“Alluringly Feminine”: Hair Removal in the Early 1900s

The 1920s were the beginning of a break from traditionalist views for women. Hems of skirts began to rise higher, and more arms and shoulders were shown in dresses. As women began to show more of their skin, it became important to maintain the beauty of the bare skin. At this time women desired smooth, white skin. No longer able to hide their legs and under arms beneath sleeved and floor length skirts, this is the first time that shaving became important to women. At the beginning of the 20th century, very few shaving options were available, all inconvenient and time consuming. As the decades passed, more products were created to meet the needs of women and hair removal. With the advent of hair removal products in the early 20th century, the societal perception of feminine hair and the perception of feminine beauty has forever changed. Examples of this are prevalent throughout advertisements from this time and a continuation of these societal perceptions that hair removal is a requirement can been seen in artifacts from the 1920s to the 1960s as hair removal products evolved.

The first real hair removal product marketed to women, the safety razor, dulled and rusted easily. Although they were called “safety razors”, it was still very easy to cut oneself with them. Women of the early 20th century searched for other options to meet the smooth, bare beauty standards that were becoming more and more popular. Artifact A is an instructional piece printed in a 1926 Vogue. It discusses that instead of a safety razor every time a woman bathed a pumice stone should be used instead to maintain hairless legs instead. The pumice stone could be
ran across skin every day to keep hair away, but this was only affective after shaving with a safety razor to begin with. Pumice stones are extremely rough and were uncomfortable to use.

Women demanded a new product to remove hair efficiently and easily. During this time, the popularity of chemical hair removals was rising significantly. However, these early depilatories contained many chemicals harmful to humans such as arsenic. Artifact B is an advertisement from Vogue in 1931, promoting a depilatory cream called Zip. The advertisement claims that it will remove all hair instantly and without irritation. Using a product like Zip would appear to be much more appealing to the woman of this time, as compared to using a pumice stone for hair maintenance. The cream only needed to be applied once, then washed away for 2-5 days of “smoothness”, but the pumice stone required everyday use and needed to be run across the skin up to 30 times for it to be effective. Zip also advertised their epilator which pulls hairs out of this skin. Both of these products were unable to cut a woman like the safety razor, but the depilatory contained harsh chemicals and the epilator was often painful to use (Herzig). While the Zip hair removal products seemed to be improving the shaving process, women still searched for other options.

Before World War II, many women did not shave every day and simply wore nylon stockings on their legs between shaves. However, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, almost all nylon production changed to military use, and women no longer had access to nylon stockings (Herzig). Having hairless legs was so important to women of the women of the 1940s that they would go to any length to achieve it. Women during this time would often draw a line up the backs of their legs and apply cosmetics in order to give the appearance that they were actually wearing stockings, but in order for this to look realistic, it required their legs to be completely
bare and smooth. Artifact C is an advertisement for Silktona, one of the cosmetic liquids used to give women the look of wearing stockings. Women began shaving every day to maintain their bare legs. The advertisements for hair removal products up to this point all carried the message that the removal of superfluous hair was necessary for beauty and femininity. Artifact A calls any outfit that shows superfluous hair a “failure”, whereas Artifact B simply shows a smiling woman in a bathing suit with bare under arms and legs. Advertisements such as these pressured women into believing that a woman should have no hair other than what was on her head. These pressures kept women seeking out and purchasing products that claimed “quick and easy” hair removal.

The 1960s brought many new fashion trends, and following the pattern of the previous decades, more and more skin began to show from under the clothing of women. This naturally put an even higher emphasis on keeping the skin smooth. Artifact D is a television advertisement to women in the 1960s. The woman in the ad talks about how the latest fashion is “bareness” and is selling a new electric razor with 96 blades. It claims to remove the hair without the woman feeling a thing. This product certainly appealed to women at this time seeking out gentleness and convenience. The commercial pulls on the emotions of women calling unsightly hairs or cuts from razors “taboo”, and insists that the advertised shaver will make a women more “alluringly feminine”. The advertisers knew that as long as women felt bare legs were necessary to be beautiful, women would keep buying their products.

Artifacts A through D are several different representations of the same idea: women should be free of all visible body hair. Artifacts B, C, and D are all advertisements for hair
removal products, whereas artifact A is a self-help article discussing a new way to remove hair. Although they are shown through different platforms, all the artifacts do not allow any room to believe that superfluous hair could be kept without dire social consequences. The article format however, does appear more welcoming. Instead of pushing a product to be purchased, it simply seems to be written by a woman wanting to help women be fashionable as well. The helpful nature of the article is more appealing to the average woman, unlike artifacts B, C, and D due to their requirement to buy the product in order to look as fashionable as the woman in the advertisement.

Artifacts B, C, and D do not conjure woman in the same manner, but instead use the idea of ostracization to sell their products. A woman does not want to be left feeling she is not as pretty or hygienic as the beauty ideals represented in the advertisements. The advertisements push that in order to be as proper and well-groomed as the women in the advertisements, the product must be purchased and used. This technique proved successful, as it continued to be used across a span of 30 years. Artifacts B and D, although separated by 30 years, both use a model showing quite a bit of hairless, smooth, and light skin. Artifact B is only a printed advertisement, whereas D is a minute long commercial. Both artifacts state the inferiority of the safety razor in comparison to its own product, while showing a smiling woman with perfect skin. Both even boast gentleness, showing that the demands of women for a gentle, effective hair removal product from the 1930s to the 1960s remained unchanged.

Artifact C was not directly an advertisement for a hair removal product, but instead was an advertisement for a product used alongside one. A woman’s legs could not appear to have stockings on them if she did not shave them before applying the makeup. This second hand hair
removal advertisement did not present the idea of shaving legs as an option in the slightest, but in a backhanded way. It presented the look of stockings as a requirement for all women. The makeup advertised was only effective if a woman kept her legs free of superfluous hair. Therefore, a woman must not have hair on her legs in order to achieve the fashionable stocking look.

Women of the early 20th century felt many pressures to be feminine and beautiful. As the ideas of beauty began to change, the thought that superfluous hair should be removed from a woman’s body did not. As the decades passed, the pressure on a woman to participate in hair removal became stronger as better and more efficient products were created and clothing began to show more skin, removing any excuse a woman had for not maintaining bareness. Artifacts from this time period are a clear representation of these pressures on women at the time. These four artifacts may be different in products and format, but they all represent what women at the time considered “beautiful” concerning superfluous hair. The artifacts present bareness as a necessity, not an option, lest a woman be unfashionable or unkempt. As women conformed to these social pressures to remove body hair, it perpetuated itself into a social norm still seen nearly a century later. As long as the idea that superfluous body hair needs to be removed stays unchanged, the hair removal products and ways to pressure women to remove hair will change as quickly as technology allows.
Works Cited


Artifact A

This artifact is an article found in the Proquest Vogue achive. This article from Vogue in 1926 talks about how to use a pumice-stone to rid oneself of “superfluous hair.” The treatment involves rubbing a pumice-stone over wet skin twenty to thirty times after removing hair with a safety razor. This method was used so women did not have to use razors and could simply continue pumicing their skin every day or two to keep hair away. This article goes as far to say that if any arm or leg hair is seen while wearing an article of clothing, that article of clothing is a “failure.” This article is aimed at women, and it pressures them to keep body hair removed in order to meet the beauty standards of the 1920s.
This advertisement from *Vogue* from the Proquest *Vogue* database in 1931 shows two more popular ways to remove hair. Both creams and epilators were advertised by Zip. The picture shows a woman with completely bare underarms and legs smiling on a beach, and the descriptions of the products advertise their affordable price and ease of use of the products. The epilator even describes its use to permanently destroy hair. This advertisement is also aimed at women, showing the “ideal” body hair for a women in the 1930s.
Artifact C

This advertisement was popular in the 1940s during World War II. The main nylon manufacturer for the United States, Du Pont, was converted to create military materials instead of stockings for women. Due to this stocking shortage, companies such as Silktona created products to make it appear like a woman was wearing stockings. Women would apply this make up and draw a line up the backs of their legs. This advertisement is yet another pressure on women, showing them what they should look like.
Artifact D

This advertisement was shown throughout the 1960s. These images are from an advertisement by Schick for their Crown Jewel Electric Shaver. It had 96 blades, and claimed not to give nicks or cuts. This advertisement focuses on “bareness” because there is “more you on view”. With this shaver women could become “alluringly feminine” by removing their “unsightly hair”. This shaver was advertised for its gentleness, and the actress even uses it on her dress to prove no damage would be done. This advertisement really pushes the idea that in order to be fashionable, you must have no hair on your legs or underarms. It also reinforced the idea to women that showing more skin was becoming widely accepted, even expected.