.2%) were Native American, and one participant did not report his ethnicity. One hundred and seven (91.7%) of the participants indicated attraction only to the other sex, two (1.5%) identified as having exclusive same-sex attraction, and the remaining nine (6.8%) reported some level of attraction to both sexes. Participants were recruited from a university research pool and volunteered for this study; they received extra course credit for their participation. All participants were recruited from one large research university in the southeastern United States. The only inclusion criterion was being a male over the age of 18. Age of the sample ranged from 18 through 55 years ($M = 22.04$, $SD = 4.75$).

Measures

Body Depilation Questionnaire (BoDeQ)

This new instrument was created based on the results of previously conducted structured interviews (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002). The interviews yielded qualitative and quantitative information concerning the locus of depilation, removal strategies, associated emotional and behavioral components (i.e., anxiety or avoidance), as well as descriptive information about men who remove or reduce body hair via shaving, trimming, or both. In developing items for this questionnaire, the results from the prior study were considered in addition to the sparse literature in this area and the diagnostic criteria for Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) in the *DSM-IV-Text Revision* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The final draft instrument contained 18 questions (see appendix).

Procedure

All participants gave informed consent and were told that they could end their participation at any time or refuse to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. When participants were recruited, they were informed that the study was related to body image. The study was anonymous; no identifying information was collected. Some participants completed the questionnaire in a laboratory in the psychology department, but most participated in a classroom setting. After completing the BoDeQ measure and the demographic profile, participants were given a debriefing sheet that contained one paragraph of general information about research on men's body image and some suggested readings on the topic.

RESULTS

Of the 118 participants in the study, 75 (63.6%) answered affirmatively to the question "Do you or have you recently shaved or trimmed any body hair below the neck?"³ The subsequent results are based on this sub-sample from the original participant pool. The adjusted sample demographics

³Future use of the questionnaire should reword item 1 to say, "Do you or have you recently shaved or trimmed any body hair from the neck down?"

Table I. Summary of Body Sites Where Depilation Occurs in Men

Body site	<i>n</i>	(%)
Groin	56	74.7
Chest	42	56.0
Abdomen	35	46.7
Back of neck	28	37.3
Arm pits	25	33.3
Upper legs	20	26.7
Clavicle	16	21.3
Lower arms	17	22.7
Lower legs	14	18.7
Feet	14	18.7
Hands	13	17.3
Upper arms	12	16.0
Buttocks	10	13.3
Upper back	9	12.0
Shoulders	8	10.7
Lower back	7	9.3

are: 47 European Americans (62.7%), 14 Latinos (18.7%), nine African Americans (12.0%), three Asian Americans (4.0%), and two Native Americans (2.7%). Included in this sub-sample of 75 participants were all of the gay and bisexual men as well as over one-half (60%) of the heterosexual men in the sample. Ages ranged from 18 to 35 ($M = 21.83$, $SD = 3.12$).

The primary sites for depilation were the groin (74.7%), chest (56%), and abdomen (46.7%) (see Table I).⁴ The most frequently reported methods used for reducing and removing body hair were: regular razor (70.7%), electric razor (32%), and electric clippers (29.3%). Many reported the use of shaving cream (54.7%), presumably with razors (see Table II). Body image issues were key factors for body hair reduction and removal. The most significant reasons for depilation included: cleanliness (74.7%), sex appeal (69.3%), and body definition/muscularity (38.7%) (see Table III). Also of interest are the various injuries that were reported as a result of shaving or trimming body hair, including razor burn (38.7%), nicks to the skin

⁴Follow up analyses were not carried out to investigate why participants selected certain body sites for depilation. Explanations could include the biological, i.e., areas where all men are likely to grow hair (e.g., groin, arm pits and legs) are more likely to gather a higher frequency of depilation behaviors in a sample of men. Likewise social motivations might also explain the finding, which would be congruent with the participants' reported overall motivations for depilation: to make the genitals appear larger or because it makes participants feel cleaner. Over 30% of participants reported "better sexual experience" as a reason for depilation, and this particular response may be highly correlated with the groin as a site of depilation.

Table II. Distribution of Methods Used in Body Hair Removal and Reduction

Hair removal method	<i>n</i>	(%)
Regular razor	53	70.7
Shaving cream	41	54.7
Electric razor	24	32.0
Electric clippers	22	29.3
Scissors	20	26.7
Creams	5	6.7
Waxing at home	5	6.7
Chemical depilatories	2	2.7
Electrolysis	2	2.7
Nads TM	1	1.3
Waxing in salon	0	0
Laser hair removal	0	0

(29.3%), in-grown hairs (32%), and cuts to the skin (26.7%). Thirty-six percent of the sample reported no occurrence of injuries.

Factors that influenced participants' first depilation experiences and variables related to hair reduction and removal behaviors were also examined. Participants reported that the influences for commencing body depilation were: no influence by others or tried depilation on their own accord (40%), talked to someone about it (22.7%), influenced by media (21.3%), and saw others engage in the practice (20%).⁵ Participants were asked if their shaving or trimming behaviors were curtailed for certain reasons such as: (a) relationship status, (b) during the off-season of a sport, or (c) climatic differences (i.e., colder weather). Thirteen of seventy-five participants (17.3%) said that shaving or trimming became less important when they were *not* in a romantic relationship. Seven (9.3%) said that the off-season for a sport made the behavior less important. Another eight participants (10.7%) reported that the climatic 'off-season' made the behavior less important. Forty-five (60%) reported no changes in depilation over time, and six (8.0%) said that they have not been depilating long enough to respond to the question.

Affective dimensions of body depilation were assessed. Participants were asked to rate the importance of shaving or trimming body hair prior to

⁵Although a substantial minority of participants claimed that they began depilation on their own accord, the accuracy of this self-reported response may be suspect. Clearly there may be influences that individuals were not aware of, or perhaps forgot, especially for those who had been depilating for some time. The inclusion of this item was due to both our previous qualitative inquiry and because of our interest in their subjective interpretation of the genesis of their shaving or trimming. Prospective work would be necessary to gauge more accurately the connection between specific experiences and the onset of depilation.

Table III. Summary of Reasons for Shaving

Reason	<i>n</i>	(%)
Cleanliness	56	74.7
Sex appeal	52	69.3
Body definition/muscularity	29	38.7
Better sexual experience	24	32.0
Youthfulness	8	10.7
Avoid teasing	6	8.0
Better healing	4	5.3

social contact. The scale for this series of questions was as follows: 5 (extremely important) to 1 (not important). Ratings of importance for shaving or trimming body hair prior to social contact were variable, though steady, across the three reference groups in question. Participants reported depilation prior to social contact as moderately important before having interactions with significant others ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.15$), the general public ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.27$), or friends ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.17$).

Participants were asked to describe their feelings related to a hypothetical inability to remove body hair in general and after a few days without depilation. The scale for these items was as follows: 1 (extremely good) to 5 (extremely bad). The mean score for the general inability item (2.77 , $SD = .86$) indicated feelings of ambivalence, however, 16% of the sample rated the item "4," which is "moderately bad feelings." The average rating was also in the mid-range for the item that assessed feelings after going a few days without depilation ($M = 2.61$, $SD = .90$); 1.6% of the sample rated this item "5," and 10.9% rated it "4." Participants were also asked to estimate their hypothetical level of anxiety if they could not shave or trim for a few weeks. The scale for this item was: 1 (extremely anxious) to 5 (not anxious at all). On an average, participants' anxiety rating was somewhat to slightly anxious ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.31$); 17.64% rated their anxiety as extreme to moderate if they could not shave or trim for a few weeks.

Although clothing usually covers many of the oft-reported sites of depilation, several participants reported depilating parts of their bodies that are regularly exposed to the public (e.g., forearms or legs). Over one-half of the participants (53.6%) reported that friends and acquaintances had noticed their body depilation and had given them direct feedback about it. Average scores indicated that the feedback was moderately positive ($M = 2.0$, $SD = .79$; range from 1 to 5, on a scale of 1–extremely positive to 5–extremely negative); only 1.5% of participants reported only negative comments from others about their body depilation.

DISCUSSION

These results extend our previous findings, which were derived from a targeted sample of men who engaged in body depilation (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002). The current sample, although not randomly selected, consisted of individuals who volunteered to participate in the study, and it was surprising that over 60% of this sample engaged in some form of body depilation. Although there have been numerous articles in the popular press on this issue (e.g., Gomes, 2001; Schuler, 2000; Smith, 2000; Stein, 1999; Stuever, 2000), this is the first study to document a new cultural phenomenon in the United States that has implications for greater understanding of men's body image issues. Given the historical emphasis on the relationship between masculinity and the presence of body hair (i.e., some level of hirsuteness), such a shift has importance not only for better understanding the ever changing ideals of attractiveness for men, but also because it sanctions behaviors that were once reserved for women (Basow, 1991; Basow & Braman, 1998; Hope, 1982; Tiggeman & Kenyon, 1998; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003).

The scope of this study did not include an examination into why men have undertaken these behaviors. One possibility might be the cultural phenomenon known as *Metrossexual*. This term, coined by Simpson (1994, 2002) as cheeky satire, was also a sober social observation. It can be defined as a fashion-conscious urban heterosexual man with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. This might be one contributing explanation to the emergence of male body depilation. Other possibilities include sales strategies by companies looking to increase profits from an untapped market segment. Heterosexual and gay men (Simpson, 1994; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003), like women, are subject to the effects of exposure to media on their body image (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004). Perhaps as shifts in economic affluence produce greater equality between men and women, pressure increases on men to take better care of themselves and do something to look more attractive to their target audience (Simpson, 1994). The goal of this project was to undertake an examination into the process of depilation with less concentration on the purpose of depilation. Future work on the motives behind such body modification efforts is clearly indicated.

This study documented that the most frequently reported sites of body hair removal and reduction were the groin, chest, and abdomen. Body image

issues were key factors in instigating body depilation. Participants suggested that the most salient reasons for depilation were greater cleanliness, sex appeal, and making their bodies appear more defined or muscular. Consistent with our previous investigation (Boroughs & Thompson, 2002), participants again indicated that they “felt cleaner” or “looked more defined/muscular” as a result of either shaving or trimming their body hair. It is interesting that a considerable minority of men reported that there was no external influence that contributed to the start of their body hair reduction or removal, which suggests that the idea was spontaneous in nature. Others acknowledged that talking to someone, the media, and seeing others engage in body depilation influenced them to try depilating, and, for many, these behaviors have been sustained over time. In particular, participants noted the inclination to depilate as being more important for strangers (i.e., the general public) than for those familiar to them (e.g., friends or significant others). Although on average the men reported only moderate affective disturbance related to their depilation, a small but considerable group of men reported more serious effects.

The results of this study document body hair removal among men, a relatively new phenomenon that has implications for research related to body appearance and gender identity in a variety of academic disciplines. With respect to body image research in the area of clinical and counseling psychology, the finding that some men reported distress related to their hair removal has important implications. Extreme anxiety related to hair removal might conceivably lead to social avoidance and, potentially, to BDD. A formal BDD evaluation was not conducted along with this study; however, the fact that 16.6% of participants reported that they would experience significant anxiety if hair removal was prevented indicates the importance of further evaluation into the clinical relevance of depilation. Future researchers should target weightlifters/bodybuilders and athletes involved in sports such as swimming, given that this subgroup of men frequently report removing body hair and BDD has been prevalent among these athletes (Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips, 1997).

Another area of concern relates to the methods used by men to remove and reduce body hair. Although there are probably few serious injuries associated with body hair reduction and removal, laser hair removal represents an extreme method of hair removal because it is a form of cosmetic surgery. Moreover, laser hair removal has the potential for

adverse cutaneous side effects (Apfelber & Alster, 2001). Clearly the side effects noted in this study coincided neatly with the methods of hair removal most frequently described by participants such as razor burn resulting from the use of a razor and shaving cream. None of the participants in the present study acknowledged the use of laser hair removal, which is likely due to the fact that this was a university student sample without economic affluence, yet these concerns apply to other male populations due to the increasing volume of laser hair removal advertisements directed toward them (Smith, 2000; Stuever, 2000).

Among the limitations of this investigation is the use of a university psychology student sample, which reduces the extent to which generalizations can be made about men in the broader population. Additionally, although the sample volunteered for participation, some participants may have participated because of their own personal interest in the topic, rather than the incentive of extra course credit. The prevalence of body depilation in men, therefore, may be over-represented in this sample. However, it is also possible that some men may not report body depilation simply because of a dearth of hair on certain areas of their bodies. This should not be mistaken as desire or preference for hirsuteness, but rather a measurement issue to be mindful of in future studies. Therefore, it is possible that the prevalence of depilation might be greater than our results (63.6%) demonstrate given that the natural absence of body hair for some men may make the measurement of the preference for hairlessness difficult to infer from these findings. Future research should address this limitation, perhaps by not only assessing hair removal behaviors, but also by measuring the body hair present at various sites on the participants before depilation takes place.

The current study serves as the foundation for a more extensive examination of body depilation in conjunction with other body image issues. Essential to future evaluations of body depilation will be the assessment of variables that might relate to depilation, such as muscle satisfaction, social acceptance, body shame, self-esteem, and comparisons between gay and heterosexual men. Also, a formal examination of body dysmorphic symptoms with a standardized instrument such as Rosen's (1996) Body Dysmorphic Disorder Examination would be important. In the context of the dramatic increase in the number of men who report body image problems (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), body depilation may represent a unique and important cluster of concerns that men experience.

Appendix: Body Depilation Questionnaire

1) Do you or have you recently shaved or trimmed any body hair below the neck? _____ Yes _____ No

2) How long have you been removing your body hair? _____

3) How did others influence you to begin this behavior? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> overheard someone talking about it | <input type="checkbox"/> observed someone I know doing it |
| <input type="checkbox"/> talked to someone about it | <input type="checkbox"/> magazines and other media influenced me |
| <input type="checkbox"/> observed others that did it | <input type="checkbox"/> not influenced by others |

4) Does removing your body hair become less important during certain times of the year? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes, in the off-season for sports | <input type="checkbox"/> yes, when it is colder (climatic season) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes, when I am not in a relationship | <input type="checkbox"/> haven't been shaving or trimming long enough to know |
| <input type="checkbox"/> no, it does not become less important | |

5) Have any of the following injuries occurred as a result of your body shaving or trimming? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> nicks | <input type="checkbox"/> cuts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ingrown hair | <input type="checkbox"/> no injuries have ever occurred |
| <input type="checkbox"/> razor burn | |

6) Why do you shave and/or trim your body hair? Check all that apply.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> definition/muscularity | <input type="checkbox"/> cleanliness | <input type="checkbox"/> to avoid teasing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sex appeal | <input type="checkbox"/> better healing | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> youthfulness | <input type="checkbox"/> better sexual experience | |

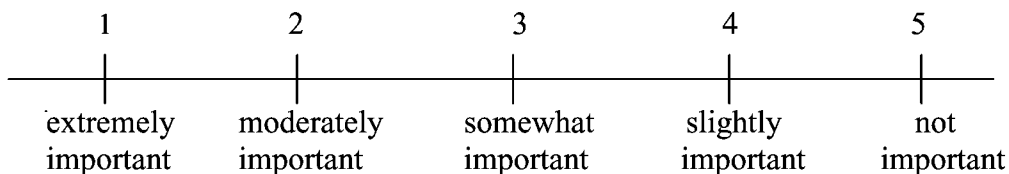
7) How do you remove your body hair? Check all that apply.

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> shaving cream | <input type="checkbox"/> electrolysis | <input type="checkbox"/> waxing at home | <input type="checkbox"/> chemical depilatories (e.g., Nair™ or Neat™) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> regular razor | <input type="checkbox"/> laser hair removal | <input type="checkbox"/> scissors | <input type="checkbox"/> Nads™ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> electric razor | <input type="checkbox"/> electric clippers | <input type="checkbox"/> waxing in a salon | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> creams | | | |

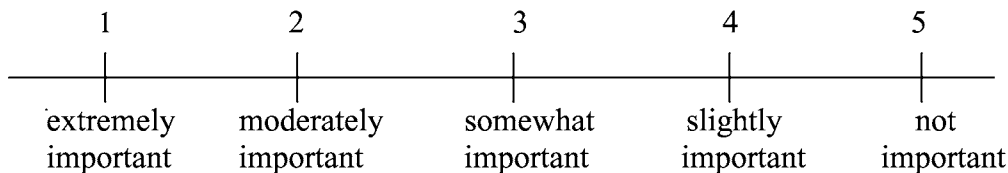
8) How frequently do you remove your body hair? _____

9) Do you allow any visible re-growth before you begin the removal process? _____ Yes _____ No

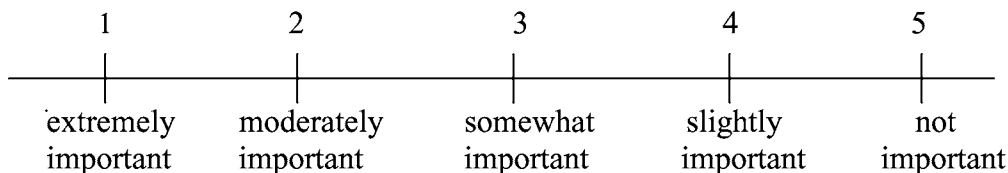
10) Rate how important it is for you to shave/trim when being seen by significant others.



11) Rate how important it is for you to shave/trim when being seen by friends.

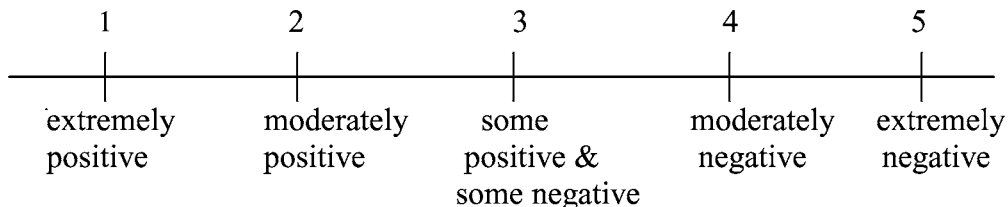


12) Rate how important it is for you to shave/trim when being seen out in public.



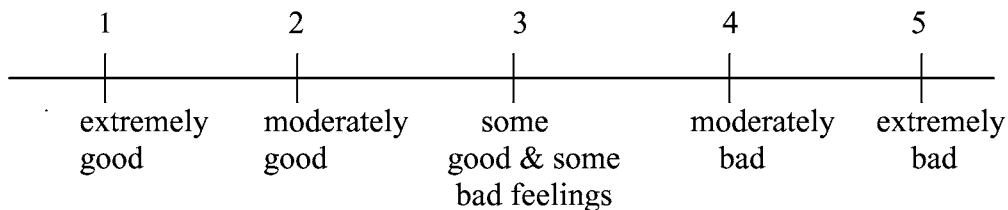
13) Have others mentioned to you that they notice that you have removed body hair? ____ Yes ____ No

13a) Rate the kind of feedback you have received related to your body shaving/trimming.

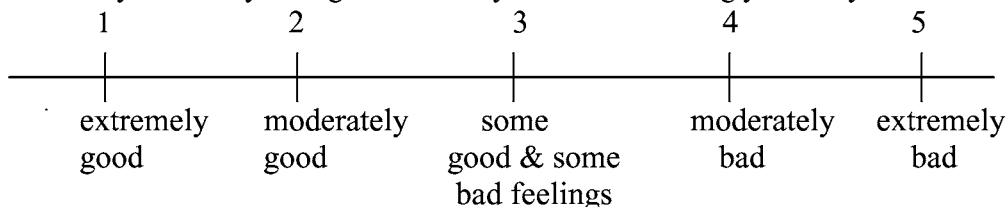


14) Do you feel different about yourself or your body after you shave or trim rather than when it has grown back? ____ Yes ____ No

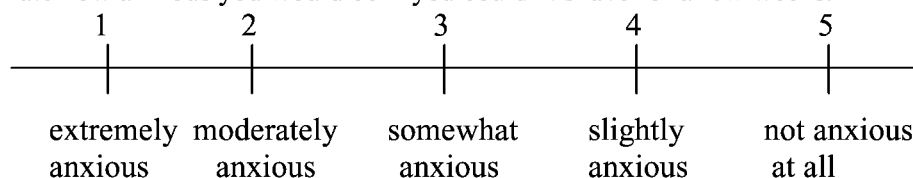
15) Rate how you feel when you don't remove your body hair.



16) Rate how you feel if you've gone a few days without removing your body hair.



17) Rate how anxious you would be if you couldn't shave for a few weeks.



18) Please indicate the area(s) of your body where shaving or trimming behaviors take place.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abdomen | <input type="checkbox"/> Hands |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arm Pits | <input type="checkbox"/> Lower Arms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Back of Neck | <input type="checkbox"/> Lower Back |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buttocks | <input type="checkbox"/> Lower Legs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chest | <input type="checkbox"/> Shoulders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clavicle (area below neck, above chest) | <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Arms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feet | <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Back |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Groin | <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Legs |

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