

Hair or Bare?:
The History of American Women and Hair Removal, 1914-1934

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. History of Hair Removal	8
II. American Men and the Hair Removal Industry	13
III. The Clothing Fashion Industry	16
IV. The Rise and Role of Women’s Magazines	18
V. The Early Ad Campaign, 1908-1914	24
VI. The Underarm Campaign takes Shape, 1915-1916	27
VII. The Underarm Campaign Expands, 1916-1920	29
VIII. The Leg Campaign, 1918-1934	38
IX. Establishing a Norm, 1934+	44
Conclusion	49

Introduction

I came to write this thesis because of a personal curiosity about hair removal and its origins. Among my female friends hair removal is considered an annoying, arduous, often painful, but necessary ritual. Most insist on removing leg hair before putting on a skirt or shorts, and balk at the thought of wearing a bathing suit without shaving or waxing the bikini line. Hair removal is considered so essential to some of these women that they refuse to participate in daily activities such as exercising or going on a date if they have not paid proper attention to removing their body hair. Furthermore, hair removal is generally considered to be a timeless ritual, or at least one that all American women have always practiced. Through my research, however, I discovered that hair removal is not an ancient tradition, nor is it an isolated behavior. Hair removal was introduced first in the nineteen teens and twenties, and coincided with a momentous change in the definition of the American feminine ideal.

In *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues that females today organize their self-perception around their outward appearance, in contrast to women of earlier generations, and emphasizes the importance of the 1920s in transforming the feminine ideal from the Victorian model to our modern concept of femininity. Indeed, it was largely the 1920s that brought about a profound alteration in the perception and definition of the female body:

The 1920s...encouraged a massive 'unveiling' of the female body, which meant that certain body parts were bared and displayed in ways that they had never been before. This new freedom to display the body was

accompanied, however, by demanding beauty and dietary regimens that involved money as well as self-discipline.¹

In other words, the new 1920s definition of the female body allowed for greater freedom in fashion, but also demanded a new awareness of the physical self. In addition to the “unveiling” of the female body, the 1920s saw the introduction of a litany of beauty practices including the regular use of makeup, the introduction of the bra, and the practice of dieting. In marked contrast to the ideal Victorian woman, who was expected to be more concerned with her morality and development of character than her outward appearance, all of these new fads focused on the presentation of the physical self.² Furthermore, these fads went a step beyond traditional fashion, emphasizing the body instead of clothing. Brumberg accurately sums up the great transformation of the female body image when she states: “The body *itself* became the fashion in the 1920s” (emphasis added).³

Exactly how and why this transformation in the female body image occurred is a subject of great debate among historians and anthropologists alike. According to historian Joshua Zeitz, the media industry alone was responsible for the birth of this new female image. In his analysis of flappers, one manifestation of the new female image, Zeitz explains,

These artists, advertisers, writers, designers, film starlets, and media gurus fashioned her sense of style...their power over the nation’s increasingly centralized print and motion picture media, and their mastery of new developments in group psychology and behavioral sciences, lent them unusual sway over millions of young women who were eager to assert

¹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project : An Intimate History of American Girls*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Random House, 1997), 98.

² Ibid., 97.

³ Ibid., n.p.

their autonomy but still looked to cultural authorities for cues about consumption and body image.⁴

According to Zeitz, this transformation of the female body was entirely a top down process. The media created an image of the modern female and sold it to women.

In her extensive study of the origins of the cosmetic industry in America, historian Kathy Peiss offers an opposing theory. Peiss maintains that the media industry was an important contributor to creating women's newfound role as consumers, however she professes that women themselves were most responsible for the transformation of the female body image. The invention and distribution of make-up began as a grassroots industry in which women were the inventors, manufacturers and distributors.⁵

Highlighting entrepreneurs such Helena Rubenstein, Peiss explains that in the early days of the cosmetics, women were more successful than men in developing the industry.⁶ Not only were women highly involved in the creation and sales of make-up products, they were extremely aware consumers. Women chose to wear make-up as a mode of self-expression, even when their husbands or male employers preferred them not to.⁷ Thus the creation of the cosmetics industry depended on invention at the grassroots level; women of all classes, races and ethnic backgrounds acted as both producers and consumers, and made the ultimate decision regarding the new female image.

Zeitz, who favors the "producer-led" explanation, and Peiss, who favors the "consumer-led" explanation, provide conflicting explanations for a still unresolved

⁴ Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper : A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who made America Modern*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 8.

⁵ Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar : The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, 1st American ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182, 202.

debate.⁸ This paper aims to reexamine the origins and implications of the transformation of the feminine ideal through an often overlooked but highly pertinent practice: the introduction of hair removal among American women. Although historians have examined the history of hair removal in ancient cultures, and anthropologists have tried to assign symbolic meaning to this practice, little attention has been given to how this custom entered American culture and became an integral element in the new definition of the female image. But as Brumberg asserts hair removal was a central component to the new female body image, “Beginning in the 1920s, women’s legs and underarms had to be smooth and free of body hair.”⁹ Where then, did this practice begin? Why and how did hair removal become a part of the feminine ideal? And what are the implications of this practice for American culture?

This paper offers a brief history of hair removal, and establishes that hair removal was not initially a widely performed custom among American women. Next the paper examines several converging factors that I have identified as being primarily responsible for the marketing of hair removal to American women: 1) the expansion of the men’s hair removal industry; 2) alterations in women’s clothing fashions; and 3) the birth of mass produced women’s magazines. Finally, this paper analyzes the hair removal advertising campaigns that appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar Magazine* and the *Ladies’ Home Journal* between the years of 1914 and 1934. From these magazine campaigns I derive the majority of my evidence for my contribution to the female body image debate.

My decision to examine the hair removal advertising campaigns as they appear in *Harper’s Bazaar Magazine* and the *Ladies’ Home Journal* was based largely upon the

⁸ Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 45.

⁹ Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 98.

previous research of historian Christine Hope. In her article *Caucasian Female Body Hair and American Culture*, Hope identifies *Harper's Bazaar Magazine* as the first of the women's magazines to run the hair removal advertisements. Significantly, *Harper's Bazaar* was not one of the "Big Six," the mostly widely read women's magazines of the era, but was specifically a fashion magazine targeting the elite.¹⁰ While Hope compares the advertisement campaign as it appears in *Harper's Bazaar* to the advertisement campaign that appears in the middle class magazine *The Delineator*, I have chosen to compare *Harper's Bazaar* to the much more widely read, indeed, the *most* widely read women's magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Although my work is organized loosely on the research of Hope, my study and comparison of *Harper's Bazaar* to a third magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, questions several of Hope's theories about the origins and implications of hair removal among American women.

Where Hope emphasizes the role of magazines in introducing and disseminating the practice of hair removal among women, I also consider the role of the men's hair removal industry and the women's clothing fashion industry, and provide a more detailed examination of the magazine industry. Hope clearly favors the "producer-led" explanation for the adoption of the practice of hair removal, but limits her analysis to the role of women's magazines. Yet the practice of hair removal was a heavily top-down process induced from many sources, not just one. Furthermore, my comparison of the *Ladies' Home Journal* to *Harper's Bazaar* reveals that hair removal was even more of a class-related phenomenon than Hope suggests, based on her analysis of the less-widely read *Delineator*. The hair removal campaign which debuted in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1914

¹⁰ Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995*, Vol. 165 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 114.

did not appear in the *Ladies' Home Journal* until 1934. In sum, the introduction of hair removal to women was introduced through and influenced by many different industries; furthermore, it trickled down the class hierarchy at a slower rate than Hope suggests. Finally, Hope only briefly speculates about the link between hair removal and gender, and does not begin to consider the implications of hair removal as part of the greater social phenomenon of the era, the redefinition of the feminine ideal. As Celia Lury notes in her book *Consumer Culture*, "consumption practices have become an increasingly important part of the feminine self."¹¹ I argue that the production and consumption of hair removal products was an integral component of this redefinition.

As with any historical analysis, this paper has a number of limitations. First, my research focuses primarily on the practice of hair removal among white women in American culture. This paper does not attempt to provide any explanations for variations in behavior among racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, while class is certainly an essential factor which must be considered when studying shifts in fashion, my research is restricted to the dissemination of the practice of hair removal among middle and upper-class women.

Despite the limitations of my research, an in-depth study of the advertisement campaigns in *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* provides ample evidence to establish that both Zeitz's and Peiss's perspectives on the creation of the female body image are incomplete explanations. This paper proposes that the practice of hair removal was neither solely a top-down fashion, nor entirely a grassroots movement. Hair removal was introduced through the efforts of three different industries, the men's hair removal industry, the women's clothing fashion industry, and the women's magazine industry,

¹¹ Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 134.

each of which recognized and sought to profit from women's new role as consumers. These industries appealed to women's acceptance of gender norms, marketing hair removal as a necessary feminine trait that could be achieved through the consumption of hair removal products. But the development of the women's hair removal market cannot be viewed simply as a fashion that men developed and sold to women. Just as Peiss made clear in the make-up industry, women were involved in the production and sale of hair removal products, working as producers in the cosmetic, fashion and magazine businesses. Furthermore, female consumers exercised their influence over the market by deciding whether and to what degree to adopt the practice of hair removal. Significantly, elite women were the first to wield their power as consumers. As my comparison of the advertising campaign in *Harper's Bazaar* to the advertising in the *Ladies' Home Journal* reveals, elite female consumers were the initial target of the hair removal industries, and therefore the first women to consider and ultimately to adopt the practice. Elite consumers set the standard that the middle class would later seek to imitate. Thus hair removal should be understood as a practice that was initiated by industry, but was influenced by the consumer, specifically the elite consumer. The industry's promotion of the practice of hair removal, combined with upper-class consumerism, succeeded in redefining femininity to include yet another element: the hair-free body. Hence, through the production *and* adherence to the hair removal campaign, both producers and elite consumers played a role, albeit of differing degrees of influence, in the 1920s reconstruction of femininity.

I. History of Hair Removal

According to historian Russell B. Adams, no one knows when humans first engaged in the practice of hair removal. Rudimentary attempts at shaving can be traced back to prehistoric cave drawings in which depictions of men appeared without beards or other facial hair. But the basic technology of the time meant that shaving likely involved using a flint ax or sharpened animal teeth on the face, a dangerous operation. Upon the invention of a more sophisticated flint razor, Egyptian males were known to have shaved both their faces and their heads. The reason was a practical one, according to Adams; in a combat situation a smooth head and face deprived the enemy of a handhold grip with which to behead his victim. With this description in mind, Adams explains, we can rule out any explanations of vanity or beauty, especially since older civilizations lacked devices like mirrors for self-scrutiny.¹²

Other civilizations engaged in the practice of facial shaving for ostensibly the same reason. Alexander the Great is said to have removed his beard and ordered his soldiers to do the same in order to avoid decapitation in battle. Although beards originally symbolized manhood and health in early Roman culture, the Romans were soon following the trend of Alexander the Great and other Greeks, removing their beards in the event of war. A clean-shaven man thus became the symbol of civilization and progress, while a bearded man became the symbol of slavery, servitude and barbarism throughout the Roman Empire.¹³ Even the artists and writers of the day reflected the then-modern sentiments about shaving. According to a pamphlet published by Gillette upon the

¹² Russell B. Adams, *King C. Gillette, the Man and His Wonderful Shaving Device*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

company's fiftieth anniversary, the Roman poet Ovid offered advice about shaving in his *Lover's Handbook*:

Let exercise your body brown:
 Don't slobber: see your teeth are
 clean:
 Your hair well brushed and cut right
 down:
Your cheeks closed shaved with razor
 keen:
 Your toga spotless, white and neat:
 Your sandals fitting to your feet (emphasis added).¹⁴

In Roman society removing facial hair was an integral element of cleanliness and a necessary component in courtship.

With the decline of the Roman Empire and the resurgence of barbarian tribes the beard came back in style, likely because the practice of shaving was still a rudimentary and dangerous process. In Europe during the Middle Ages a man was considered clean shaven if he did so twice a week.¹⁵ Hair removal would not be customary again in Europe until the onset of the Crusades in 1096 CE which reintroduced European soldiers to the Middle Eastern customs of regular bathing and hair removal.¹⁶

In the United States, early political leaders, among them George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, continued the trend of remaining clean shaven. Franklin once wrote that he counted it "among my felicities to set my own razor and shave myself perfectly well" rather than suffer under the razor of an untalented barber.¹⁷ It was not until President Abraham Lincoln grew his famous beard that facial hair would be seen as

¹⁴ J. P. Spange, *Look Sharp! Feel Sharp! be Sharp! Gillette Safety Razor Company for Fifty Years!*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1951), 9.

¹⁵ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 10.

¹⁶ Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair : A Cultural History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 39.

¹⁷ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 11.

fashionable in United States society. But as quickly as the beard came into style, it disappeared from style in the decades following the Civil War. By the end of the 1880s most American men were shaving once again, though as Adams notes, despite drastic technological advancements of the industrial era, razors had failed to develop beyond the earliest Bronze Age models.¹⁸ Thus, in spite of the widespread tradition of shaving, which came in and out of fashion at various points throughout history and was practiced by cultures across the globe, hair removal remained a slow, painful, and somewhat dangerous operation that could hardly be performed on a daily basis by the average man.

Though a handful of historians have written on the evolution of men's shaving, few have examined the parallel practice of hair removal among women. In the *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, Victoria Sherrow provides evidence that women in ancient Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire removed all the hair from their bodies.¹⁹ In ancient Egypt women used beeswax or cream depilatories composed of an alkali to remove the hair from their legs.²⁰ Women in ancient Egypt also removed pubic hair, as did Greek women, because, according to Sherrow, they believed the presence of such hair was "uncivilized." So distasteful was the presence of body hair on women in ancient Greece, that Greek artists molded their statues of women without pubic hair.²¹ The aversion to pubic hair was not restricted to ancient Egypt and Greece; in other Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, Palestine and Lebanon, brides were expected to remove all body hair, with the exception of eyebrows and head hair, on the eve of the wedding ceremony. In some central African tribes, brides plucked their pubic hair, or

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹ Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 180.

²¹ Ibid., 316.

removed it through a rudimentary form of shaving.²² Nor was the practice of full-body hair removal restricted to women. Men in ancient India and Egypt also removed body hair employing the same methods women used.²³ As with men's facial hair removal, the practice and methods of women's body hair removal differed among ancient cultures. Moreover, the practice of body hair removal was not necessarily gender dependent. Nevertheless, on the whole, women engaged in body hair removal specifically purging hair from the arms, legs and pubic regions, more often than men.

Like men's facial hair removal, women's body hair removal often served as an indication of class. During the height of the Roman Empire, middle and upper-class Roman women engaged in hair removal with regularity, using pumice stones, razors, tweezers and depilatory creams: "Wealthy Roman women were usually the trendsetters."²⁴ But the collapse of the Roman Empire, which ended the practice of facial hair removal among men, likely reduced the practice of body hair removal among women. Indeed, European women did not engage in body hair removal during the Middle Ages.²⁵ Yet as Sherrow emphasizes, even with the reintroduction of men's hair removal during the Crusades, Caucasian peoples did not commonly remove body hair. While the presence of body hair had served as an indication of class among ancient Romans, body hair had traditionally been seen as an asset among Caucasian cultures. And although some wealthy European women did engage in forms of hair removal during the Middle

²² Ibid., 180.

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 335.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

Ages, these procedures fell into disfavor when Catherine de Medici, the Italian-born queen of France in the 1500s, objected to the custom.²⁶

Although the practice of hair removal has occurred throughout human history, only in the last fifty years have anthropologists begun to speculate about the significance of hair in culture. One of the earliest anthropological studies on the symbolism of hair was that of E.R. Leach written in 1957. According to Leach, who based his work on the studies of Hindu people in India, and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the symbolic significance of hair follows a specific pattern in these Eastern cultures: long hair symbolizes “unrestrained sexuality,” short hair symbolizes “restricted sexuality,” and shaven or otherwise removed hair, symbolizes “celibacy.” A decade later anthropologist C.R. Hallpike proposed an alternative formula: the cutting of hair symbolizes “social control” and long hair symbolizes “being outside of society.” Significantly, Leach and Hallpike, derived these equations solely from their studies of head hair, without considering facial hair or body hair. Furthermore, both anthropologists examined specific cultures in their work and did not propose that their conclusions could be generalized to apply to other societies. Nevertheless, both Leach and Hallpike introduced the concept that hair and its removal have functioned as a medium for cultural expression.²⁷

Overall, the practice of hair removal among both men and women has been a culturally specific practice. Particular cultural groups have engaged in the behavior and ostensibly done so for a variety of reasons including, as various historians and anthropologists have suggested, war-time precautions, hygiene, fashion, class symbolism and cultural symbolism. The critical questions of this paper then are: How and why did

²⁶ Ibid., 68.

²⁷ Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: The Sociology of Hair," *The British Journal of Sociology* 38 (1987), 381-413.

American women adopt the practice of hair removal, and what were the implications of adopting this practice?

To begin answering these questions, it is imperative to remember that hair removal was not a common custom among Caucasian European women.²⁸ The tendency of European women to abstain from hair removal of all kinds helps explain why initially American women did not engage in the practice of hair removal. The majority of early immigrants to the United States were of European origin rather than of Middle Eastern or African origin, female slaves excluded. Accordingly, European women did not transfer the practice of hair removal to American society. Thus, custom and tradition cannot account for the history of hair removal among American women, as it might for the practice of facial hair removal among men; rather, hair removal had to be introduced, explained, and marketed to American women in order to become a common practice. Accordingly, an explanation of the advent of women's hair removal in America must begin with an examination of a behavior *with* precedent: the custom of hair removal among American men.

II. American Men and the Hair Removal Industry

In the late 1880s American men were still shaving with razors that resembled the crude models that had been used for centuries. Inventors had experimented with various protective guards and clamps meant to protect men from cutting themselves, but all had

²⁸ Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 68.

failed to eliminate the fundamental hazard of shaving. It was not until the genius of King Camp Gillette that the danger inherent in shaving would be alleviated.²⁹

King Camp Gillette was both a salesman by trade and an inventor by hobby. A “star salesman” Gillette understood the value of relentless and repetitive promotion. As an inventor, however, Gillette did not initially find success. He had always hoped to become wealthy from his inventions and several years earlier had founded the short-lived Gillette Tap Valve & Faucet Company with his brother. But when Gillette’s early invention failed, a friend gave him the advice that would be essential to success of the Gillette razor:

King, why don’t you try to think of something like the Crown Cork which, when once used, is thrown away, and the customer keeps coming back for more—and with every additional customer you get, you are building a foundation for profit.³⁰

Gillette recognized the value of his friend’s advice; if he could combine his aptitude as a salesman with his passion for invention, he could make a profit. The creation of a one-time-use product was where the revenue lay.

Years later, Gillette described how the idea of the safety razor came to him one morning in 1885:

On one particular morning when I started to shave I found my razor dull, and not only was it dull but it was beyond the point of stropping and needed honing, for which it must be taken to a barber or cutler. As I stood there with my razor in my hand...the Gillette razor was born.³¹

In just its second year on the market 91,000 Gillette razor sets were sold.³² K.C. Gillette had succeeded in creating a product that could be manufactured at a low cost, sold at a

²⁹ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

relatively cheap price, but required constant replacement. The new blades did not require stropping because they could be thrown away after use. Men were no longer beholden to barbers but could shave themselves and could do so daily. Most importantly, the design of the new blade was much safer than any that had ever been used by men before. Clearly K.C. Gillette had succeeded in filling an ancient void and offering a solution to a problem that had existed for thousands of years.³³

Curiously, this profit-inspired, fortune-hungry man also authored a number of socialist theory books. But in *The People's Corporation* written near the end of his life, Gillette revealed his preoccupation with capitalism and making a profit:

Science and invention and technique are employed in the service of profit, not in that of the public...the public often gets some benefits, to be sure, but it gets it only at the nod of those who serve the shareholder and have his interest at heart.³⁴

Despite Gillette's best intentions as a socialist theorist, the life he led was far from his Marxist values.³⁵ As a salesman he was most concerned with capturing the market, and edging out any new competitors who might arrive on the scene. Hence by the 1920s, Gillette had been established as an international company with manufacturing outfits in Canada, Great Britain, and Germany. Men in countries including Russia, Norway, Italy and France were shaving with Gillette razors.³⁶

In July of 1915, the first Gillette razor for women came on the market. But where Gillette had responded to a clear void in the men's hair removal market, he now faced the dilemma of promoting to a market that did not yet exist. Hence Gillette was responsible for introducing to American women the revolutionary concept of shaving. The Gillette

³³ Ibid., 49.

³⁴ King C. Gillette, *The People's Corporation* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 27.

³⁵ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 85.

³⁶ Ibid., 97-98.

women's razor would trigger a relentless advertising campaign on the part of more than a dozen beauty care companies, all encouraging women to remove the suddenly "unsightly" body hair and all seeking to make a profit.³⁷ Although these beauty care companies would later vie to be the leader of the women's hair removal industry, Gillette must be credited with introducing a women's fashion which would ultimately become convention.

III. The Clothing Fashion Industry

The introduction of hair removal to American women, not incidentally, coincided with substantial changes in women's clothing fashion. Between 1910 and 1930 fashion changed with remarkable rapidity due to a host of factors such as World War I which caused shortages in resources and machinery, the invention of new materials like artificial silk (also known as rayon), and the movement towards mass produced clothing in an increasingly industrialized America.³⁸ The overall trend in women's fashion seemed to be, as Brumberg notes, the "massive 'unveiling'" of the women's body.³⁹ This "unveiling" did not occur all at once but in stages, and cycled from less revealing, to more revealing, to less revealing throughout this twenty year period.⁴⁰

The first step in the "unveiling" was the popularity of sleeveless and sheer evening gowns, specifically among wealthy women. The sleeveless and sheer style

³⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1915.

³⁸ Doreen Yarwood, *Fashion in the Western World, 1500-1990* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1992), 131-132.

³⁹ Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 98.

⁴⁰ Christine Hope, "Caucasian Female Body Hair and American Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 1 (1982), 93.

gowns reflected the dance fad of the pre-war era: the tango.⁴¹ Women's clothing suddenly began to allow for movement, and at the same time, revealed the upper arms and shoulders. The hair removal industry, as we will see, would call upon these new sleeveless and sheer fashions, as well as the new dance craze, to explain to women the need for hair removal, and to promote their new products.

Even more avant-garde than the sleeveless and sheer evening gown fashions, were changes in the length of skirts and dresses. Beginning around 1910, the hemlines of women's skirts and dresses began slowly to creep upward, revealing ankles and stockings. By 1915 the hemline rose to the mid-calf, shorter than it had ever been before.⁴² The hemline continued to rise until it reached its shortest length, just covering the knee, in 1927.⁴³ Around 1930 hemlines began to drop again, but never to the modest pre-World War I level.

Coinciding with the rising hemline was the introduction of flesh-colored stockings, made possible through the invention of rayon. These flesh-toned stockings came to replace old-fashioned, dark-colored, wool stockings, and were intended to simulate the look of bare-legs. Most importantly, rayon stockings were affordable, even for working class women. Thus, women of all classes could take-part in the latest fashion trend.⁴⁴ And in general, fashion trends of the 1920s revealed more of the body than in any previous decade of American history. From skirts to blouses to "flesh-colored stockings", skin was in.

⁴¹ Valerie D. Mendes and Amy De La Haye, *20th-Century Fashion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 41.

⁴² Cynthia Rose, *American Decades Primary Sources: 1910-1919* (Detroit: Gale, 2004), 189.

⁴³ Yarwood, *Fashion in the Western World, 1500-1990*, 139.

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Herald and Robert Price, *Fashions of a Decade. The 1920s* (New York: Facts on File, 1991), 48.

But what effect did fashion have on the hair removal industry? Clothing fashion promoted hair removal in a circuitous manner. Clothing fashion did not mandate hair removal despite the claims of hair removal advertisements, but served as a justification for the industry. Ads called upon new clothing fashions as one of the primary reasons women should remove hair. Yet women in many non-Western cultures have and do embrace clothing fashions that expose various parts of their bodies without consideration for the presence of body hair. Furthermore, clothing fashion should not be confused with beauty fashion which dictated that, as Brumberg tells us, the body itself was now under scrutiny. Thus, changes in clothing fashion merely encouraged the hair removal industry and served as a rationalization for advertisers.

IV. The Rise and Role of Women's Magazines

Even as the men's shaving industry expanded to consider women, and changes in the women's clothing industry encouraged exposure of the female body, the hair removal market could not have reached consumers without the proper avenue of communication: the women's magazine. Through a budding relationship between magazine publishers and the national advertising industry, these magazines would come both to inform women about products and encourage their consumer behavior.

Women's magazines had been available to American women at least as early as 1792 when the *Lady's Magazine* first appeared. Yet the *Lady's Magazine* and other pre-bellum publications for women targeted only a small group of readers, specifically the

“elite, literate audience.”⁴⁵ The first mass circulation women’s magazine, the *Delineator*, was not introduced until 1873 but was followed promptly by the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall’s*, and *Pictorial Review*. Known as “the Big Six” these magazines differed slightly in their targeted audience, but all sought to profit from a newly identified group of consumers: middle class, white, American women. The birth of the mass marketed women’s magazine can be attributed to a host of factors, including the post-war entrepreneurial fervor, and technological advances in printing and transportation, all which allowed magazines to reach this new consumer group.⁴⁶

The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which quickly became the leading women’s magazine, helped shape women’s roles as consumers and establish an economically profitable relationship between publishers and advertisers. The magazine got its start when the publisher of the men’s magazine *Tribune and Farmer*, Cyrus Curtis, allowed his wife, Louisa Curtis, to add a supplemental article directed at farmers’ wives. Louisa’s article proved so popular that the inset, entitled the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, would boast a circulation of 25,000 readers by the end of its first year.⁴⁷ Curtis cleverly sold his previous magazine and focused instead on his new publication, *The Ladies’ Home Journal*. Like every businessman, Curtis knew that he needed additional revenue if the magazine was to succeed; to keep up with the costs of ever increasing circulation Curtis began selling space in the magazine to advertisers. Curtis’s appreciation of the potential profit from his newfound market was evident in a speech he delivered to advertisers:

⁴⁵ Mary Ellen Waller, “Popular Women’s Magazines, 1890-1917”, (Ph.D. diss, Columbia University, 1987), 6.

⁴⁶ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women’s Magazines*, 3-4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Do you know why we publish the *Ladies' Home Journal*? The editor thinks it is for the benefit of American women. That is an illusion...the real reason, the publisher's reason, is to give you people who manufacture things that American women want and buy a chance to tell them about your products.⁴⁸

Curtis realized women's new role as consumer and saw the opportunity for both producers and his own company to benefit.

Producers were not blind to the effectiveness of magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* at reaching the female consumer. Between the years of 1895 and 1910 the circulation of the *Ladies' Home Journal* increased 75 percent while *Delineator's* could boast a 139 percent increase, *Women's Home Companion* a 291 percent increase, *McCall's* a 912 percent increase, and *Good Housekeeping* a 331 percent increase. By 1912 the *Ladies' Home Journal* had a circulation of more than 1.5 million readers and the *Delineator* had a circulation reaching readers in as many as twenty different countries.⁴⁹ Historians estimate that the sum spent on advertising jumped from \$190 million in 1890 to \$682 million and growing by 1914.⁵⁰ Hence from the start, corporations identified women's magazines as tools for increasing consumerism and sought to establish a working relationship with the publishers who could connect them with this market.

The success of the women's magazine was not entirely due to the spirit of entrepreneurship blossoming in men like Curtis, nor to the profit-minded producers. Improvements in technology made mass circulation possible. Printers saw the introduction of assembly lines, conveyor systems and scheduled time production. The rotary press increased magazine production ten fold, reducing the cost of publishing and increasing both the length and circulation of the magazine. Furthermore, the beginning of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7, 33.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

the twentieth century saw the introduction of color printing as well as the reproduction of artwork in a simpler, cheaper manner.⁵¹ In addition to advancements in technology of the press, improved railroads and postal services meant publishers could reach a wider audience. The Rural Free Delivery Act (1891) allowed publishers to reach rural consumers with ease.⁵² In short, changes in technology and transportation established magazines as a fundamental route of communication and hence as an influential force in the creation and distribution of ideas.

Although industrialization influenced the production and distribution of women's magazines, demographics best explain the increase in the readership of women's magazines. Between the years of 1890 and 1920 the U.S. population increased from 63 million to 105.7 million people; the female population increased two thirds. Furthermore, the literacy rate jumped to 94 percent by 1920, making magazines accessible to a large majority of an ever growing population. Women's magazines spoke to the needs of a new and growing group of women, while still reflecting the values of female homemakers. Thus changes in the demographics of women and an expanding female market, in addition to advances in production and distribution, made women's magazines extraordinarily influential.⁵³

While the early success of women's mass-produced magazines reveals that a women's market clearly existed, the true objective of both advertisers and the magazine industry was to increase women's consumerism. Accordingly, the goal of advertisers was not solely to fulfill women's needs; it was to create new ones.⁵⁴ In addition to household

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Ibid., 31.

⁵³ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 59-60.

products such as “soaps, foods, clothing,” magazines began to market products for self-improvement. As Joshua Zeitz points out, the early twentieth century saw a barrage of products directed at the female body, from facial cream to make-up to corsets, such that by the end of the 1920s the total volume of advertising for toiletries and beauty services were second only to advertisements for food.⁵⁵ For many of these products advertisers needed to create longing where none existed, using whatever means necessary to sell their merchandise. Listerine for example, which had previously been used to clean scratches and scrapes, was suddenly marketed as a solution to “halitosis,” a new social and medical malady also known as bad breath. Advertisers were so convincing in their marketing that few consumers realized “halitosis” was an entirely fictional disorder.⁵⁶ Thus not only were advertisers creating desire for products designed to improve the home; they also sought to create among women the desire to improve the external self.

Through such attempts to expand female consumerism, the magazine industry simultaneously defined the average female consumer. According to historian Jennifer Scanlon, the *Ladies' Home Journal* ran advertisements which “obscured fundamental differences among women” and promoted the ideal customer: “This average woman had certain characteristics:...she was married...she was white, native born...and preferred spending money to producing goods.” Above all, the female prototype in the *Ladies' Home Journal* was a consumer. Thus the *Ladies' Home Journal*, argues Scanlon, linked gender with consumption, and in doing so, “defined womanhood for the early 20th century...for the middle class.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Zeitz, *Flapper*, 202.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings : The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6-7.

If the *Ladies' Home Journal* defined womanhood for the middle class consumer, *Harper's Bazaar* defined womanhood for the elite consumer. From its birth in 1867, founder Fletcher Harper proclaimed his vision for the magazine; *Harper's Bazaar* would be "a repository of fashion, pleasure and instruction" for American women. Through fashion articles and advertisements, *Harper's Bazaar* sought to instruct upper-class women in consumerism and "their roles as dowagers, matrons and debutantes."⁵⁸

Despite the role of women's magazines in promoting the respective "consensus" views of womanhood for the middle and the upper-class, it would be a mistake to frame the relationship between women's magazines and advertisers as solely a male-run enterprise. Women were highly involved in the promotion of these magazines, selling subscriptions to other women, and giving subscriptions as gifts to their female friends.⁵⁹ Furthermore, some women broke conventional gender roles of the era, becoming editors of magazines like the *Delineator* and *Vogue*. *Harper's Bazaar* hired a woman, Mary L. Booth, as one of its initial editors and in the 1920s appointed Elizabeth Jordan to its editorial staff.⁶⁰ Women also worked as writers for the advertising industries. As Scanlon notes, most of these women viewed their role as advertisers as a social good: "These women often approached their work with a missionary spirit about the consumer culture, a spirit many of them carried over from the progressive politics of their college educations, suffrage activities or social work experiences." Scanlon asserts that the role of women as editors and advertisers thus challenges the conventional notion of the "hegemonic" growth of the magazine and advertising industries in this era. Women were

⁵⁸ James Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 2d ed. (New York: Ronald Press Co, 1956), 128-129.

⁵⁹ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 29.

⁶⁰ Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 128-129. Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 54.

selling magazines and the consensus image of womanhood to one another.⁶¹ But as Mary Ellen Wallace argues in her dissertation *Popular Women's Magazines, 1890-1917*, male editors outnumbered female editors by a ratio of approximately two to one.⁶² Furthermore, as Zuckerman notes, no women became publishers in the early decades of the women's magazine. So while some of these magazines were staffed with female promoters, writers, and editors, the top echelons of the industry remained male dominated.

V. The Early Ad Campaign, 1908-1914

The first hair removal advertisements directed at American women appeared as early as the 1840s. One man named Doctor Gouraud used New York City newspapers to advertise his home-made depilatory power which could be mixed with water and applied to the skin.⁶³ Similar advertisements for depilatories appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine at the turn of the century (Figure 1). In one such advertisement which appeared in the December 1908 issue of Harper's Bazaar magazine, the producer, Mme. Julian, promotes her home remedy for hair removal and promises, "All hair on face and arms permanently destroyed guaranteed."⁶⁴ This *Harper's Bazaar* advertisement was typical of early hair removal ads and fits perfectly into historian Christine Hope's paradigm of the hair removal campaign. Hope divides the hair removal campaign into four periods which she titles, "The Ivory Complexion (prior to 1915)," "The Great Underarm Campaign (1915-1919)," "Coming to Terms with Leg Hair (1920-1940)," and "A Minor

⁶¹ Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 171.

⁶² Waller, *Popular Women's Magazines, 1890-1917*, 6.

⁶³ Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 181.

⁶⁴ *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1908.

Assault on Leg Hair (1941-1945).” Like other advertisements in the earliest period of the campaign, the *Harper’s Bazaar* advertisement was small in size measuring less than one inch by two inches. The advertisement did not discuss hair removal of the underarms or legs but focused solely on the visible portions of a woman’s body: the face and forearms. Furthermore, the product was not a mass-produced item but a home-made remedy which a potential customer had to order through the mail. The small size, sporadic appearances, and limited focus of the advertisement, as well as the type of product advertised, together suggest that in the early stages of the hair removal campaign, the practice of hair removal was not a normative behavior among American women.⁶⁵

Yet as Hope notes, these early advertisements were “product-based” rather than “instructional.”⁶⁶ Instead of informing women of how and why to remove hair, these early advertisements merely provided women with a product, suggesting that there was already a female market in existence which understood the need to remove extraneous hair from the face and arms. According to Hope, these early product-based advertisements fulfilled a previously established desire among upper-class American women: the need to remove any “superfluous” hair, or, any visible hair not growing on the head. Hope’s study of beauty books of the late nineteenth century, as well as a relentless campaign of facial creams also evident in *Harper’s Bazaar* which promoted the attainment of a perfect complexion, verify that superfluous hair on the face was a viable social concern for upper-class women.⁶⁷

But while the product-focused message of the early advertisements suggests that such hair removal companies were catering to an already established desire, Hope also

⁶⁵ Hope, *Caucasian Female Body Hair*, 94.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

reminds us that this desire was likely limited to a handful of upper-class women. Fashion at the turn of the twentieth century left little skin exposed, hence there probably was not a great need among most women to remove body hair.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the limited size and number of advertisements at the time reflects the limited demand among women for such hair removal products. And while the advertisements like the one found in *Harper's Bazaar* sought to provide a product for some women, they did not seek to expand the market through informing or appealing to new potential customers.

Perhaps accurately then, the next hair removal product to appear in *Harper's Bazaar* appeared in 1914 and was in for a depilatory powder called X Bazin which claimed to have been “used by women of refinement for generations for the removal of objectionable hair.”⁶⁹ (Figure 2) But as a closer look at this advertisement and the ensuing X Bazin advertisements suggests, these upper-class women probably were not already engaged in the practice of hair removal *under the arms*. Indeed, this same X Bazin advertisement, which portrayed a woman in a sleeveless gown with her arm raised about her head, was likely intended to *inform* consumers. The large print read: “Summer Dress and Modern Dancing combine to make necessary the removal of objectionable hair.” This informative text suggests that underarm hair removal was an uncommon, unknown practice. Furthermore, “summer dress” referenced the sleeveless gowns which were still a relatively new fashion phenomenon in 1914. American women had only begun wearing sheer and sleeveless evening dresses at the end of the first decade of the

⁶⁸ Mendes and De La Haye, *20th-Century Fashion*, 10.

⁶⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1915.

twentieth century.⁷⁰ Hence the necessity created by fashion was a new one, even for many refined women.

VI. The Underarm Campaign takes Shape, 1915-1916

The X Bazin advertisement ushered in the second phase of the hair removal campaign which Hope titled “The Great Underarm Campaign.” Just two months after the first X Bazin advertisement initially targeted hair removal of the underarms, the Milady Décolleté Gillette razor appeared in a full-page advertisement in the July 1915 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* (Figure 3). The Milady Décolleté Gillette advertisement, the first to promote a razor designed for women, supports the notion that the removal of underarm hair was a new practice among most American women. The advertisement, like that of X Bazin, called upon fashion as the explanation for underarm hair removal: “Fashion Says—Evening gowns must be sleeveless or made with the merest suggestion of gauzy sleeves of tulle or lace...The Woman of Fashion Says—The underarms must be as smooth as the face.” Like the X Bazin advertisement, the Gillette advertisement was an educational piece, informing women about the importance of underarm hair removal as well as the new product.⁷¹

But where depilatories like X Bazin introduced women to the notion of underarm hair removal, Gillette was responsible for introducing the concept of underarm *shaving*. As the history of Gillette demonstrates, the safety razor was a new product for men hence the concept of a safety razor for women was even more innovative. Yet the Gillette

⁷⁰ Phyllis G. Tortora and Keith Eubank, *Survey of Historic Costume : A History of Western Dress*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1998), 365.

⁷¹ *Harper’s Bazaar*, July 1915.

advertisement reads “by request Milady Décolleté Gillette ...a special model toilet accessory for the women of fashion brought after numerous requests from the leading summer and winter resorts and all the metropolitan fashion centers.” This advertisement begs a further question: Was the Gillette Company creating a new market, or was the new cosmetic razor fulfilling an actual demand on the part of women? Although the advertisement suggests that women initiated the production of this new “toilet accessory” through direct requests, Adams’ history of Gillette reveals that the company was seeking to control the entire hair removal market: for men *and* for women.⁷² The Gillette Company was created and owned by the very man who admitted in his writings, “Science and invention and technique are employed in the service of profit, not in that of the public...”⁷³

Furthermore, as the first company to introduce the concept of shaving to women, Gillette was cautious not to be too modern. In their early advertisements for women, Gillette did not to use the word “shaving” but the word “smoothing” instead. “Shaving,” according to Adams, was an activity men engaged in; “smoothing” was more feminine.⁷⁴ Later advertisements for depilatories, which arrived in women’s magazines at the peak of the underarm hair removal campaign, would promote their product as the alternative to the “harsh” and “unfeminine” use of a razor. Clearly the concept of “shaving” was not a practice many American women were comfortable with. In addition, it seems unlikely that the average American woman even contemplated the creation of a razor for women, considering that the practice of underarm hair removal and the use of depilatories was still restricted to a small, elite group. Despite the advertisement text that proclaimed the

⁷² Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 92.

⁷³ Gillette, *The People's Corporation*, 27.

⁷⁴ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 92.

Gillette razor was created “by request”, a more likely explanation for the invention of the Milady Décolleté razor is that Gillette saw a potential market and sought to exploit it.

A different advertisement for the same Milady Décolleté Gillette razor appeared in the December 1915 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (Figure 4).⁷⁵ This advertisement marketed the Gillette razor as a holiday gift, and unlike the advertisement which had appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* five months prior, was more of a “product-based” advertisement rather than an “instructional” advertisement. Instead of informing women about the practice of underarm shaving, this advertisement assumed that the action had already been adopted: “Milady Décolleté Gillette is welcomed by women everywhere—now that a feature of good dressing and good grooming is to keep the underarm white and smooth.” But this advertisement seems out of place in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Prior to this advertisement the *Ladies' Home Journal*, unlike the *Harper's Bazaar*, had not included any advertisements for hair removal products, not even for home made remedies. The *Ladies' Home Journal* was directed at all levels of middle-class women including mothers, farmer's wives and urban girls, who had less money and perhaps less motivation to concern themselves with a new fashion as seemingly inane as the removal of underarm hair. After the singular advertisement for the Gillette razor, there were no further promotions of underarm hair removal in the *Ladies Home Journal* until 1926.

VII. The Underarm Campaign Expands, 1916-1920

⁷⁵ *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1915.

The X Bazin and Milady Décolleté Gillette razor advertisements in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine triggered a relentless campaign of informative advertisements aimed at the complete annihilation of women's underarm hair. Beginning in January of 1916 there appeared in every issue of *Harper's Bazaar* for the next two years at least one, if not two, advertisements for a depilatory of some sort.

In contrast to the early era of hair removal ads, now all of the hair removal ads could be categorized as “instructional” in addition to promoting a product. The second X Bazin advertisement to run in *Harper's Bazaar* appeared in July of 1915 (the same issue in which the Milady Décolleté Gillette razor made its debut) with the headline “For Ladies of Refinement, You Should Know This About Objectionable Hair:”(Figure 5).⁷⁶ The ad explains that although hair is a natural occurrence which will grow again even after it is removed, fashion demands its elimination. In February of 1916 the headline for a product called El Rado read “How Actresses Remove Hair from their Underarms” (Figure 6).⁷⁷ And though the hair removal campaign was well underway by 1918, a product called Evan's Depilatory ran an advertisement entitled “How to Remove Hair in 5 Minutes” (Figure 7).⁷⁸ The advertisement included a five step process on how to mix, apply and remove the depilatory from one's skin, as well as pictures detailing the process. In September of 1918 this same company promoted a booklet along with its product, “A Free Talk on Superfluous Hair” (Figure 8).⁷⁹ Providing an instructional booklet to educate women both about hair removal and the company product became a popular tactic. In November of 1920, a company called Mi Rita chose to advertise its product in

⁷⁶ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1915.

⁷⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1916.

⁷⁸ *Harper's Bazaar*, August 1918.

⁷⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1918.

the format of a newspaper article “4 Questions Every Woman Asks About Superfluous Hair Removal” and promoted a similar free “Beauty Book” on the “how-to” of hair removal (Figure 9).⁸⁰ The persistent instructional nature of these advertisements reveals that companies were aware that women were heretofore unfamiliar with the practice of hair removal, and the companies sought to alter the behavior of their consumers. Where early ads had appealed to a select group of already informed consumers, the new wave of ads aimed to educate and hence exponentially expand their market.

In addition to instructing upper-class women, these advertisements also faced the obstacle of justifying to consumers why the previously unnecessary practice of hair removal was suddenly compulsory. Consequently, companies employed language to create a negative association with body hair and to validate the necessity of their products. X Bazin repeatedly labeled underarm hair “objectionable” (Figure 2),⁸¹ “unwelcome” (Figure 10),⁸² “embarrassing” (Figure 11), and “unsightly” (Figure 11).⁸³ In comparison, companies like El Rado, Evans Depilatory, and Neet labeled the hair free woman “attractive”(Figure 12),⁸⁴ “womanly”, “sanitary” (Figure 13),⁸⁵ “clean” (Figure 14),⁸⁶ and “exquisite” (Figure 15).⁸⁷ X Bazin agreed that only the hair free woman was “modest” (Figure 16),⁸⁸ “dainty and perfectly groomed” (Figure 17),⁸⁹ and had both “charm” (Figure 18)⁹⁰ and “the last touch of ‘feminine loveliness’”(Figure 19).⁹¹ Such

⁸⁰ *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1920.

⁸¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1915.

⁸² *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1917.

⁸³ *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1915.

⁸⁴ *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1917.

⁸⁵ *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1916.

⁸⁶ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1917.

⁸⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1920.

⁸⁸ *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1918.

⁸⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1918.

⁹⁰ *Harper's Bazaar*, August 1918.

advertisements, which appealed to women's sense of fashion and beauty unequivocally stated that body hair was undesirable, and could be mitigated only through the consumption and use of depilatories or razors.

According to Hope, the message of such advertisements can be divided into two distinct categories appealing to women's concerns about: 1) personal hygiene; and 2) femininity. Hygiene, as both Brumberg and Hope note, was not a new concern. Personal hygiene had been central to the perception of female beauty in the Victorian Era; now advertisers sought to exploit and extend this conception of personal hygiene to include hair removal.⁹² As Hope explains, "Female body hair has been treated in much the same way as other body products: it is said to be 'ugly' and 'disfiguring,' and even 'morbid'; it is to be removed in the privacy of one's own bathroom...and one's closest acquaintances are not supposed to know about either the hair or its removal."⁹³ Advertisers hoped that by labeling hair as "unclean," hair removal would become part of women's daily hygienic routines. Furthermore, some advertisements sought to relate outward cleanliness with an inner character. One X-Bazin advertisement explained that a woman could only be "modest" and "well-groomed" if she removed the hair from her armpits (Figure 16).⁹⁴ Here, advertisers invoked moral values like modesty and cleanliness that had been central to Victorian America, and linked them to the modern value of exterior beauty.⁹⁵ The message of the advertisements was that in order to attain traditional moral characteristics like modesty and cleanliness, women must adopt the modern practice of caring for their exterior.

⁹¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1918.

⁹² Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 70.

⁹³ Hope, *Caucasian Female Body Hair*, 97.

⁹⁴ *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1918.

⁹⁵ Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 70.

But the “cleanliness explanation” is “incomplete” says Hope.⁹⁶ If advertisers’ appeals to cleanliness could explain women’s adoption of the practice of hair removal, men would be subject to the same behavior. As Hope points out, and Sherrow confirms, *both* men and women in ancient Egypt removed all body hair in effort to avoid infection and disease.⁹⁷ Thus women’s increasing tendency to remove body hair cannot entirely be explained through the desire for personal hygiene. Rather, cleanliness serves more as a justification than an explanation for this behavior.

Instead, Hope proffers a more probable explanation: the adoption of body hair removal in American culture “reflected American beliefs about sex roles and the appropriate relationship between the sexes.”⁹⁸ Just as advertisers sought to create a link between body hair removal and hygiene, so they aimed to link body hair removal and femininity. In addition to labeling the hair-free woman “sanitary” and “clean,” she was also “exquisite,” “dainty” and “feminine.” Oftentimes advertisements portrayed a woman with her arms flung above her head to reveal hairless underarms, and a man caressing her, an image which provided stark contrast between the genders (Figure 20).⁹⁹ In September of 1922 *Zip* went so far as to run an advertisement with the headline “Can any woman afford to look masculine?” (Figure 21).¹⁰⁰ The text of the ad responded, “Positively not! And moreover there is no excuse for your having a single hair where it should not be.” According to this ad, no self-respecting female would dare not to remove her body hair. Advertisers played upon an already existing gender contrast and aimed to incorporate the new practice of body hair removal within the model of “femininity.”

⁹⁶ Hope, *Caucasian Female Body Hair*, 93.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁹ *Harper’s Bazaar*, March 1920.

¹⁰⁰ *Harper’s Bazaar*, September 1922.

But advertisers did not just exploit the deeply ingrained gender division. Some advertisers even exploited what Hope calls “the tendency to think of adult as male and to lump women with non-adult.”¹⁰¹ In an advertisement which first appeared in October of 1928, Neet encouraged women to buy their product promising it would leave one’s arms “as hair-free as a child’s,” the most fundamental element of “true feminine allure” (Figure 22).¹⁰² In fact, hair removal did just that; it returned women to a pre-pubescent state by removing one of the most noticeable signs of maturation: underarm hair. Arguably then, for women to appear childlike was considered desirable.

Yet the explanation that women began shaving to appear more childlike is also incomplete considering that other products, namely El Rado, advertised its depilatory as the “‘Womanly’ Way to Remove Hair” (Figure 23).¹⁰³ Although this headline reinforces the theory that advertisers exploited gender divisions, it posits that women should shave to appear more grown-up, rather than more childlike. But while these notions are ostensibly conflicting, perhaps the overall message of advertisers is that women can be both at once. In *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Susan Douglas criticizes the modern media for promoting contradictory images of women. According to Douglas, women are consistently faced with an ideological crisis as the media encourages them to be both “passive” and “active”, “selfish” and “selfless”, virginal and sexual, young and mature, dainty and athletic. Such conflicting messages can only lead to a “conflicted self [image].”¹⁰⁴ Perhaps it is these juxtaposed ideas about hair removal which advertisers presented to women that have led to the modern day irony:

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰² *Harper’s Bazaar*, October 1928.

¹⁰³ *Harper’s Bazaar*, August 1917.

¹⁰⁴ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are : Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 1994), 18.

teen-age girls begin shaving as a symbol of maturation; yet they are engaging in a behavior which makes them appear more childlike.¹⁰⁵

Rejecting both personal hygiene and femininity as complete explanations for hair removal, Hope fails to consider that perhaps there exists a link between cleanliness and femininity. If women were considered “cleaner” than men, then conceivably hairless women could be considered “sanitary,” and—by extension—“feminine.” Furthermore, perhaps there exists an association between “cleanliness” and “youth.” If we consider, as Hope proposed, that youth is a feminine characteristic, would not the image of a clean woman suggest that she is in a prepubescent, virginal state, and that she is therefore, ideally feminine? Alternatively, although Hope clearly separates the two explanations, hygiene and femininity, it is possible that “hygiene” and “youthfulness” both fall under the umbrella concept of “femininity.” Such a wide understanding of “femininity” would allow women to embody the conflicting characteristics of “youth” and “sexual maturity.” This second model upholds the complex message of advertisers; only a hair-free woman can attain the true, paradoxical essence of being female: clean and child-like, while simultaneously womanly and mature.

Regardless of the reasons American women began to adopt the practice, the underarm hair campaign undoubtedly met with success. The campaign expanded enormously throughout the late teens and twenties. Where Mme. Julian had been the lone advertiser of her product for several years, X Bazin introduced a litany of new hair removal products. El Rado first appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in January of 1916 followed by Evan's Depilatory in July of 1916, De Miracle in May 1917, Sulfo Solution in June 1919, Maxixe Boudoir Safety Razor in July 1919, Neet in February 1920, Del-A-

¹⁰⁵ Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 181.

Tone in May 1920, Mi Rita in August 1920, Zip in September 1920, Dot in March 1921, Odo-Ro-No in October 1922, Curvfit Safety Razor in July 1925, Shavette in October 1926, Berlin's Wonderstoen pumice in October 1926 and Tricho Treatments in April of 1928.¹⁰⁶ In thirteen years more than a dozen various depilatories, razors, pumice materials and electric treatments debuted in *Harper's Bazaar*. In addition to the expansion in companies and products, the advertisements increased in frequency and size. In April of 1915 there were no advertisements for hair removal products; in April of 1916 there was one ad; and in April of 1919 there were three ads. In 1916 there averaged 1.5 ads per issue; in 1920 there averaged 2.3 ads per issue (see Table I). And where all of the ads were smaller than 2 inches by 2 inches in 1916, ads were commonly a quarter to a half page by 1920. Zip frequently ran full page ads, and in October of 1922 ran an advertisement that spread across two pages (Figure 24).¹⁰⁷

Not surprisingly, the expansion of the hair removal campaign induced competition among companies. In April of 1917 an advertisement informed consumers of the merits of X Bazin while warning them to "refuse dangerous substitutes" (Figure 25). De Miracle offered its consumers the opportunity to test their product against other products with a refund as a guarantee (Figure 26).¹⁰⁸ Such competition reinforced the message that hair removal was still a new concept for American women who were apt to try various products before settling on one. Companies sought to dominate the still new, expanding and profitable market of hair removal. These competitive advertisements also highlighted the continued debate between depilatory products and razors. Although

¹⁰⁶ An advertisement for *De Miracle* appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1904 but was small in size, and like other products of the time, was not mass produced.

¹⁰⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1922.

¹⁰⁸ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1918.

Gillette's Milady Décolleté was the first razor to appear in *Harper's Bazaar* and did not appear again in the timeframe I studied, the jargon of competitors' advertisements suggest that, despite the push for selling depilatories, some women opted for razors. El Rado advertised its depilatory as an alternative "more agreeable than the razor" (Figure 27)¹⁰⁹ and asserted that it did "not increase or coarsen later hair growth" (Figure 23).¹¹⁰ Dot also proclaimed "Severe Methods Now Unnecessary: the Unfeminine Razor with its Encouragement of Harsher Growth" (Figure 28).¹¹¹ Nevertheless, an advertisement for Maxixe Boudoir Safety razor appeared in July of 1919 which claimed to be intentionally suited for women's underarm hair removal (Figure 29).¹¹² Although I did not find any testimony from women about which method or product they preferred, an advertisement for shaving lotion which ran in the *Barnard Bulletin* in 1922 indicates that among college women, shaving was a becoming more common. The product called "Skin Improver Cream" was advertised to stop "chafing, prickly heat, pains from burns, stings, bites, or shaving" (Figure 30).¹¹³

This competition among producers and the raging debate over the merits and weaknesses of various products indicates that elite female consumers had some degree of influence over the market. The growth in the number of producers reinforces the idea that women were the ones who made the ultimate decisions about the success of products. While the power of the producer over the creation and expansion of the hair removal industry is readily apparent, an in-depth look at the young and still formative state of the hair removal industry reveals that women were not blind consumers. As Scanlon

¹⁰⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, January 1916.

¹¹⁰ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1918.

¹¹¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1921.

¹¹² *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1918.

¹¹³ *Barnard Bulletin*, June 1922.

confirms, “Women did not unwittingly buy products or accept a consumer culture as their own; they sought an approved standard of living and a positive social identity, both of which advertising promised and sometimes delivered”.¹¹⁴ In other words, Scanlon asserts that women knew what they were buying, both literally and figuratively. Upper-class women were purchasing hair removal products, but also a measure of social distinction.¹¹⁵ Accordingly, they were apt to compare products, change their minds, and, in some cases, reject the notion of hair removal altogether.

Nevertheless, by the early 1920s, advertisements for underarm hair removal could be found in every issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine. By now advertisements had claimed that underarm hair removal was compulsory in almost every activity of a refined woman’s daily life, from evening galas to swimming to basketball games. Accordingly, advertisers indicated to women that hair growth was a recurring problem which necessitated habitual hair removal. Advertisements remained instructional but also aimed to link notions of cleanliness and femininity with hairlessness. And American women, it seems, were mostly receptive to these products. More than a dozen products appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* and advertisements grew in size and frequency. But the campaign against leg hair would not meet with the same success.

VIII. The Leg Campaign, 1918-1934

Hope claims that the “Great Underarm Campaign” ended in 1919, and that the third major period of the campaign against hair removal, “Coming to Terms with Leg

¹¹⁴ Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 171.

¹¹⁵ Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption : New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 93.

Hair,” began in 1920, but the start and end dates of these campaigns are not so precise. The first advertisement to promote hair removal from the “limbs” was an El Rado advertisement which appeared in May of 1918 (Figure 23).¹¹⁶ The advertisement did not focus on hair removal from the “limbs,” but mentioned it along with the increasingly common practice of hair removal from the face, neck and underarms. One year later, in May of 1919, De Miracle would also mention hair removal from the “limbs” (Figure 26).¹¹⁷ This same text would appear again in De Miracle advertisements in January, April, and June of 1920. Even though El Rado and De Miracle led the campaign in “limb” hair removal, other companies continued to market the concept of underarm hair removal. Neet persisted with the underarm campaign, and in September of 1921 used the term “armpit” rather than “underarm” for the first time (Figure 31).¹¹⁸ Likewise, an advertisement for the Curvfit Safety Razor first appeared in July of 1925 and promoted the razor as the supreme method of hair removal precisely because it was “curved to fit the armpit” (Figure 32).¹¹⁹

While the underarm campaign carried on, companies would also begin to follow the lead of El Rado and De Miracle, promoting their various products as ideally suited for hair removal from the “limbs” or the “body.” In May of 1920 X Bazin published an advertisement mentioning “limbs,” as did Zip in October 1924, and even Curvfit in April of 1926. Although most hair removal companies seemed to follow suit, Zip was the first company to illustrate the concept of hair removal from the limbs in its 1924 ad (Figure

¹¹⁶ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1918.

¹¹⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1919.

¹¹⁸ *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1921.

¹¹⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1925.

33).¹²⁰ Like previous advertisements, the ad did not focus solely on the limbs but displayed a one inch by one inch figure of a woman with ostensibly clean shaven legs putting on her stockings. This advertisement suggests that removing hair from the legs was not incompatible with wearing stockings; on the contrary, these fashions were complimentary.¹²¹ But while Zip illustrated this practice, Neet was the first to trade the word “limbs” for “legs” in its advertisements (Figure 34).¹²²

As the increasing size and number of advertisements aimed at underarm hair removal, as well as the increasing number of products designed to remove underarm hair, had revealed, hair removal was a profitable industry. The trick for advertisers was to see just how far they could expand this industry. In July of 1927, Zip released a full-page advertisement with a large photograph of a young woman sporting a modern bathing suit, which exposed her hair-free thighs and shins. As in preceding advertisements, the text of the ad did not focus on the legs; a caption next to the young woman read “hair free skin.” But the advertisement clearly proclaimed that removing hair from the underarm was not good enough; legs must be hair-free too (Figure 35).¹²³ In July of 1928 Zip released an advertisement with an illustration of a woman canoeing, her hair-free legs exposed. In this ad Zip finally refers to hair removal from the “legs” (Figure 36).¹²⁴ In both of these two Zip ads the legs are shown, but the texts of the ads do not focus on the legs. In October 1928, Neet ran an ad in which the legs and underarms were given equal weight. The caption of the ad read, “Yes!...You Can Get Rid of Arm and Leg Hair” (Figure

¹²⁰ *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1934.

¹²¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1924.

¹²² *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1925.

¹²³ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1927.

¹²⁴ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1928.

22).¹²⁵ According to advertisers, hair removal from the legs was no longer an after-thought. Finally, in April and July of 1929 Zip ran two ads in which legs became the focus of the advertisement; the face, neck, and underarms were not even mentioned (Figures 37 & 38).¹²⁶ Hair removal from these areas, the advertisements suggest, had by now become customary.

Even as the subject of the advertisements changed from underarm hair removal to leg hair removal, the overall message of the advertisements remained the same. Hair was still labeled “ugly” and even “masculine” (Figure 36)¹²⁷; hairlessness was still labeled “attractive” and “charming” (Figure 35).¹²⁸ But as Hope notes, the advertisements which focused on leg hair removal were less “instructional” and shifted back to the more “product-based” tactic.¹²⁹ This shift might suggest that American women were adopting the practice of hair removal so readily, that companies no longer needed to convince women of the need to remove hair; rather, companies were more concerned about the popularity and dominance of their own product within the market.

Despite the shift in the subject of hair removal advertisements, the campaign against leg hair removal was never as pervasive as the campaign against underarm hair removal. The number of hair removal ads in *Harper's Bazaar* climaxed in 1921 and the overall number of advertisements was fewer in the 1930 than in 1918.¹³⁰ Furthermore, a much lower percentage of ads focused on the legs during the leg hair removal campaign than focused on the underarms during the underarm campaign. Although Hope analyzes a

¹²⁵ *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1928.

¹²⁶ *Harper's Bazaar*, April, July 1927.

¹²⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1928.

¹²⁸ *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1927.

¹²⁹ Hope, *Caucasian Female Body Hair*, 95.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

larger time period in her study than my paper examines, she provides statistics that while 66 percent of advertisements between 1920 and 1940 mentioned “limbs” or “legs”, only 10 percent of these advertisements *focus* on the legs.¹³¹ And despite the onset of the leg hair removal campaign, the underarm hair removal campaign never truly ended.

Because *Harper’s Bazaar* did not include “Letters to the Editor” during the nineteen twenties and thirties, we can only speculate how American women reacted to the hair removal campaigns. The expansive and persistent nature of the underarm hair removal campaign suggests that underarm hair removal was adopted with some regularity. But the smaller and ultimately fleeting campaign against leg hair suggests that women were not willing to adopt indiscriminate hair removal. In spite of the audacity of advertisers, American women were making their own decisions about consumption and fashion, at least for the time being.

Harper’s Bazaar provides little explanation for this rejection of leg hair removal, but Hope offers a few theories of her own. While the underarms could represent an “extension” of the practice of hair removal from the already visible and often judged face and neck, hair removal from the legs may have been viewed as an entirely new practice among women.¹³² Perhaps women were too modest to remove hair from their legs. Although this theory seems plausible, it is not an entirely convincing explanation. As we have seen, the majority of advertisements included in the underarm hair removal campaign were “instructional” in nature, and were most likely aimed at women who had never engaged in any sort of hair removal, including the face and neck, prior to the campaign. For most women then, hair removal was an entirely new practice and hair

¹³¹ Ibid., 95.

¹³² Ibid., 96.

removal under the arms to suit the fashion of sleeveless dresses was likely to be as foreign a concept as hair removal from the legs to meet the fashion of shorter skirts.

Hope also posits that, at least among some women, hair removal was considered immoral because some of the first women to adopt the practice were “chorus girls.” In a beauty book published in 1922 Virginia Kirkus admonishes, “Because the underarm depilatory or shaving started with chorus girls is no reason for considering it beneath the dignity of the social leader.”¹³³ While it may have been true that “chorus girls” engaged in hair removal during the earliest periods of the campaign, Kirkus’s admission does not undermine the fact that upper-class women were also engaging in hair removal during the nineteenth century, albeit in the privacy of their own home with a home-made depilatory like that of Doctor Gouraud or Mme. Julian. Furthermore, as we have seen, the hair removal campaign was intended to target elite women. Likely there were some women who viewed the new practice of hair removal as immoral, but the nature of the advertising campaign as well as the ensuing popularity of underarm hair removal reveals that upper-class women did not abstain from leg hair removal because they believed it to be a mark of the lower class.

Finally, Hope suggests the most plausible explanation for the fleeting campaign against leg hair; American women were ambivalent about the need to remove hair from the legs. Hair removal, she points out, is a messy and often dangerous process that requires consistent attention.¹³⁴ Furthermore, even as the fashions of the 1920s dictated shorter skirts and dresses, stockings came into style. As one beauty book explained,

¹³³ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 96.

stockings served to “effectively conceal unsightly hairs.”¹³⁵ In the April 1929 edition of *Harper’s Bazaar* there were eight advertisements for eight varying brands of hosiery, while there was only one advertisement for leg hair removal. Although no such fashion existed for the problem of underarm hair, wearing stockings seemed to be a quick, hassle-free solution for leg hair. Thus the very same women who had so readily accepted the practice of underarm hair removal were unreceptive to advertisers’ campaigns against leg hair.

In 1930 Helena Rubenstein, a famous name in women’s fashion, wrote that “hair removal was “as much a part of the routine of every woman as washing her hair or manicuring her nails.”¹³⁶ In truth, this was not the case. While the readers of *Harper’s Bazaar* readily adopted the practice of underarm hair removal, they were more skeptical about leg hair removal. Furthermore, as the following chapter will demonstrate, an examination of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in this period reveals that at least until the mid-1930s, hair removal was a class-based phenomenon.

IX. Establishing a Norm, 1934+

In contrast to the relentless and expanding campaign in *Harper’s Bazaar*, the hair removal campaign was noticeably absent from the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. The Gillette advertisement that appeared in the December 1915 issue was the only advertisement of its kind to appear in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* until 1926. Meanwhile, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* remained the number one selling women’s magazine in the country, and the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 96.

leader of “The Big Six.”¹³⁷ The absence of the hair removal campaign from such a prominent magazine reinforces the claim that advertisers specifically targeted upper-class women. As previously mentioned, *Harper’s Bazaar* had a much smaller circulation but catered to the wealthiest and most fashion-conscious American women. The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, on the other hand, had a very large and somewhat more diverse circulation including women from all ranges of the middle class.

Although the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, did not initially publicize the hair removal campaign, the *Journal* disseminated the new practice of hair removal in another manner. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* included advertisements for many other modern products and fashions that exposed areas of the female body to the public eye. One such advertisement for Martex towels includes a photograph of a young girl in her bathing suit, free of under-arm and leg hair (Figure 39).¹³⁸ The *Ladies’ Home Journal* also included numerous advertisements for deodorants such as Nonspi which often pictured a girl with a hair-free arm slung above her head (Figure 40).¹³⁹ Even if the *Ladies’ Home Journal* did not directly advertise the practice of hair removal, other producers were aware of the new behavior, and adjusted their ads accordingly. As Lury observes, even when women cannot afford to adopt a particular fashion, they “nevertheless consume the images.”¹⁴⁰ In this manner, even readers of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* were exposed to the concept of hair removal as normative.

The second advertisement to mention hair removal appeared in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in April of 1926. But this advertisement was not for a hair removal product such

¹³⁷ Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines*, 9.

¹³⁸ *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1925.

¹³⁹ *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1928.

¹⁴⁰ Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 147.

as a depilatory; instead it was for an item called the Sterno Canned Heat Outfit, a Gillette product designed to make shaving easier. The advertisement read “Everyone knows the value of hot water for comfortable shaving and with this Sterno Outfit you can have at a moment’s notice hot handy water and a keen razor for the underarm, or for keeping the back of the neck neat and trim if you bob” (Figure 41).¹⁴¹ Unlike the underarm hair removal campaign in *Harper’s Bazaar*, this advertisement was not “instructional” but “product-based.” Furthermore, the advertisement was not focused on the sale of the Gillette razor but on an accessory to accompany the Gillette razor. The appearance of such an advertisement would suggest that a certain group of readers of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* were shaving, and doing so regularly. Furthermore, the advertisement assumes that these readers were already receptive to the practice of underarm hair removal despite the conspicuous absence of previous advertisements. Thus the ad indicates that at least a small group of middle-class women, likely the upper-middle class, were embracing the practice of hair removal along with the elite. But rather than facing a bombardment of hair removal ads, these women were adopting the practice based upon either advertisements for other products, such as the Martex towels, or a source other than the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

The next advertisement for hair removal did not appear until July of 1933, when the campaign against leg hair in *Harper’s Bazaar* was already well underway. The ad that promoted the Zip depilatory cream included a photograph of a woman free of underarm hair, but the text mentioned the face, arms, legs and body. In addition, this advertisement, like the advertisement for the Gillette product, was “product-based” instead of “instructional.” The mention of leg hair, as well as the product focus of the

¹⁴¹ *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1926.

advertisement, suggests that the intended consumers of the product were already well-versed in the practice of hair removal (Figure 42)¹⁴². Once again, the intended audience for these advertisements was likely a small group of women who adopted the practice, not because of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, but in spite of the absence of the campaign.

Why was the hair removal campaign so conspicuously absent from the *Ladies' Home Journal*? Hope did not examine the *Ladies' Home Journal* and hence does not offer an explanation. But based on Scanlon's analysis of the readership of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, advertising in the *Journal* was an enormous gamble for the hair removal industry for two reasons: 1) the economic class of consumers; and 2) the diversity among consumers.

At the turn of the twentieth century consumer theorist Georg Simmel proposed the then innovative idea of Trickle-Down Consumerism. According to Simmel, fashion change occurs because: "Subordinate social groups, following the principle of imitation, seek to establish new status claims by adopting the clothing of superordinate groups. Superordinate social groups, following the principle of differentiation, respond by adopting new fashions...it establishes a self-perpetuating cycle of change."¹⁴³ In other words, Simmel proposed that fashion always begins with the upper-class because they have both the means and the desire to differentiate themselves from the middle and lower classes. The middle class then imitates the upper-class fashion in effort to increase their own social standing. Whether or not the hair removal industry was purposely following the tenets of Simmel's Trickle-Down Consumer theory, the hair removal industry evidently believed that the fashion would meet with the most success in the upper-class,

¹⁴² *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1933.

¹⁴³ McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, 93.

which could afford to partake of a new fashion on a whim. The hair removal industry accordingly marketed hair removal as a status symbol, proclaiming the behavior necessary for “refined women” and the “women of fashion.” The middle class would not adopt the fashion until it became a symbol of upper-class status hence the hair removal industry hoped the phenomenon would become normative among the elite before they sought to advertise in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

The second reason hair removal companies were less willing to advertise in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* was the demographics of the magazine’s readers. Despite the intention of the *Journal* to convey the “consensus image of womanhood” and to assert that its primary readers were white, middle-class, native born American women, Scanlon reveals that the *Journal* in fact had a more diverse readership than *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, these readers varied in their needs and consumer behavior, making them a less predictable consumer group than the upper-class women.

Even if the middle-class was not the initial target of the hair removal campaign, the continued expansion of the campaign reveals that many middle class women began to embrace the practice and accept it as a custom. Other sporadic hair removal advertisements soon followed the Zip advertisement which had appeared in July of 1933. Finally, in 1934 the full-fledged hair removal campaign materialized in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* as it had in *Harper’s Bazaar* fifteen years before. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* now ran a variety of ads promoting two of the largest competitors, Zip and Neet. The ads were not confined to the early stages of the campaign but were large in size and promoted hair removal from the underarms, legs, and body. Like the advertisements found in *Harper’s Bazaar*, these ads called upon women to annihilate body hair in order to be

¹⁴⁴ Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 7.

“charming,” “alluring,” “clean” and to “have skin as soft as a child’s.” If the *Ladies’ Home Journal* sought to represent the “average American female” and the “consensus” view of middle-class womanhood, as Scanlon has argued, then the appearance of the hair removal campaign in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* suggests that hair removal, at least under the arms, had finally become normative—not just for the elite—but for the middle class. Thus the fashion of hair removal had indeed followed the model of Trickle-Down Consumerism; middle class consumers looked to imitate the fashion of the elite. Evidently, hair removal was a symbol of hygiene, youth and above all, femininity, for the middle class as well.

Conclusion

According to industry reports from the early 1980s, between 80 and 90 percent of American women remove hair from their bodies.¹⁴⁵ A century before, this percentile was certainly in the single digits. Today girls agonize over the process of hair removal from “the bikini-line area.”¹⁴⁶ A century ago, hair removal was restricted to the face and forearms. Considering that the practice of hair removal did not have a precedent in American culture, the historian wonders, how did this change occur? And, what does it tell us about American society?

I have argued that the custom of hair removal was mostly a top-down phenomenon conceived of by companies like Gillette, encouraged by alterations in clothing fashion such as sheer-sleeved dresses, and presented to women through

¹⁴⁵ Hope, *Caucasian Female Body Hair*, 93.

¹⁴⁶ Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 195.

magazines, most notably *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Despite advertisements such as the early Gillette ad that claimed to produce razors, "by request," very few American women were familiar with the concept of hair removal. While select, elite women were employing various home remedies, hair removal was restricted to the face and forearms. The practice of removing hair from the underarms and legs was practically unheard of. In fact, hair removal was such a novel concept when it was first introduced that companies had to persuade women of the benefits of hair removal, and demonstrate how to practice it.

The industries responsible for the introduction of hair removal did not target all American women initially. Early advertisements were aimed at expanding the practice among the elite. It took time for the practice of hair removal become widespread among women of the middle class, as the almost twenty year gap between the advertising campaigns of *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* divulges. Thus hair removal seemed to follow the consumer theory of Trickle-Down Consumption; elite women adopted the practice first and the middle class imitated the elite. By the mid-1930s the appearance of the hair removal campaign in the *Ladies' Home Journal* reveals that the practice of hair removal had become incorporated into the prototype for the "average" American consumer.¹⁴⁷ Thus hair removal had become a normative behavior for the middle class as well.

The elite women of the nineteen teens and twenties who first adopted the practice were not, however, blind consumers. Women were involved in the production and dissemination of hair removal through their roles as fashion designers and magazine editors. Equally as important, women also exerted their influence as consumers; they

¹⁴⁷ Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 7.

made decisions about brand choice as well as product choice. Of the more than a dozen hair removal companies which appeared between 1914 and 1934, Neet and Zip were clearly leading products among women by the mid-1930s. Furthermore, through the purchasing power of women shaving evolved from a “masculine” practice to one that a significant number of women embraced. Thus, as the initial target of hair removal companies, elite women played an active role in the success and expansion of the hair removal industry.

Yet the overall success of the hair removal industry can be attributed to the nature of the hair removal campaigns. In *Harper's Bazaar* the campaign took the form of a relentless series of advertisements linking the practice of hair removal to concepts of hygiene, gender norms and youth. Though often times the ads offered conflicting messages, the overall point was clear: a hair-free woman was a superior kind of woman. Furthermore, the ads said women could reach this ideal through consumerism. Thus, through their adoption of and adherence to the practice of hair removal, American women reinforced and gave legitimacy to the proposal of the men's shaving, women's fashion and women's magazine industries: hairlessness is an essential aspect of modern femininity.

As with most research, my thesis leaves a number of questions unanswered. Future historians might continue to examine the hair removal campaigns in *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* to look for new trends in the industry and among female consumers. When does leg hair removal become normative for the elite, and for the middle class? When does shaving gain popularity over depilatories and other forms of hair removal? Future research might also choose to examine magazines that targeted the

working class, or specific racial or ethnic groups. When, if ever, did hair removal become widely practiced by non-white American women? Does our culture project different standards of femininity for different groups of women?

Significantly, a hair-free body was only one aspect of the new feminine ideal introduced in the 1920s. According to Brumberg, other behaviors centering around body image and self-improvement including the use of make-up and the practice of dieting caught on during the same era. Thus hair removal, at first glance, seems to be an inane, isolated habit, but was in fact part of a marked shift in the American feminine ideal. Understanding how and why the practice of hair removal was introduced and disseminated in the 1920s brings us one step closer to understanding how the modern feminine ideal came to be. It is also a step towards understanding why females today organize their sense of self around their bodies, and why they believe the body to be “the ultimate expression of self.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 97.

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Table I

	Number of Advertisement Appearances in 1916	Number of Advertisement Appearances in 1920
January	1	1
February	1	2
March	1	2
April	1	2
May	1	5
June	2	4
July	3	4
August	1	3
September	2	1
October	3	1
November	2	2
December	1	1