NO SWEAT! A PSYCHOSOCIAL AND FEMINIST INVESTIGATION OF BODY HAIR AND GENERATION Z WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

> *'People* love *to talk about body hair; it somehow is just provocative enough that conversation is allowable about the subject, while still being taboo enough that debates, strong feelings, defiant actions and healthy banter can easily ensue.'*
>
> *Breanne Fahs, 2019, p.14*

In 2021 I noticed several young women I encountered who were not shaving their leg and armpit hair. Born in the late '60s, I have spent my life since puberty ensuring that legs, armpits and pubic hairline were smooth and hair-free, the aim being to make it look permanently as if these areas were naturally bald. The shock of seeing hair on these young women felt visceral, a quick hit of revulsion and embarrassment on their behalf, followed by a chorus of internal and often conflicting voices: Why? How might they dare? What did it mean? Could I distract others before they noticed? Did it make them better than me? Braver than me? Did they like the way it looked? How could they possibly?

In 2018, The Gentlewoman magazine cited Mintel research that revealed that over the previous three years the number of UK women under the age of 25 choosing not to remove their armpit hair had grown by 18% (Mintel, cited in The Gentlewoman, 2018). The magazine speculated on the mystery of this trend – was it style, pheromones or gender fluidity? A YouGov study in 2021 quantified social attitudes towards body hair and its removal. Only 26% of women aged 16-24 felt that women should remove their armpit hair, compared with 56% of women aged 40-59. 34% felt that hairy legs were unattractive, compared with 68% of women in the older age bracket (Dinic, 2021). These figures suggest that there has been a shift in attitude towards armpit and leg hair between the generations.

This difference in generational attitudes was explored on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour in April 2023, when a 20-year-old student described growing her armpit hair for two years, with the only negative response coming from her mother. She suggests it is a 'generational difference', a view supported by guest Martha Alexander, an Evening Standard journalist:

> 'Yes, it's absolutely a generational thing as far as I can see, and even not just between even Millennials … and Gen Z. There's a massive

> difference… Growing up as a Millennial teen and in my early 20s, it was just unthinkable that you wouldn't shave your armpits [and] shave your legs… But now, I think that Gen Z are a lot more relaxed about it.'

The presenter, Anita Rani, raises the question whether Generation Z women are removing less body hair out of feminist beliefs or as a fashion statement, calling to mind The Gentlewoman's speculations.

The evidence of changes in attitudes and practices between generations of women in the UK led me to question why more Generation Z women seem less concerned about what women do with their body hair, and why some are not conforming to the hairlessness norm, choosing to retain their armpit and leg hair. I wondered what this choice meant to them and how they, with their body hair, experience their world. The research questions I formulated for this study are:

Why are some Generation Z women in the UK choosing to retain their armpit and leg hair?
What meaning does this choice hold for them?
How do they feel that the world responds to their body hair?

This study adopts a feminist theoretical framework and uses interviews and autoethnography to explore the relationship that UK Generation Z women have with their body hair. A review of the literature reveals that women's body hair is a topic worthy of attention because it plays a part in managing and controlling women. The study is situated within the field of feminist and intersectional theory, exploring the lived experience of Generation Z women choosing to retain their body hair.

The methodology used is outlined and justified by a set of philosophical, ontological and epistemological factors. The research used semi-structured interviews with four women, aged between 20 and 24, who do not remove their leg and/or armpit hair. Emerging from the interviews are five themes: resistance, spaces, surveillance and self-surveillance, feminist joy and privilege. I also conducted a psychosocial autoethnographic analysis of the embodied and embedded experience of growing out my own body hair. This reveals the challenges of feminist praxis and

intergenerational research, the importance of representation in changing social norms and the vision that Generation Z women have for a future social world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the existing literature reveals limited study into female body hair. I consider the explanations academics offer for this and support for their claims that it is an area that deserves greater attention. I then review the findings of research that focuses on female body hair removal, including explanations for why women remove their body hair. To contextualise female body hair today, I provide a summary of the more recent political and feminist discourses around body hair in the UK. Finally, I look at the very limited field of research into those who choose not to remove their body hair, including a rare piece of intersectional research. This literature review positions this study within the field and shows clearly what gap it aims to fill.

Body Hair: No Trivial Matter

In her book, *The Last Taboo*, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) reflects on how body hair is a topic both too trivial and too repulsive to mention. The lack of academic work on female body hair is often attributed to the sense that women's body hair, as an aspect of women's body image, is too trivial and insignificant a subject to merit academic study. Where body weight, shape or cosmetic interventions attract serious attention, people's response to women's body hair seems ambivalent. I found evidence for this repeatedly when asked what my dissertation was about – the most common response was laughter. I came to believe this reflected embarrassment and discomfort at having to talk or think about female body hair, combined with a belief that it was too trivial or insignificant for a dissertation.

Many scholars, including Lesnik-Oberstein herself, contest the triviality of women's body hair and its management (e.g. Basow, 1991; Cofield, 2021; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2006; Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi, 2005). Oral history reveals the significance of the ritual of body hair removal in women's lives, debunking the idea that it is 'trivial or invisible work' (Cofield, 2021, p.15). Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998, citing Chapkis, 1986 and Ussher, 1989) also note that shaving is seen as trivial yet its social requirement is part of a discourse where women's bodies are not acceptable as they naturally are. They predicted that women not shaving would have higher self-esteem than women who shave, and when this was validated amongst university students, they suggested that this evidences that body hair removal is far from a

'trivial behavior' (Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998, p.876). Ahmed also considers that no location is too trivial for feminist action and feminist theory-making, especially those we might have considered apolitical, like the home. For Ahmed, 'every room of the house can become a feminist room, in who does what where' (Ahmed, 2017, p.4).

Toerien and Wilkinson endorse the view that hair removal is trivialised but suggest that the hairlessness norm 'powerfully endorses' an assumption that women's bodies require alteration to be socially acceptable (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003, p.333). Basow (1991) also notes that from the 1920s onwards, consumer marketing worked to persuade women that they needed to change their bodies to be socially acceptable. Cofield believes that the routine practices of hair removal therefore come to occupy a 'liminal position' in Britain: 'both essential and trivialised, mundane and yet presented as a feminized commodity giving access to glamour and beauty' (Cofield, 2021, p.251). Toerien et al. (2005) point out that women then cannot win – women demean themselves by taking seriously the work required to achieve hairlessness, yet if they fail to do this work they have failed also in the job of being feminine. They call on us to refuse to trivialise tasks such as shaving – if we take them seriously, we also question seriously a society that sees women's bodies as unacceptable in their natural state.

A number of studies highlight the link between hairlessness and youth, since body hair growth begins during puberty. Hope suggests that hairlessness 'doesn't really mean "womanly", it means "childlike"' (Hope, 1982, p.99). Thus, body hair, which is widely associated with masculinity (Basow, 1991; Smelik, 2015; Toerien et al., 2005), comes to mean adulthood. This association with youth introduces the idea that women may not be capable of autonomy. Toerien and Wilkinson suggest that the social norm of body hair removal keeps women in 'a perpetually preadolescent state of relative powerlessness' (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003, p.341). Hope (1982) notes that the rise in hair removal from the 1920s onwards in English-speaking western cultures coincided with a period when women were gaining power and beginning to challenge gender norms. She argues that, as women adopted less restricted clothing, gained suffrage and were able to behave in a more relaxed and open manner publicly, there was a need to establish other markers of gender difference. When women's autonomy and freedom is on the rise, creating a social

norm that seems trivial, but demands time and effort of women, is also a covert way of controlling and managing them.

Ahmed suggests that everyday practices that seem trivial are the very things we should pay attention to. She advocates 'listening for resonance' (Ahmed, 2017, p.12) as a research methodology, allowing the feeling of something wrong in the world to guide our enquiry. She describes the process of building sweaty concepts out of descriptions of the world, and more specifically 'a body that is not at home in the world' (Ahmed, 2017, p.13). The process of trying to describe something challenging that defies comprehension will lead to these sweaty concepts, making 'descriptive work… conceptual work' (Ahmed, 2017, p.13). For Ahmed, we should use our embodied, and often uncomfortable, experience of feeling at odds with the world to generate feminist theory. There is resonance for me between the probing and interrogation of the experience of having hairy armpits and the generation of sweaty concepts. In a world dominated by the hairlessness norm, hairy armpits are 'not at home' - surely the concepts they generate are likely to be as sweaty as the armpits themselves may be.

Ahmed's insistence on the importance of experience before theory is challenging for the academy. It requires confidence that we can 'use our particulars to challenge the universal' (Ahmed, 2017, p.10), listen for resonance, pay attention to what does not make sense and activate the everyday to generate knowledge, and in doing so make feminist theory more accessible. As Ahmed says, 'the personal is theoretical' (Ahmed, 2017, p.10). Yet 'the personal is [also] structural' (Ahmed, 2017, p.30) because by piecing together women's experiences of sexism you can reveal sexism's structural framework, and this is why the process of listening to, recording and unpicking the individual female experience matters profoundly.

Body Hair Removal

Several studies have considered the frequency of body hair removal by women in the USA, Australia and the UK over the past decades. In 1998, Tiggemann and Kenyon found that nearly 92% of women in the USA removed their leg hair and 93% removed their armpit hair. A follow up study in 2004 in Australia found that 98% of women removed both leg and armpit hair (Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004) and, in 2008, another Australian study found that approximately 96% of women regularly removed their leg and armpit hair (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008). A

2005 study in the UK found that over 99% percent of women reported removing body hair at some point in their lives, with 98% having removed armpit hair and 93% having removed leg hair (Toerien et al., 2005). Ten years later, Herzig (2015) claimed that over 99% of all American women removed their body hair. There is no question, it seems, that body hair removal for women in anglophone countries has become the norm.

The 2005 data showed that women over the age of 50 were less likely to remove leg and pubic hair, which might mean that older women are less concerned about fitting in with social norms around body hair. An alternative explanation is that the norms of that day were different to the norms prevalent when older women were growing up, and more likely to establish body hair habits or develop enduring beliefs and attitudes around body hair (Smelik, 2015). The results of the YouGov survey (Dinic, 2021) on attitudes towards body hair seem to endorse the latter explanation, since the youngest generation surveyed had the most tolerant attitudes towards armpit and leg hair.

Why Women Remove Body Hair: 'Doing' a 'Good Woman'

Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) found three broad reasons why women remove their body hair. The first two are connected – hairlessness was associated with feeling feminine and was perceived as a route to attractiveness. The last (which I believe is also inextricably linked to the first two) was about normativity – having no body hair has become normative for women, and the women surveyed felt that they needed to remove their body hair to fit in, conform to expectations and not be judged by those around them.

<u>Femininity and Attractiveness</u>

Body hair removal is part of the performativity of being a woman within a wider cultural discourse that women must navigate, along with more local influences like friendships and family ties, or personal environment (Cofield, 2021). Cofield's representation of hair removal as a 'feminized commodity' (Cofield, 2021, p.251) speaks to Toerien and Wilkinson's (2003) claim that hairlessness is an important tool in the way femininity is constructed and defined. Hairlessness becomes a key aspect of being feminine. Cofield notes how this not only establishes an association between hairlessness and femininity, but ensures that hairlessness is part of the process of 'becoming' female as described by Judith Butler, which she adds is

'never-ending' (Cofield, 2021, p.8). Toerien and Wilkinson also draw on Butler, showing that our ability to question the necessity for hairlessness and see it rather as a socially constructed norm reveals to us how 'femininity is itself a production' (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003, p.342). Removing body hair is part of Butler's (1999) performance of femininity; each time a woman undertakes the shaving or waxing process, she is conforming to the oppressive social norms that demand that she publicly express her femininity in this way or acknowledge that she has failed to perform her gender correctly. In this way, what appears to be a private and personal act is shown to be public and politicised.

Cofield (2021) acknowledges this, arguing that if removing body hair is a way of complying with socially imposed ideals of femininity, it is by no means trivial. Instead, it becomes one of the ways women have to navigate the social world. Removing body hair may ensure they are included in social spaces, can occupy positions of power, control resources, maintain respectability and can even allow them to lay claim to being a woman. Of course, not removing hair can also exclude them from these 'privileges', while arguably offering them agency and a means of resistance.

Given the strong association between hairlessness and femininity and hair and masculinity, women with body hair are perceived as less sexually and interpersonally attractive; but also less sociable, intelligent, happy and positive, more aggressive, active and strong (Basow and Braman, 1998). Smelik (2015, citing Hollander, 1993, and Lesnik-Oberstein, 2006), notes that body hair is seen as 'dirty, ugly, superfluous, sexual and animalistic' (Smelik, 2015, p.234). A woman can choose to keep her body hair, but this decision subjects her to surveillance, judgement, ridicule, disgust or, perhaps, admiration (Guillard, 2015). Basow and Braman (1998) found that a model with body hair was perceived as unfeminine or as either a lesbian or a feminist.

The Hairlessness Norm

Foucault's (1998) concept of disciplinary power provides a useful framework to consider female body hair. From a Foucauldian perspective, one could argue that women are disciplined to conform to the normalised standards that a 'good woman' should have, in this case hairlessness. By creating a strong social norm of hairlessness across the social spectrum, women feel constantly under surveillance

to ensure they conform. Ultimately, fearing judgement by the collective, they will self-surveil. This explains why the imperative to remove body hair is so strong in women even if they aspire to resistance. Basow and Braman (1998) found that women reacted more negatively to body hair on other women than men did.

For Ahmed, norms have a physicality - you can inhabit a norm, which itself provides 'residence to bodies' (Ahmed, 2017, p.115), making it feel at ease and comfortable in the world. Not inhabiting the norm, whether by choice or involuntarily, will make you feel out of place and open to interrogation. Ahmed notes that often norms are policed through a shared understanding of how those who do not inhabit it are treated, revealing one way in which self-surveillance operates. Choosing not to inhabit the norm is choosing discomfort, which can feel exhausting.

An earlier study by Basow (1991) reviewed body hair removal practices amongst lesbian women, predicting that attitudes and practices might be different amongst women who do not accept male-defined body ideals for women. Basow did find that more self-identifying lesbian and bisexual women rejected the norm of body hair removal than self-identifying heterosexual women, however, many still conformed to it. Although lesbian women may not have felt social pressure to make themselves attractive to men, they did care about social acceptance and wished to avoid judgement and disapproval. Dworkin (1989, cited in Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003) suggests that male-defined social norms regarding hairlessness and women are so embedded and widely accepted that most lesbians do not risk challenging them. Identifying as a lesbian woman or a feminist had less impact than predicted on decisions over whether to remove or retain body hair. Bartky (1990, cited in Cofield, 2021) suggests that the process of self-surveillance sustains a framework of female oppression, while Cofield describes the active role that women take in circulating the 'ideas and rituals around hairlessness' (Cofield, 2021, p.9) in a way that suggests more personal agency.

Political and Feminist Discourses around Body Hair

The stereotypes of hairy women being either feminists or lesbians date back to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, which are common and crop up in many studies about body hair. In support of such stereotypes, Basow (1991) did find that over 75% of women who did not shave their legs

identified as very strong feminists and over 64% identified as not exclusively heterosexual, and the reasons they gave for not shaving were political. Herzig notes how during the second wave of feminism, hairy armpits and legs became 'badges of political consciousness' and the trope of the 'hairy feminist' was born (Herzig, 2015, p.119). Body hair was a badge of a bohemian and politically leftist identity (Fahs and Delgado, 2011). Resisting hair removal norms became a political act of rebellion, leading us still to be haunted today by what Cofield (2021) refers to as the feminist ghost, with her hairy legs. Cofield draws on the idea of haunting and ghosts to demonstrate the co-existence and interaction of feminist pasts and presents. Resistance is also implied in the 1991 and 1998 studies that found that the most common reasons given for not shaving were that women's bodies were fine as they were and that women should not have to remove their body hair (Tiggeman and Kenyon, 1998; Basow, 1991).

The era of postfeminism in the 1990s marks a shift from the collective action of second-wave feminism towards an emphasis on individual freedom of choice (Gill and Orgad, 2015, cited in Cofield, 2021). Postfeminists, reacting against the trope of the hairy, ugly, masculine feminist who did not care about her appearance, embraced beauty practices, femininity and the freedom to be fully-fledged consumers. With this begins a rise in body hair removal, and particularly the mainstreaming of pubic hair removal. Body hair removal is positioned as individual choice, rather than conforming to powerful social norms. Women should be free to remove their body hair if they want to, not required to retain it to prove their feminist credentials – a backlash to demands made by 'militant' second-wave feminists. However, Ahmed calls this position 'a postfeminist fantasy' (Ahmed, 2017, p.5) – the idea that women individually and collectively have achieved what needed to be done and are no longer exploited, oppressed or discriminated against. Ahmed shows how important it is not to fall for this fantasy, but to continue to insist on the materiality of sexism. By 2003, Spencer (cited in Smelik, 2015, p.237) referred to hair removal as 'feminism's lost battle', reflecting the strength of the hairlessness norm.

There is evidence throughout the 2010s of growth in feminist self-identification amongst younger women, including several high-profile celebrities, and of course via social media; these combined to make feminism 'desirable, stylish and decidedly fashionable' (Gill, 2016b, cited in Cofield, 2021). This 'popular feminism' (Cofield,

2021, p.223) has however also been critiqued for an apparent superficiality, as a distinction was made between identifying as a feminist and 'doing' feminism. While this era seems distinct from postfeminism, it shares an ideology that women should be free to make individual choices about their bodies, whether that be resistance or compliance to body norms, and critics therefore argue it supports an individualistic and neoliberal social framework (Cofield, 2021).

Cofield compares the strategies of the 2010s, whereby women develop and platform their own feminist campaigns, to previous 'strategies of resistance' (Cofield, 2021, p.222). For example, in the 1990s the Riot Grrl post-punk movement adopted similar methods, reclaiming language and building a community of interest. The 2010s did see a new feminist focus on resisting pubic hairlessness as a symbol of feminist identity and a way of mobilising resistance; armpit and leg hair were not included in this (Cofield, 2021).

More recently, with new media available to provide a platform, Guillard (2015) sees signs of public rebellion against the hairlessness norm in younger generations. Rejection of social norms around gender identity and resistance to social surveillance and body shaming are two factors in the growth in online communities of interest that use social media to provide representation to normalise body hair (e.g. Project #WWHA, @ladypithair) or organise collective action (e.g. Januhairy). Guillard notes that the use of social media accesses audiences who are not already participating in feminist discourses and ideologies.

Resistance: Studying Women's Experience of Having Body Hair

Much of the research considered has focused on the removal of body hair, not those who go against social norms and retain their body hair. In fact, not much research can be found about this. This seems surprising given the intense media reaction to women who display body hair. Outraged tabloid and magazine headlines can easily be found online, regarding the visible armpit hair of Julia Roberts, Rachel McAdam, Miley Cyrus, Sarah Silverman, Scout Willis, Penelope Cruz, Madonna, Gaby Hoffman, Juliette Lewis, Drew Barrymore, and Mo'Nique, some of whom have used it as a form of public rebellion (Butler, 2015, cited in Fahs, 2019). That these personal body choices are treated as public transgressions shows how powerful the hairlessness norm is for women.

Within the small field of research into body hair, there is a limited body of work that considers the lived experience of women with body hair. One is Cofield's 2021 cultural history of body hair removal, which includes oral histories of women of different ages. Cofield's research found evidence of women struggling to reconcile their feminist identity with wanting to remove their body hair. Women felt shame and guilt when they failed to meet the standards required of them to be a good feminist (Fisher, 1984, cited in Cofield, 2021). It seems that these standards could be just as demanding and punitive as the social norms of hairlessness which they resisted. Furthermore, the experience of not being able to live up to feminist ideals made some women feel a 'compromised sense of attachment to feminism' (Cofield, 2021, p.244), as if it had soured their relationship with feminism. They felt shut out from the network of women which should have supported them. This demonstrates how hard it is to 'do' feminism in everyday life. Women are conscious of the social norms oppressing them, but nonetheless are sometimes unable to find a route to behaviour change. Ahmed advocates the importance of 'living' feminism, supporting Frye's (1991, cited in Ahmed, 2017) version of 'lived theory', whereby politics and living are part of the same process (p.214). Yet, she also recognises the importance of permitting your body to become a 'site of a rebellion', and while this might mean '[making] your body a cause' (p.249), it can also at times involve deliberately rejecting the call to do so.

Another interesting exception is a series of university classroom exercises in the 2010s led by Breanne Fahs. Fahs asks her female students to grow out their body hair for a 12-week period and journal the experience, gaining them course credit. One study (Fahs and Delgado, 2011) using data from this exercise explores how women from different identity categories react to growing their body hair. The study considers the role of body hair in the construction of women's raced, gendered and classed identities, making this the only intersectional study of the lived experience of having body hair that I could find.

The women in this study mostly felt negatively about growing their body hair and had internalised misinformed beliefs. They experienced social punishment, 'heteronormative patrolling' and 'negative affect and appraisal' (Fahs and Delgado, 2011, p.13 and p.18) as a consequence of growing their body hair, including from family and partners. They changed their behaviour and routines to avoid this. Their body hair made them feel ugly, dirty and masculine, and they compensated for the

violation of the hairlessness norm by increasing adherence to other social norms, for example wearing more make-up. Participants with male partners were particularly fearful of negative responses, suggesting over-dependence on male approval for self-esteem. Aptly, it seems, since some male partners expressed genuine concern that their partner would become a lesbian and punished them by withdrawing affection and commenting negatively. Social regulation also came from friends and family, mostly by way of disapproval, hostility and disgust, although there were some supportive, positive responses.

Some participants found the experience positive, reporting that they felt more comfortable in their own body and had come to see hair removal as a 'patriarchal, consumerist-driven chore that society has required and frequently reprimanded women for if they don't do' (Fahs and Delgado, 2011, p.22). Even a short period of hair growth made the women more aware that their decisions on how to alter their bodies are driven by social norms, not personal preference. Participants felt the experience sensitised them to how power operates in the social realm and how their individual social networks analysed, controlled, judged and punished their decisions about their bodies. They also felt empowered to resist.

Fahs and Delgado also provide an intersectional analysis of the women's experience of having body hair. Many studies find evidence of differences in social norms for different class and race/ethnicity identities and note the dominance of representation of white and US/European women in research, yet do not explore differences (see Basow, 1991; Tiggemann and Kenyon 1998; Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003; Herzig, 2015; Guillard, 2015; Smelik, 2015; Cofield, 2021). Fahs and Delgado explore whether there is additional pressure on women of colour and working-class women to meet standards of femininity that are largely white and middle-class. They found that women of colour and working-class women experienced more regulation from their families and higher social penalties. Growing their body hair added more oppression to that already experienced, as women with less social power. Women of colour experienced more heteronormative patrolling of gender norms and worked harder to avoid conforming to stereotypes of being 'dirty and low class' (Fahs and Delgado, 2011, p.19), which were reinforced by having body hair.

Women of colour also spoke of the failure of white women to understand or acknowledge the physiological differences (darker, more noticeable body hair) that lead to experiencing greater negative consequences of having body hair (Fahs, 2019). Fahs calls this lack of understanding a 'racial consciousness gap' (Fahs, 2019, p.16). An intersectional lens revealed that women of colour are trying not just to meet patriarchal standards, but also those set by white, middle-class women. The study suggests that privilege, afforded by factors like race, class, education and of course gender, can allow an individual more freedom to make their body inconsistent with social norms. Ahmed notes that privilege could be thought of corporally, as making the structures that surround you 'easier to wear' (Ahmed, 2017, p.125). Privilege can ensure that you do not appear out of place or open to interrogation, it acts as a shield from these experiences.

It is significant that the participants in these classroom exercises were asked to alter their normal behaviour by growing out their body hair. Prior to the exercise, they routinely removed it. Fahs' work does not therefore explore why women choose to retain their body hair and how they experience that. Even students who wanted to grow their body hair relied on the mandate of the course requirement to resist hair removal norms, with later students requesting participation to have the chance to experience having body hair. Fahs and Delgado also note that they created a new social norm of body hair within the classroom, making it difficult for anyone who wished to continue to remove their body hair. Transgressing the hairlessness norm became the new norm, supporting some of Cofield's findings and revealing how difficult it is for women to resist body norms, whatever they may be.

Filling the Gap

Research into women's body hair is limited, perhaps because it seems a trivial subject at first, unworthy of serious academic study. Yet, what there is reveals to us that women's body hair plays a significant role in social processes that seek to control and manage women. Far from being trivial, the matter of women's body hair is significant: it propagates the view that women's bodies in their natural state are not acceptable and establishes hairlessness as normative for women's bodies; it defines an ideal femininity of youth and powerlessness in women; it demands that women struggle to achieve that ideal, occupying their time with a project of body maintenance that feels uncomfortable and even dangerous to resist, and has the power to include or exclude.

Research on female body hair to date has mostly focused on the frequency of, practices of and attitudes towards its removal, with very little opportunity to hear the voices of women who choose to retain their body hair. I could find nothing written about the experience of having body hair in the UK today. An intersectional approach has also been rare. This study aims to address this by exploring the experience of a small number of Generation Z women who are choosing to retain their armpit and leg hair, considering why they are doing this and what it means to them, as well as how they are received by their social environment. It also offers a psychosocial autoethnographic analysis of my experience of having body hair for the duration of the research process.

METHODOLOGY

This section explains and justifies the methodology used in this study and includes reflections on the research process, revealing how exhilarating and invigorating it was, as well as overwhelming and challenging. I have used Finlay's (2002) concept of a meta-reflexive voice within the methodology, presented in italics, to interweave these reflections and express the dilemmas I felt, as well as my responses. This enabled me to separate reflections that were highly personal and often emotional from more factual information regarding how the study was conducted.

Philosophy of the Research

The design of this study was driven by some key philosophical, ontological, epistemological and ethical factors:

1. Feminist principles

I used Cook and Fonow's (1986) basic principles of feminist methodology to sense-check my methodology, to ensure that I 'do no harm' in a feminist sense. This meant respecting the women I was interviewing and their expertise; aiming to provide a platform for unheard women's voices; acknowledging my own subjectivity and influence as the researcher as well as the situatedness (Haraway, 1988) of my research; and aiming to contribute to social and political change that empowers women. Conducting research with people is often an extractive process and there is almost always some kind of power differential (Sinha and Back, 2013). Thinking of work by Oakley (1981), I tried to conceptualise the interviews as a collaboration to avoid an exploitative approach and to be sensitive to any power imbalance between me and the women being interviewed and minimise this. Oakley suggests that the way to achieve this is by rejecting the positivist call for researcher neutrality. As researchers, we must engage, be prepared to self-disclose and treat the people we are interviewing as human (Rapley, 2004).

I find myself questioning whether any of my worthy aims are actually achievable. What kind of a platform can I offer with this study? How important is it and what difference can it make? What about a power imbalance the other way – these bright young women with their certainty and their confidence, whereas I know how little I know.

2. **A desire to sit face-to-face with the young women and experience the process of co-constructing their narratives**

This study is underpinned by a postmodernist belief that there is no 'truth' out there to be discovered, but only situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) within a narrative that the women being interviewed and I will construct together as an always-partial, 'unstable and evolving event' (Anim-Addo and Gunaratnam, 2012, p.384). I anticipate that what we co-construct will reveal to me something about what motivates these young women to defy the hairlessness norm and how they see and experience the world we have co-habited in our different ways (they with body hair, me, until now, without).

Rejecting positivist hegemony is harder than you might think – it is engrained in me. In the first two interviews, I worry about building rapport and remaining neutral. In the second interview I do not want to stray away from the questions in my first interview – they should have the same format so I can compare the data. It makes me anxious, stiff, self-conscious, over-thinking. I hesitate before avenues that could be productive and turn away. I try (and fail!) to ensure I say as little as possible, so that my own voice is unheard. Afterwards, I read an article by Rapley (2004), then relax and realise that I don't need to worry about this – rapport-building and neutrality are tied to ontological and epistemological beliefs to which I do not subscribe, so I can let them go. It is liberating. Nonetheless I have to work hard to accept that my research cannot answer my research questions definitively and generalisably. I think of Stephen Frosh (2007), who asks us to avoid trying to tidy our findings into a neat or right answer, a unifying storyline. If I try to capture the experience in aspic, I am doomed to failure. Over and over I keep saying: live with the mess! Disrupt and disorganise! In my husband's family they divide people into neaties and mess-pigs. For a neaty, this process is challenging. The third interview is completely different – having re-conceptualised what I am doing, I can enjoy the process of collaboration. At a certain point, I realised that it was OK to express myself, my opinions, thoughts and values. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) say that research should be value-centred not value-free. I allow the conversation to flow more naturally and follow its own path, for example we have a long conversation about pubic hair, not part of the study. It feels like a true collaboration, I am no longer trying to stick to my 'predetermined agenda' (Rapley, 2004, p.18) but am empathising, reflecting, disclosing, listening, arguing and engaging. I feel sure that this makes for a better experience for both of us and I feel I am learning so much.

3. I wanted a personal journey of discovery and learning; I wanted to be transformed

This study was my response to seeing body hair on young women and what that evoked – disgust, awe, envy, respect. I wanted to dig into what these young women were thinking, feeling and experiencing, what gave them the strength to do this thing which I did not think I could, but felt I ought. I wanted to organise my own thoughts, develop my own ideology, build a stronger, firmer structure to which I could pin my colours. Anim-Addo and Gunaratnam state that 'in every research context… we are affected, moved, changed, transformed' (Anim-Addo and Gunaratnam, 2012, p.391). I wanted this study to challenge my beliefs and bring about my own transformation. According to Fontana and Frey, through the process of engagement and collaboration we '[learn] about ourselves as we try to learn about the other' (1994, p.373-4, quoted in Rapley, 2004, p.19). In a truly collaborative interview process, I found, this works both ways – the young women were interested in what I thought and asked me questions. At first, I wanted to avoid being drawn in, but then accepted that for full collaboration, self-disclosure is vital (Rapley, 2004). Consequently, it felt fitting to include some level of autoethnography in my methodology, where 'the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that *change us* and the world we live in for the better' (my italics, Ellis et al., 2011, p.284). Autoethnography could make the research more honest, as well as more 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative' (Ellis et al, 2011, p.274) to readers, and it would make the influence of my personal experience on this study a central element rather than pretending it had no impact.

Is this focus on my journey selfish? Should it even be an aim of research? Does that make the study unimportant, self-indulgent, frivolous? How can I achieve this but make it significant and worth doing? In doing so, will I lose sight of my research questions? I've never done this before, how do I make sure that I achieve 'enhanced self awareness' and not 'navel-gazing' (Finlay, 2002, p.215)? On the other hand, it feels just, fair and respectful, because if I am prepared to make these young women the subject of study, I surely ought to be prepared to submit myself to this process too (Ellis et al., 2011).

4. A commitment to an intersectional lens

I wanted to try to apply an intersectional lens to the analysis, taking account of the impact of class, race, educational opportunities etc. on the young women's experience of having body hair. The young women I interviewed were from similar racial, class and educational backgrounds, so it felt important to have an analytical sensitivity towards what impact this might have on what I found. Although I chose not to collect full demographic information on the women, they all presented as white, middle-class and university-educated, currently living in urban environments.

Name	Age	Occupation	Current Location	Home Location
Josie	23	Media analyst	London	Rural Scotland
Leila	21	Neuroscience student	Edinburgh	Oxford
Pip	20	Student and artist	London	Colchester
Ruby	24	Journalist	London	Edinburgh

Table 1: Demographic information about the women interviewed in this study

A Psychosocial Approach: Embodied and Embedded

As part of this process, I decided to try to grow my own body hair during the period I undertook the study, turning my own body into an archive, and allowing the study to occupy me as well as preoccupy me. I kept a journal throughout the study, recording how it felt to have body hair, what I thought about it, how other people responded to me. In Autumn 2022 I also followed as many body hair social media groups as I could find, allowing my social feeds to become saturated with images of women with armpit, leg, arm and facial hair. I wanted to see what representation and exposure would do to my feelings about body hair on women. A psychosocial approach will allow you to 'focus upon experience and… personal testimony, which is never entirely removed from the social context that feelings and emotions constitute and in which those feelings are made and remade' (Woodward, 2015, p.2,, citing Lewis, 2010). This means you can take into consideration both the inner world of lived experience and the outer social world, a perspective that I found most usefully summed up by one of my tutors in 2021 as both embodied and embedded. The two personal activities I undertook throughout this study gave me

an embedded and an embodied experience of body hair, fully psychosocial, which I believed could best be explored through an autoethnographic analysis.

When it came to the embodied experience I failed. Again and again. This, at least, is how I saw it. November 2022 when I was going clubbing with my old university girlfriends and shaved my armpits. June 2023 when I put on a dress for a summer party and shaved my legs. Before: trying to envisage how it would feel to be judged for my hairy body, and caving. After: shame and disappointment in myself and my inability to embody my beliefs.

Data Collection

To explore my research questions, it was important to me to hear from the Generation Z women who were choosing to grow their leg and/or armpit hair in their own words. I wanted to be in the room with them, ideally a real room, not a virtual room, able to hear their voices, watch their whole-body movements, eyeball their eyeballs. I wanted discussion, engagement, debate, argument – the antithesis of neutrality and objectivity. I wanted to learn something from this, I wanted personal change. While a focus group could have worked well to achieve this end, it was not feasible to organises, and so I decided to conduct four free-flowing, semi-structured interviews to obtain the kind of thick descriptions that I wanted, what Rapley calls 'elaborated and detailed answers' which provide ' 'special insight' into subjectivity, voice and lived experience' (Rapley, 2004, p.15, quoting Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). I also read an article that one of the women, a journalist, had recently published about her armpit hair, but I am not able to reference this to maintain her anonymity.

I focused on armpit and leg hair, as there was a difference in attitude towards areas of body hair (YouGov, 2021; Cofield, 2021). Toerien et al. (2005) felt that research into women's body hair removal, but more so non-removal of body hair, would benefit from separate investigation into the different regions of body hair to gain a more nuanced analysis. I also thought it would make the interviewing process less intrusive, since many women might not feel comfortable discussing their pubic hair.

The women I interviewed were aged between 20 and 24. All were acquaintances of my children, but only two of them knew each other. The connection meant we

entered the collaboration with a high level of trust and different levels of background understanding. It also meant that we started with some assumptions, and the age differential and route to them meant I felt responsible for their wellbeing in a vaguely parental way. Nonetheless, I felt that the advantages of having social connections outweighed the disadvantages, and these could be mitigated by sensitivity towards what impact that could have. I let the women decide how to communicate – all via WhatsApp – and sent them my information sheet and the consent sheet (Appendix A and B) before organising a time and place to meet.

The interviews were held in various spaces, always the choice of the women being interviewed. I would have preferred somewhere quiet, but this was not always their preference or possible, and Sinha and Back (2013) note that sometimes somewhere private and quiet can make 'genuine two-way dialogue' impossible if it arouses unease in the people taking part in the study. For this reason, I offered a range of private and more public locations and let the women choose. This meant a mix – my home, their home, a glass-walled meeting room in someone's flexible workspace, a busy, noisy café. The shortest was 44 minutes, the longest 73 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, we both signed hard copies of the consent form and I provided a hard-copy information sheet; at the end I gave them a hard-copy debrief sheet (Appendix C). The interviews were all recorded and transcribed with the help of Descript software. I took field notes afterwards and added them to my study journal, which I also used to record my responses, thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences throughout the period of the study. I wanted to be fully aware of my own role in this research process – the researcher is always part of the production of the narrative that the research creates (Anim-Addo and Gunaratnam, 2012), and so it felt important to record and reveal this. This was effectively an early stage of analysis, which started before the whole interview process had completed, so that thoughts and ideas after the first interview fed into the second and so on. Themes that I felt were emerging and noted in my journal, could be followed up and even provoked, such as a discussion about the queer community in the third interview. Gilgun (2014) points to the importance of the time between interviews for reflection and the refinement of questions. Sometime after the

interview I sent Josie, Leila, Pip and Ruby a book I had chosen, based on our discussion, as a thank you.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed and coded manually, using coloured highlighters and handwritten notes. After listening to the audio several times I was able to read the transcripts using in my head the voices of the women interviewed. Listening to the interviews for resonance, as advised by Ahmed, I also thought about what I wanted to learn from this process. This meant a conscious act of listening on two levels. Firstly, what were the women saying about why they had chosen to stop removing their body hair and what it meant to them to do so. I was also interested in how they felt the world received them, as young women with hairy legs and/or armpits. I was also listening for resonance, connections and echoes, allowing personal, emotional and intuitive responses to identify what was significant and to find connections that could lead to some overall themes. Where did things get stuck in the flow: what jarred? Or where did I get a sense of relevance or familiarity: what chimed? When something jarred or chimed, I made a note, building a list.

While this type of research will not produce generalisable findings, my results aim to make the reader feel a personal connection (Frank, 2000) and I hope they might resonate with them, suggesting that I have touched some kind of shared nerve. Ellis et al. (2011, p.283) describe this as when a story 'speaks' to your experience or the experience of others. This process felt unstructured, risky and a little scary, but also immensely exciting; for me, at least, it was unexplored territory.

I was also committed to experimenting with writing in a different voice. In a lecture I attended in 2022, sociologist Nirmal Puwar encouraged the audience to find our own voice and be brave enough to write in it, rejecting the more traditional, dispassionate, apparently-objective voice used in academic writing. I have striven to write up my research using my authentic voice. This made autoethnography an obvious choice for some of the discussion.

The autoethnographic analysis drew on the journal I had kept throughout the course of the study. I found it a helpful method to distil the personal journey of learning that I was undertaking, and I hope that my personal experience also

contributes towards 'extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes, 2000, p.21) in some way. I found autoethnography a particularly effective method for revealing and analysing a sweaty concept that I struggled with, and I hope that through this struggle I have provided 'something meaningful for [myself] and the world' (Ellis, 1999, p.672).

Ethics

I followed ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. I managed ethical concerns through transparency, providing information (research outline, debrief, how to withdraw) and anonymity, data management procedures and informed consent. The research was deemed routine. I offered the women I had interviewed the chance to review their transcript and see the final study. My main concern was regarding a power imbalance, though I was not sure in which direction this would act; I aimed to remain sensitive to the possibility and how that could a) create discomfort or dilemmas for the women being interviewed and b) impact the data. I tried always to behave in an ethical way, and adopting a feminist theoretical sensibility helped to scaffold this.

The methodology used in this study was driven by a number of factors that were important to me. I wanted to adhere to feminist principles of research, which included experiencing research as a collaboration. Personal learning and change were important aims for me, and underpinning my approach was a commitment to an intersectional analytical sensibility. Analysis of four semi-structured interviews led to five themes being identified, and a psychosocial autoethnography, drawing on my journal, was used to explore my experience of living with body hair during the research project.

DISCUSSION

The discussion falls into two parts. The first considers what was revealed from the interviews with Generation Z women who have chosen to retain their armpit and/or leg hair. The second provides an autoethnographic analysis of women's body hair.

The Interviews

The analysis of the interviews provided me with five key themes through which to consider how and why these young women are defying the social norm of hairlessness, what it means to them and how it feels. The themes are: resistance, spaces, surveillance and self-surveillance, feminist joy and privilege.

Resistance: A Call to Arms

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed develops the sweaty concept of the Willful Child, a figure from the Grimm fairy story about a daughter who disobeys her mother and is punished by God with death, but when buried her wayward arm sticks out from the grave and must be beaten back by her mother with a rod to rest in peace. The image of a wayward arm coming out of the earth - armpit hair like roots holding it fast, keeping it grounded and strong - kept coming back to me. For Ahmed it symbolises rebellion and persistence and I thought also of Ahmed's 'feminist army of arms' (Ahmed, 2017, p.84). Armpit hair becomes a call to arms.

For three of the women interviewed, Josie, Leila and Ruby, their body hair allowed them and others to send important signals about themselves to the world around them. Josie felt that:

> 'it's quite nice to feel like I'm… putting my stake in the ground a bit and saying you guys are all gonna read me as being a feminist and I am a feminist'.

Leila remembered when she was younger and stopped removing her body hair, thinking 'I'm a feminist, I don't do this anymore'. Ruby called it 'a signalling thing', but for her it was about signalling that she identifies 'as a queer woman'. We discussed that she took for granted the political, feminist stance the others associated with body hair, not wanting to dwell on 'super political' associations that can be 'exhausting' and put off people who perceive it as 'preachy feminist' positioning. That said, she saw growing her armpit hair as 'rebelling against the

norm' and took pleasure in 'owning' her armpit hair, playing a part in normalising what would otherwise play to the 'stereotype of being a butch, hairy lesbian'. Pip was most aware of her body hair around her family, and mentioned spending holiday time with her younger female cousin, feeling that by having body hair she was modelling something for her cousin. While advocating for women's choice to shave or not shave their body hair, Josie recognised that you could position retaining body hair as helping to fight the 'battle' in changing norms for women. Body hair allows these women to self-identify and signal their political, feminist and sexually liberal position to the wider world, including, or indeed targeting, those who might be welcoming and receptive to it.

As well as signalling information about herself, Josie notes that body hair on others allows her to identify political and ideological allies in the world. If she sees a woman with body hair she knows

> 'this is a person who I'm gonna get on with because we have shared politics, we have shared social grouping'.

For Josie, there is a link between politics and what she calls 'communities' and the display of body hair. It facilitates a mutual acceptance of each other, allowing her to 'place' them and know that there will be commonalities in what they believe and the way they think. Ruby also noted that when she sees someone with armpit hair she thinks 'maybe we are on more of the same wavelength', more specifically meaning that they are 'either open-minded or queer'. As a schoolgirl, Leila remembered being affected by social media influencers 'making a stand' for body positivity through acts of body hair rebellion. Ruby also mentioned several times the impact of social media influencers on her – some of whom normalised body hair and encouraged her to grow her own, others made her cautious of how she uses her body hair to publicly position herself.

For Ahmed the arm that keeps coming up out of the grave signifies 'persistence and protest or… persistence as protest' (Ahmed, 2017, p.160). For some of these women, their armpit hair signifies a politics that demands that women are allowed to feel comfortable in their bodies as they are and free to make their own choices without judgement, and is a form of rebellion and protest against existing social norms. Ahmed says about arms that 'we need them to keep coming up' (Ahmed,

2017, p.160). For me, this conjures an image of arms rising in formation and unison, revealing the armpit hair beneath. In this vision, body hair acts as a call to arms, amassing a community of like-minded women prepared quietly to do battle for freedom of choice, rejecting the imposition of oppressive and demanding beauty standards.

Spaces

Hairless female bodies are normative in the broader social world in the UK. If you choose to make your body inconsistent with that norm, you put yourself at odds with the social world; an uncomfortable and even risky position to occupy. Ahmed calls on Puwar's (2004, cited in Ahmed, 2017) concept of 'space invaders' to describe how occupying a position like this, resisting the hairlessness norm, makes you a stranger within a space. However, spaces were also critical in allowing the women to decide to *stop* shaving and retain (and continue retaining) their body hair. This is supported by Cofield's oral history findings, where 'spatial context was an important factor in the capacity to resist' (Cofield, 2021, p.241).

The women had all encountered spaces where new norms had been created, giving them permission to occupy that space when they decided to keep their body hair, offering their bodies that 'residence' (Ahmed, 2017, p.115). For Leila, her secondary schools were influential, being places where she felt that no one cared about appearances. Her sixth form in particular was a place 'where all they preached about was self-empowerment and just taking a stand'. It provided a space without judgement; assumptions that people cared if you had body hair 'felt wrong'. Pip also seems to have found a space in sixth form that offered freedom and allowed her to reinvent herself: 'I'm new me'. She discovered a bigger world filled with different people than in her middle school, and in this space having body hair 'just wasn't a big deal'. For Josie, her university house was the space that exposed her to women with body hair, normalising it so that she was no longer disgusted by it. Ruby also found that university offered her a space to explore her queerness, which in turn led to an interest in growing her armpit hair.

Queer spaces were significant in all four interviews, with the women noticing that the queer community has developed its own body hair norms. Josie recognised that friends of hers within the queer community were more likely to have body hair, as

opposed to heterosexual friends seeking a male partner, who would conform to heteronormative beauty standards. Leila also noted that

> 'the hairlessness norm is for the cis, heterosexual man and they aren't involved in [queer] communities, so, it would be strange for that norm to be perpetuated in those spaces. (l.296-8)

Leila participates in pole dancing and talked about her anxiety about not removing body hair when so much of her body would be visible in close proximity. However, at some point she realised that this was 'a really queer space' and

> 'in that space I suddenly was just like, honestly, I think no one cares 'cause the assumption is you have hair, you're a human'.

Pip pointed out that in the queer community men can shave body hair and it is 'normal for [women] to not shave', expressing the feeling that this gave her representation. Ruby also noted that 'in certain circles it is less normal to shave your legs'.

Being in spaces that are accepting of female body hair was important to all the women, expressed in the feelings of liberation and freedom that these spaces gave them. It seems significant that queer spaces came up in all four interviews; the queer community seems to welcome different approaches to body hair for men and women, allowing all four women the space to experiment with new body hair experiences. Ruby spoke most confidently about the normalisation of body hair, offering me a hopeful vision where, for this generation, body hair on women is becoming more mainstream and the social norm is changing.

Surveillance and Self-surveillance: Policing the Hairy Norm

However, Josie described this new norm as 'not an easy story of just liberation'. Both Josie and Leila talked about retaining body hair in terms of enlightenment. As a schoolgirl, Leila had felt herself to be enlightened in comparison with some of her friends and felt she had a role to play in educating other girls at school in how to be a feminist. Yet she now saw her behaviour as patronising:

> ‘this sense [that] you're on a pedestal and can enlighten all these *other* people that they don't need to remove their body hair. When in fact it's none of your business what anyone else does to their body. And I think when I was younger, I just struggled with not overstepping, not being in someone's face about what they do to their own body. 'Cause I felt like it was my responsibility to tell my girlfriends that 'You know, you don't actually have to do this' or 'You're still beautiful even if you have leg hair', those kinds of things. But when someone says to you, 'You don't have to shave your legs', it's obviously a very condescending thing to say to someone. Everyone knows you don't have to shave, it's an active choice’.

Leila’s first-hand experience of being one of those people allows her to identify with authority a ‘movement of feminist people who definitely think they’re better than other people who haven’t reached their level of enlightenment’.

Josie described a group of women at university which shared some of these characteristics. She herself remained on the edge of this group, partly because she felt alienated by their attitude, which appeared to involve a sense of superiority over women who chose to remove their body hair:

> ‘They’re sort of somehow enlightened and other women who removed their body hair aren’t enlightened.’

Just as some women in the Women’s Liberation Movement felt the weight of judgement when they continued to remove their body hair, Josie ‘felt very watched’. Her sense was that the group believed that if you shaved, you did not understand feminism and your politics were not aligned with theirs. This echoes the women in the Women’s Liberation Movement who believed they were shut out from the movement when they removed body hair and felt guilt and shame about doing so (Cofield, 2021). Josie recognised that in creating the new norm of body hair as described above, the group was then also making those who did not conform feel shame

> ‘in the same way that it has been used… for many years to shame women into removing their body hair’.

Enthusiastically adopting a new norm of body hair, the women described by Leila and Josie have also adopted Foucault's systems of disciplinary power to maintain their new norm and police other women. Josie already felt surveilled and at risk of collective judgement. It seems likely that women more integrated within the group she mentions would be surveilling themselves, to ensure they were not called to account for any deviation from the new norm. In the autoethnographic analysis I will consider whether the women I interviewed give me hope that we can move beyond such forms of power, the operation of which Foucault models so accurately.

Feminist Joy

Most of the students described by Fahs and Delgado (2011), who grew out their body hair, found it a negative experience. However, as noted earlier, they were not freely choosing to do so. There was also a minority of students who did find the experience positive, and some of what they felt is reflected in the experience of Josie, Leila, Pip and Ruby. The students reported feeling more at ease in their bodies and came to view hair removal as a social imposition on women, making them more aware of social power structures and how resistance to the norms came to feel like female empowerment. In the context of Ahmed's sweaty concept of the feminist killjoy,[1] Ahmed asserts that '[w]e need joy to survive killing joy' (Ahmed, 2017, p.248). In our interviews, I had a strong sense that for Josie, Pip and Ruby, their body hair brings them great joy. They spoke with passion and positive affect about their body hair, and their pleasure came across in their body language and tone of voice.

Pip has come to find body hair attractive on others and therefore also on herself:

> 'I just find body hair really attractive. If I see it on another woman, I'm like, that looks good. So I find it attractive on me too.'

She feels proud of her body hair: 'honestly, I feel quite proud of it now…. I have positive associations'. Ruby's armpit hair makes her feel free, more confident and she enjoys having her armpits on display. It has contributed to 'wider satisfaction

[1] The feminist killjoy is someone who will speak up when they see inequality or oppression in the world, even though doing so disrupts other people's happiness.

with [her] body image' and she feels it enables her to '[push] the boundaries of femininity'. She said:

> '[T]his is what my body is like as a woman and it's quite beautiful, in a really wild way'.

Josie's exposure to body hair on women normalised it, but she has gone beyond that and when it comes to her armpit hair she said:

> 'with my armpit hair, I feel like I genuinely have found a lot of joy in having it, and it's something that I actively like having'.

Some of Josie's joy arises from the fact that she thinks it surprises people that she has armpit hair – the rest of her does not fit with the stereotype that people have of women with hairy armpits, and their response to her hair helps her to assess them:

> 'I think part of the reason why I enjoy having armpit hair is because I feel it surprises people... and it's a good way to gauge what someone's like by their response'.

However, Josie and Ruby are less sure about their leg hair, and if having body hair does not make them happy, they will have no hesitation removing it. They seem to concur with Ahmed's (2017) assertion that women have the right to resist demands placed on them to make their body a 'site of rebellion'. Rather than feeling some kind of moral pressure to retain their body hair as a feminist act of rebellion, they are comfortable with a choice not to take on this act. It feels important that Josie, Ruby and Pip take great pleasure in their own body hair, because when it is difficult and uncomfortable to resist social norms, joy can compensate and even nourish the rebel (I think here of Pip speaking about her 'little inner feminist'), strengthening the resolve to continue to resist.

Not All Body Hair is Alike: What Can Privilege Do?

The women I interviewed all had characteristics that could protect them from some more negative consequences for women with body hair. These might include being white, highly educated, young, middle class, urban and physically attractive. Josie, Leila and Pip were conscious that they experienced a form of privilege by having

either sparse or light-coloured body hair. Leila spoke repeatedly about her body hair being less visible because it is blonde and acknowledged that this means that she has not 'been put in a box' for retaining her body hair. She expressed gratitude that she does not have 'super dark hair'. Through social media, Leila was very aware of individuals with more body hair and how 'exhausting' it could be to try to conform to the hairlessness norm if that is the case. She gave an example of a non-binary, social media influencer who wears feminine clothes but retains thick, black body hair on their legs, arms, chest and face. More of the online abuse they receive relates to their body hair (being at odds with their feminine clothes) than their queer identity. Josie pointed out more than once that she does not have much body hair and that growing up, girls who had darker hair felt shame. Pip initially said that she couldn't see why anyone would remove their arm hair but then stopped herself with a phrase that on paper seems dismissive: 'I mean, I know… anyways, whatever'. However, listening to the recording, I interpreted this as Pip self-correcting - remembering that people with more hair than she might feel a need to remove their arm hair - to acknowledge her privilege and align with her belief in freedom of choice.

For Josie and Leila, the relative invisibility of their body hair made their decision to retain it less of a political statement. Leila felt that for her body hair to be political it would need to be observable and she would have to engage publicly, stating that 'it doesn't feel like I'm contributing to this movement because I might as well not have body hair'. Josie thought that she would need a public profile for anyone to care or notice her body hair. There was a sense with both women that there must be some kind of suffering attached to having highly visible body hair for it to be political – the personal is no longer political if you are not paying a penalty.

I challenged Leila on this point, as I disagreed. At this point she acknowledged that:

> 'I understand that the fact that I don't remove my body hair means that I can say to someone, something, and maybe it will tumble'.

Benefits from privileges of education, aesthetics, race or apparent heteronormativity allow individuals to 'wear' their body hair more easily, reducing the intensity of social sanctions. The women I interviewed seemed all too aware of this. However, I believe that this does not make their body hair less political. It may

mean they are less open to interrogation as they pass through the world and thus make their individual experience easier, but it carries no lesser meaning than, say, a queer, working-class woman of colour who retains her body hair. In fact, Josie uses her privilege precisely because it empowers her, she notes that 'it surprises people' and 'muddies people's ideas… or… split second judgements', forcing them to reconsider their initial response to her. Josie enjoys what her privilege allows her to do:

> 'it's quite fun to be someone who maybe these men… conventionally find quite attractive, but then you have this thing that they find disgusting'.

And also feels it is 'somewhat important'; like Leila she recognises that it has an impact. It has the potential to make others question 'truths' they have taken for granted, such as the trope that all hairy women are unattractive.

Ruby's acknowledgement of her privilege was more difficult to unravel. Along with the other women, she articulated a closing of Fahs' (2019) racial consciousness gap in a slightly clumsy conversation we had about body hair on women of colour (the clumsiness was mine). She also recognised that being born into her time and place has made it easier for her to grow her body hair, and consequently is less inclined to claim it as feminist or political action. Like Leila, she is unwilling to affirm that her body hair is making a political statement, in her case because she feels this would be 'performative'. Performative, in this sense, is not associated with Butler's notion of gender performativity, but with a public performance of feminism associated with certain social media influencers who Ruby finds 'disingenuous' and superficial. Here, the personal risks being merely performative.

I was struck at this point by what a delicate path Ruby was navigating – despite clear indications of her political, liberal and feminist beliefs, she was careful not to lay claim to these as main motivations for her body hair choices, and I felt this was because it put her at risk of being publicly called out. We spoke about how Generation Z women feel watched, observed and judged in a way that Ruby called 'quite sinister'. This leaves a dilemma – privilege makes it easier for some women to have body hair, affording them precious opportunities to increase representation and challenge norms more easily than others. However, if they lay claim to be doing these things with their body hair, they risk being called out as privileged and this

acts as a disincentive to do so. I felt that the women I interviewed were conscious of their privilege and vigilant to ensure they did not abuse it, and it made them less inclined to make any political claims for their body hair choices. As a multiply-privileged woman, I recognise the potential damage that can be done to a political movement when the privileged take the spotlight; but at the same time it feels like a lost opportunity not to find some way to weaponise that privilege to benefit the many.

Autoethnographic Discussion

I felt that a psychosocial framework would offer the most revealing way to reflect on my personal experience of having leg and armpit hair while carrying out this research. I divided my autoethnographic responses into two categories: Embodied and Embedded, reflecting psychosociology's inner and the outer worlds.

Embodied

Figure 1: My unshaven armpit, 25 August 2023.

In the interviews I was struck by the physical experience of having body hair. Leila talked about how her body seemed to reject shaving, breaking out in an allergic rash in response to removing her hair the first and subsequent times. She felt that her 'skin was telling [her] it's not good'. The women spoke about body hair being smelly, itchy, sweaty. Pip's body hair helped her feel more comfortable in her body, as a woman living with borderline body dysphoria ('I don't like being overly feminine and I think the hair helps me… do that'), while Ruby said it put her in touch with a wilder femininity. These comments made me more conscious of how I experienced the materiality of my body hair. Although I had not noticed itchiness

associated with my armpit hair, once Josie mentioned this, I became acutely aware of an ongoing itchiness. Was it always there and I had not noticed, or was I so suggestible?

Like Josie and Pip, I grew to like my armpit hair. I removed it twice during the year and regretted it deeply the following day. When I looked at my shaved armpits, they seemed alien and their nakedness struck me as repulsive. I was delighted at one point to discover that, having shaved them without my glasses on, I had missed half an armpit and much of the hair was still intact (fortunately I hadn't noticed this the night before on the dancefloor)! That said, I remained deeply uncomfortable about going out in public with my armpit hair visible. Faced with the option of shaving, I would choose clothes that covered my armpits instead, and I spent summer 2023 with a farmer's tan. While my response to my body hair had changed during the research process, I knew that my peers had not been through the same journey and would be disgusted by it. In the end I realised that I felt ashamed of feeling shame about showing my body hair in public, but it was not enough to overcome the fear of that shame.

Like Josie and Ruby, I felt even less comfortable about my leg hair. I found the look of my sparse leg hair disgusting, like leggy spiders all over my calves. Just having the leg hair made me feel less attractive and less feminine and I shaved my legs many times over the course of the year. Every time I shaved my legs (or armpits) I felt a sense of disappointment in myself for not being able to live up to what I believe in. I thought of the women in Cofield's (2021) oral history and how they too felt they had failed as feminists, and I felt a sense of kinship. The feminist ghost was haunting me, and I did not know how to move on from the past. I also thought about Breanne Fahs writing that 'women experienced conflict between how they *should* feel and how they *did* feel' (Fahs, 2019, p.17, her emphasis). I experienced exactly how difficult it is to 'do' feminism as I failed to find my own path to behaviour change. I still do not understand why I find leg hair so much uglier than armpit hair, but it is interesting that this feeling was shared by some of the much younger women I interviewed. In my discussion with Ruby, I wondered whether it is because smooth, hairless women's legs are used more frequently than armpits in advertising imagery.

Being a different generation than the women I interviewed threw up some interesting responses in me. On the one hand, talking to them made me feel old. There were some stark differences in our attitudes towards body hair, which I will explore later, and I was aware of my lived understanding of second wave feminism compared with their theoretical, historical and sometimes patchy understanding. At times I found myself lecturing them about things and had to rein myself in, because the aim was for me to learn from them. They had not asked for a lesson from me and subjecting them to one felt like an abuse of power. Ruby and I had an interesting discussion about whether her generation would feel the same about their body hair as they aged, and I was shocked when she said, 'I've not seen very many older women with long armpit hair'. The shock was two-fold: recognising that this is undoubtedly the case, because my and the subsequent generation of women have so wholeheartedly adopted the hairlessness norm; even my friends who identify as strongly feminist shave. But also, being forced to recognise that she was talking about me – I was confronted with my ageing. It suddenly made me aware that there was a difference between their young bodies with body hair and my ageing one, and it made me feel less confident and less likely to show my body hair in public and with pride.

However, I was also overwhelmed by how positively the young women approached my request to interview them and the subsequent process. They all agreed immediately to be interviewed and seemed to express genuine interest in my research and warmth towards me. I found the interview process affirming, uplifting and inclusive and came away feeling reassured and justified in my choice of research topic. I felt that our agreement to undertake the collaborative interview journey together worked to break down some of the age barriers between us. We unconsciously looked for points of similarity rather than difference, finding them, for example, in discussion about leg hair or heteronormativity, and enabling me momentarily to forget that I had lived in my body, with my body hair, for at least thirty more years than them.

Embedded

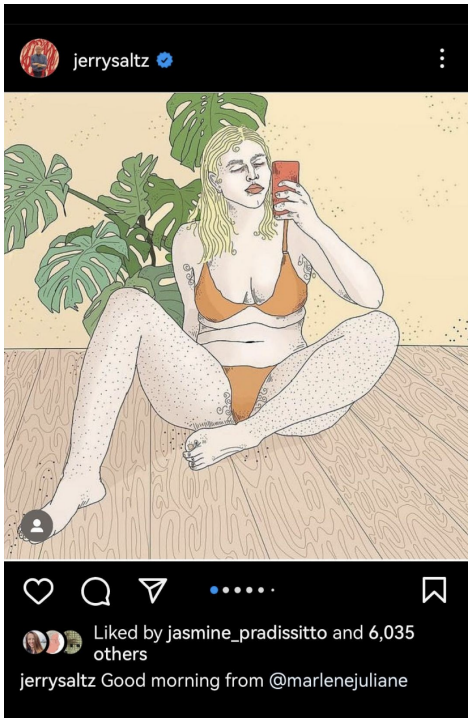

Figure 1: Image from Instagram sent to me by Pip after our interview, with the message 'A pic of an artwork reminding me of ur proj!'

There is a sticking point, an obstacle that I have kept butting up against and cannot find my way round. I think of this as the Sweatiest Concept, or a circle that I cannot square.

When I shave off my body hair for some reason, I feel like I have failed to live up to my beliefs. I am experiencing first-hand what Cofield calls 'the limitations of feminist praxis' (Cofield, 2023, p.247), even though I am on board with the feminist theory behind body hair, it is not easy to walk the talk. The women I interviewed do not have these feelings of failure when they select areas of body hair to remove. They see it as a question of individual choice. I felt this echoed the ideology of postfeminism and the 2010s, part of a neo-liberal and individualistic framework. Josie said that she wanted her legs to look as nice as they could and that '[i]t's a

mistake to be too puritanical about these things'. I think that this attitude is shared by all the women, who also believe that they should not judge anyone else who wants to remove their body hair. Josie encapsulated the women's justification here:

> 'I feel really what feminism is about, is women having the choice to do whatever makes them feel happy. At the end of the day obviously it would be nice if those norms changed, and I accept that a part of those norms changing is attitudes changing, and part of that is… exposure or representation… etc., so I do get that maybe I could position me not having my leg hair and my armpit hair as helping in that battle, and that's why I shouldn't remove it. But I just feel like it's unnecessary and it doesn't have that big of an impact…'

I envy the women's certainty, wish I could feel the same about my choices and admire them for not judging others. But note that I call it a 'justification', because deep down I find it difficult to accept their arguments.

It is instinctively attractive to think that women should be free to choose. It would allow me to feel more comfortable in my shaved body with no sense of moral pressure. But I feel that for women to be truly free to make a choice, we must change the way body hair is seen and that requires some kind of broader corrective action. If we allow hairlessness to be framed as an individual choice, we ignore the 'broader structural and emotional constraints' (Cofield, 2021, p.226) and if we ignore them, we cannot address them.

I have found that representation does make a difference to me – saturating my socials with body hair and other body positivity images *is* changing the way I think. I can see evidence of Guillard's (2015) findings in these media: collective support, resistance, representation and the normalisation of body hair within communities of interest. But it takes a lot to undo years of conditioning, and these images need to become mainstream and widely accepted. My experience has also meant that I believe that it is too much to expect individuals to dismantle gendered norms, it must be a collective process. And that collectivity must include those who are responsible for marketing and advertising imagery in all media – we need women with body hair in films, on TV, in print, in advertisements and on billboards. This is

starting to happen – I actively look for armpit hair now and feel a jolt of joy when I see it. Like Fahs' participants, growing my own body hair has sensitised me to how power functions and how the social world controls our choices. I am disappointed that there is not enough representation of women with body hair.

However, I have come also to recognise that trying to dismantle the hairlessness norm head-on risks simply establishing a different norm that women have to adhere to, imposed by us women ourselves. This brings me back to Foucault and the invisible forces that control and discipline women. Yet, you can also argue that if women believe that they are making individual choices and are blind to the normative mechanisms that are shaping those choices, then Ahmed's 'postfeminist fantasy' is here and we are in the ultimate Foucauldian dystopia. We believe we are exercising free will when in fact we are controlled by social discourses and fully self-policing.

However, I also feel a sense of hope after my discussions. Despite the more 'sinister' aspects of the gaze of social media, in many respects the women I interviewed seem kinder and less judgmental of their peers and their bodies and looks than my generation. I have come to see that the insistence on personal choice regarding body hair decisions for these women is an attempt to move away from the imposition of any norm. They are trying to make it as normative to have body hair as it is to be shaven, or as Leila put it:

> 'Removing your body hair should be just as liberating as choosing to keep it.'

I have taken a binary approach to body hair – the social norm must be reversed so that hair becomes normative for women and every woman has a personal responsibility to help achieve this. These women acknowledge that the hairlessness norm for women is part of a patriarchal social structure, but perhaps they believe there are other ways to reduce its potency than reversing the norm. For example, subverting the norm: these women made me recognise that it is not always true that removing your body hair is perpetuating the patriarchy. Within the queer community, say for a trans woman, it might be upending it. They make me think beyond the goal of creating a hairy norm to a (perhaps utopian) place where people of any or no gender are free to remove or keep their body hair, or do what the hell

they want with it, without social judgement. While I am focused on the hairlessness norm vs a possible hairy norm, they seem to be looking beyond it, thinking about how to reframe the discourse altogether.

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The interview process produced five themes that showed how the women interviewed use their body hair for social signalling and the difference that spatial context and affect made to their ability to resist the social norm of hairlessness. Revealing how one social norm might be replaced by another demonstrated how systems of power could continue to oppress women. An intersectional analysis showed that privilege makes having body hair easier for the individual but makes political engagement less likely.

The psychosocial autoethnography revealed how difficult feminist praxis can be. Conducting research with a different age group facilitated the transcendence of intergenerational boundaries, but also increased my awareness of generational differences. I experienced for myself how representation can normalise women's body hair. There were differences in what personal contribution the women and I felt we should make to dismantling the hairlessness norm. However, this does not mean that the women have fallen for a postfeminist fantasy, rather that they are aiming for a different goal.

CONCLUSION

When I noticed a number of young women I knew with unshaven armpits and legs, I wondered what gave this generation the desire and the confidence to resist the hairlessness norm, which has become so strong in anglophone western cultures today. This study aimed to explore why some Generation Z women in the UK are choosing to retain their armpit and leg hair, what this choice means to them and how they feel the world responds to their body hair.

The dearth of research into women's body hair reflects a view that it is too trivial for academic study, but what there is clearly reveals the role body hair can play in the social management and control of women. There are limited studies into the lived experience of having body hair and only one intersectional analysis that I could find. I found nothing focusing on Generation Z women who are freely choosing not to remove their body hair, a gap that this study aimed to fill.

Four Generation Z women agreed to collaborate with me in individual semi-structured interviews, constructing narratives about their body hair. The methodology was drive by a commitment to feminist research, although I found it difficult to throw off positivist ways of thinking, and only really learned to do so during the research process. This created some unevenness in the research experience – the first two interviews suffered from my attempts to adhere to positivist rules of interviewing, and the last two benefitted from newly-developing skills. One continuing frustration is that the write-up can never fully capture the experience of research; there is so much that escapes.

Analysis of the interviews revealed five main themes. First, the women use their body hair to signal their political and social ideological position to other people; body hair on other women allows them to identify a shared approach in others. I believe this enables community creation and could facilitate collective action. Second, the importance of spatial context in facilitating resistance to body hair norms, particularly queer spaces. I hope this could provide an opportunity to change social norms around women's body hair, space by space. Third, the risk of creating a new hairy norm when working to overcome the hairlessness norm, with systems of power that could be just as punitive and oppressive. This is territory into which I have strayed, but I am now primed to avoid this. Fourth, that feminist

joy is an important factor in the experience of having body hair, as it supports greater resilience and persistence. We must create opportunities to celebrate body hair. Finally, how, in today's world, privilege can ease the path to being hairy, but can make taking that path feel less politically charged and deter women from engaging in political debate.

I also carried out a psychosocial autoethnography, drawing on my research journal and organising the material into two categories. The embodied experience of having body hair revealed how difficult, messy and contradictory feminist praxis can be – sometimes it feels too challenging to live a feminist life. The age gap between me and the women interviewed was 30-34 years, but at times it was a profoundly inclusive experience that transcended intergenerational boundaries. However, at other moments I was acutely aware of the difference in our age and experiences. Our discussions and my lived experience of having body hair made me aware of how differently younger and older women with body hair can be perceived in the world.

Embedding myself in the body-positive social media community gave me a more positive personal response to body hair on other women, supporting the concept that representation is a route to normalising women's body hair. There is much more work to be done in the way women's bodies are represented in public media to achieve normalisation. I found that the women I interviewed did not share my belief that women have a personal responsibility to challenge the hairlessness norm. Initially I felt they had fallen prey to a postfeminism fantasy that feminism is completed, but I realised that they are conscious of the work that remains. Their words drew my attention to the risk of imposing yet more norms on women, and I have come to believe that their goal of a society where body hair and no body hair are both normative would be a better objective.

Without positivist measures like validity and reliability, it can be difficult to evaluate qualitative studies. Ellis (2000) offers alternative ways to evaluate autoethnographies: how well they engage the reader and whether they remind the reader of their own experience. She also expects the researcher to learn something from the experience - and that I can vouch for. This study engaged me in a journey of personal change and learning and I have enjoyed myself on the way. I have stepped outside my comfort zone to challenge my engrained ways of thinking and

open my mind to the experiences and viewpoints of others; taken risks, lived with uncertainty and mess; experimented with new ways of researching. I hope the results of this journey engage my readers, and bring about some change in the outside world, no matter how small.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information sheet for Body Hair and Generation Z Women

Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. You can contact me (katepevsner@gmail.com) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

This research project looks at the experience of Generation Z women who choose not to remove their armpit and/or leg hair. This study will be completed by 15th September 2023.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a Generation Z woman who does not remove your armpit and/or leg hair.

In this study, you will be interviewed by me. I will ask you some questions about your decision not to remove your armpit and/or leg hair and your experience of this. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed location at your convenience. This could include online.

While the topic of this interview is not in itself all that likely to cause any discomfort, any discussion about social norms regarding women's bodies could act as a trigger for negative thoughts or memories of past experiences. I will attempt to make you feel safe and protected, and will try to avoid discussion that could cause discomfort. If any issues arise, I have information about support resources available.

The results of this project will be written up for a Masters dissertation and could be presented more widely in verbal or written format. Your contribution will be anonymised and any identifying information will be removed. Identifying information will be stored in a locked safe and data will be password-protected and stored on my password-protected PC – only I will have access to these storage places. All personal data will be destroyed once the dissertation has been graded, and anonymized research data (transcript) will be destroyed.

You have the right to withdraw participation at any point up until the anonymised data can no longer be identified, which should be by the end of July.

The project has received ethical approval.

Primary investigator contact details: katepevsner@gmail.com

Information about Birkbeck's data protection policy

If you have concerns about this study, please contact the School's Ethics Officer:
Professor Karen Wells
Dept of Geography
Birkbeck, University of London
London WC1E 7HX

You also have the right to submit a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Appendix B: Consent form for Body Hair and Generation Z Women

I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that I will remain anonymous and that all the information given will be used for this study only.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the study at any time without giving any reason and to decline to answer particular questions. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the point that the anonymised data can no longer be identified.

I understand that audio and/or video recordings will be made. Recordings will be stored using a coding system to ensure anonymity and will not be used for any purpose other than data for this research project. Once the study has been marked, recordings will be destroyed. Recordings will be transcribed using voice recognition software and by the researcher – no other individual will hear the recordings.

I understand that all information given will be kept confidential. Only the researcher, Kate Pevsner, will have access to the data. Data will be coded to ensure anonymity and personal details that could identify participants will be stored in a fire-proof safe at the researcher's home, to which only the researcher has access. Research data will be held on a secure computer only accessible to the researcher. All data will be kept until the study has been graded, at which point it will be destroyed.

I understand how the results of the study will be used. The results will initially be written up for a Masters dissertation. If there is interest in the results, they may have wider dissemination, in the form of articles, presentations, interviews. Where individual data is presented, there will be no means of identifying participants. Participants will be offered a final copy of the interview transcript for approval.

I confirm that I am over 16 years of age.

Participant name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher name:

Signature:

Date:

Primary investigator contact details: katepevsner@gmail.com
Supervisor contact details: m.aragon@bbk.ac.uk

Appendix C: Debrief Sheet for Body Hair and Generation Z Women

Dear Participant
Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, feelings and experiences about your body hair with me.
I know that thinking and talking about our bodies can sometimes trigger memories and re-awaken past trauma. If you have found this conversation distressing and feel that you need some support, there are professionals and organisations who can help. These include:
BEAT: national association to provide support and advice to individuals with eating disorders. Helpline 0808 801 0677 www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Rape Crisis: national helpline for victims of rape: 0808 802 9999 (12-2.30pm and 7-9.30pm every day of the year).
Rape Crisis in England and Wales: for victims of rape in England and Wales. Helpline: 0808 500 2222 (24/7) www.rapecrisis.org.uk
Rape Crisis in Scotland: for victims of rape in Scotland: Helpline: 0808 801 0302 (5pm – midnight) www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation: email helpline: support@bddfoundation.org www.bddfoundation.org
The Survivor's Trust: confidential information, advice and support for people who have experienced rape and sexual violence. Helpline: 0808 801 0818 (Mon – Thurs: 10am-12.pm, 1.30pm-5.30pm, 6pm-8pm; Fri: 10am-12.pm, 1.30pm-5.30pm; Sat: 10am-1pm; Sun: 5pm-8pm). Email: helpline@thesurvivorstrust.org
Victim Support: 24hr free and confidential support for people affected by crime or traumatic events. Helpline: 0808 1689111. www.victimsupport.org.uk (includes live chat).
Galop: LGBT+ anti-abuse charity, providing dedicated sexual abuse helpline for LGBT+ people who have experienced sexual assault, violence or abuse. Helpline: 0800 9995428 (Mon-Thurs 10am-8.30pm; Fri 10am-4.30pm). Email: help@galop.org.uk.
There is lots more available out there, you are never alone, and if your particular concerns aren't covered, please tell me and I will find help.
Thank you again.
Kate