Psychological Predictors and Outcomes of Labiaplasty

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Labiaplasty in Australia

• Lacking statistics (private and public) in Australia
• NSW (2001 to 2013): 4,592 labiaplasty procedures were performed in both public and private hospitals (Ampt et al., 2016)
• Number of procedures rose 64.5% from 256 in 2001 to 421 in 2013 (Ampt et al., 2016)
Compared with the general population of NSW women aged 15 to 54 years, labiaplasty patients were more likely to be (Ampt et al., 2016):

- Born in Australia
- Aged 25-34 years
- Single (not married or in de facto relationship)
- Live in higher socioeconomic status areas
- Have a history of other cosmetic procedures
What motivates women to undergo labiaplasty?
### Reasons for Labiaplasty (Australia), $N = 35$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>$n$ (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>“Didn’t like the look of my labia. Not what is shown on social media.”</td>
<td>25 (71.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Feel like I don’t look normal.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>“Discomfort during sporting activity.”</td>
<td>24 (68.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Discomfort wearing tight clothes and going to the toilet.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>“I was sick of sexual discomfort during and after sex.”</td>
<td>21 (60.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It made me self-conscious in being with a new partner. I worried they would be as freaked out about it as I was.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>“To improve my self-esteem - have been insecure and self-conscious for years.”</td>
<td>16 (45.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I know my labia are different, and this impacts my confidence.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Reasons for Labiaplasty (UK), $N = 55$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>$n$ (%)</th>
<th>$n$ (%) as sole reason</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aesthetic               | 31 (70.8) | 10 (20.8)              | ‘I do not like the asymmetrical appearance or the way the inner lips protrude from the outer lips’  
‘I am very comfortable with my body but the only thing that spoils it, is the fact that my labia are visible when standing naked’  
‘For a more feminine appearance. I think I currently look (and feel) untidy’ |
| Functional (physical)   | 30 (62.5) | 9 (18.75)              | ‘My labia cause me a lot of irritation in my clothes and can become very sore. It can then lead to a great amount of discharge, which can be embarrassing’  
‘Constant irritation; external thrush; the labia are large enough to hold urine, so for a long time I thought I had urinary incontinence; discomfort when sitting’  
‘As the pain when I exercise and just walking can be awful’ |
| Sexual                  | 18 (37.5) | 4 (8.33)               | ‘Sex is uncomfortable and sometimes painful’  
‘It has caused several issues but perhaps the main reason is that I could never relax around any partner. I have always covered myself, and it has been my uttermost fear’  
‘I am fed up of being embarrassed about my body. It prevents me having a sex life, or means I jump into bed with men to not have to anticipate their reaction to my labia for weeks on end’ |
| Combination             | 24 (50.0) | 24 (50.0)              | ‘To improve appearance and to increase confidence in body image and in sexual situations. To physically be more comfortable when wearing certain clothes and doing certain sports’ (cosmetic, functional, sexual)  
‘Reduce discomfort when walking to feel “normal” and improve sex drive with husband as felt embarrassed with look and wouldn’t let him go near the area’ (cosmetic, functional, sexual)  
‘I don’t feel confident in changing rooms and I believe it plays a part in restricting myself from getting close to boys. I also sometimes find it uncomfortable’ (cosmetic, functional, sexual) |
### Reasons for Labiaplasty (USA), $N = 50$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Characteristics</th>
<th>Value (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age ± SD, yr</td>
<td>33.5 ± 9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous child-bearing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>29 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical symptoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tugging during intercourse</td>
<td>37 (74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable wearing tight clothing</td>
<td>36 (72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable twisting of labia</td>
<td>29 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible labia in exercise clothing</td>
<td>27 (54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain during intercourse</td>
<td>24 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure in bathing suit</td>
<td>20 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological symptoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-consciousness over appearance</td>
<td>47 (94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-esteem</td>
<td>33 (66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less attractive to partner</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive of clothing choice</td>
<td>28 (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact on intimacy</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing of symptoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing age</td>
<td>26 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After childbirth</td>
<td>16 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At puberty</td>
<td>11 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After weight gain</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As long as can remember</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laterality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral</td>
<td>47 (94)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sorice et al. (2017)
“I just mentioned the medical reason so I just said they rub which was true but it was probably more for body image issues.” Sharp, Mattiske, & Vale (2016)

“I thought they’re not going to be happy with this as a cosmetic issue, and I was having a slight problem in that the side that was bigger was protruding and from time to time it would rub on my clothing and become very uncomfortable…and I thought well “this is a quite good reason actually”. Bramwell et al. (2007)
Short Summary: Motivations

- Women appear to be motivated primarily by aesthetic reasons to undergo labiaplasty.
- Some may emphasize physical reasons to medical practitioners to add legitimacy to their surgical request.
Factors that Influence Genital Appearance Concern
Proposed Sociocultural Factors

1) Media
   Pornography, Internet, Advertising, TV

2) Peers
   Romantic Partners, Friends

3) Relationship Quality
   Relationship Satisfaction, Sexual Confidence

4) Pubic Hair Removal
Sociocultural Factors (Labiaplasty Consideration), $N = 351$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Sharp et al. (2015)
## Sociocultural Factors (Labiaplasty Decision)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Labiaplasty $N = 35$</th>
<th>Comparison $N = 30$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genital Appearance Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>24.85 (6.12)***</td>
<td>8.07 (7.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media Exposure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>1.25 (1.04)</td>
<td>0.97 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>2.09 (1.12)**</td>
<td>1.07 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>0.66 (0.76)*</td>
<td>0.30 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pornography</td>
<td>3.83 (2.68)</td>
<td>2.27 (2.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalisation</td>
<td>9.71 (3.48)*</td>
<td>6.70 (3.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Comments</td>
<td>0.52 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>27.71 (5.99)</td>
<td>29.92 (4.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Confidence</td>
<td>27.30 (5.86)</td>
<td>29.46 (5.62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske (2016a)
Short Summary: Sociocultural Factors

- Genital representations shown in the media are influencing some women’s attitudes towards their own genitals and, in turn, their interest in labiaplasty.
- Conversations with peers about genital appearance also influence genital appearance concerns.
Media Representations of Female Genitals
According to the Australian guidelines for unrestricted publications (Australian Government, 2005):

“Realistic depictions may contain discreet genital detail but there should be no genital emphasis”

Not only in Australia - In the UK, there was the “ILOOLI” rule (Stock, 2011):

“Inner labia are out (not allowed), outer labia are in (allowed)”
Pornography
Fashion
Advertising

Thank God For My Designer Vagina!

After having a big baby, Debbie's sex life suffered - would she ever find a solution to her problem?

Ms Angelica Kavouni on Embarrassing Bodies - Labiaplasty
Barbie Genital “Ideal”
Short Summary: Media Representations

• The predominantly “smooth curve” genital appearance shown in mainstream media may be skewing some women’s perceptions of an “acceptable” genital appearance.
Peer Comments about Female Genitals
• Almost 40% of women seeking to undergo labiaplasty have received negative comments or have experienced a negative reaction about their labial appearance

• Only 5% of women in the general community report this same experience
Comment Examples

• Ex-boyfriend:
  “It wasn’t intended to make fun of me, but my first serious boyfriend at the age of 21 made me aware of my labia being unusual – he said he had never seen one like that before. I think that’s where all of this came from.”

• Peer:
  “Classmates in communal showers at school at age of 16 when they rumoured I was really a boy and growing a penis.”

Veale, Eshkevari, et al. (2014b)
• **Mother:**
  “I showed them to my mother as I thought they were weird and she agreed and made an appointment with the doctor immediately.”

• **Father:**
  “My father teased me during episodes of sexual abuse - he would pull them and laugh and bite them.”

• **General commentary:**
  “I have heard boys, that are friends of mine, making fun of another girl who has an enlarged labia.”
However, these women have usually also received positive or reassuring comments too:

“His [my former partner’s] quote was ‘I love your flaps!’”

BUT, these comments are often ignored and only the negative comments are believed:

“I still could not believe him…these are so unlovable…If I’d stayed with that guy, I probably actually wouldn’t have done it [labiaplasty], but I did have that base level of unhappiness anyway with them.”

Sharp, Mattiske, & Vale (2016)
This bias towards negative comments means that discussing the wide variety in genital appearance diversity with these women is unlikely to make them feel better about their own genital appearance:

“I know they come in all shapes and sizes but I suppose it’s just a case of how I felt personally about my own.”

Sharp, Mattiske, & Vale (2016)
Short Summary: Peer Comments

• Some women seeking labiaplasty have received negative comments/had negative experiences involving their labial appearance
• These experiences may have initiated or exacerbated pre-existing genital appearance concerns
• Reassurance/positive commentary does not appear to alleviate concerns
Other Factors?
Psychological Disorders

• Most common psychological disorder in cosmetic surgery patients is body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

• Prevalence:
  - Community setting: 1.7 to 2.4% (Panayi, 2015)
  - Cosmetic patients: 5 to 15% (Sarwer & Spitzer, 2012)
  - Labiaplasty patients: 18% (Veale, Eshkevari, et al., 2014)
Psychological Disorders: BDD

A. Preoccupation with one or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are not observable or appear slight to others.

B. At some point during the course of the disorder, the individual has performed repetitive behaviors (e.g., mirror checking, excessive grooming, skin picking, reassurance seeking) or mental acts (e.g., comparing his or her appearance with that of others) in response to the appearance concerns.

C. The preoccupation causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

D. The appearance preoccupation is not better explained by concerns with body fat or weight in an individual whose symptoms meet diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder.

American Psychiatric Association (2013)
Psychological Disorders: BDD

- Studies suggest no improvement or a worsening of symptoms for adults and adolescents with BDD after cosmetic intervention (Bowyer et al., 2016)
- Patients with BDD directing aggression/violence toward their treating practitioners (Sarwer, 2002):
  - 40% of practitioners had been threatened by a patient with BDD
    - 29% threatened legally
    - 2% threatened physically
    - 10% legally and physically
• Diagnosis of BDD considered to be contraindication to cosmetic intervention (Sarwer & Spitzer, 2012)

• Importance of screening for BDD
  ➢ COPS-L is a freely available screening tool designed for labiaplasty patients (Veale et al., 2013)
Summary: Motivations

- Primarily aesthetic concerns motivate women to undergo labiaplasty
- Sociocultural factors (media, peers) influence genital appearance concerns
- Psychological disorders (BDD) may underlie some women’s genital dissatisfaction
What are the outcomes of labiaplasty?
Outcome Research

• Research suggests high satisfaction and low complication rates (Oranges et al., 2015)
• Some studies also suggest improvements in:
  ➢ Self-esteem (Alter, 2008; Ostrzenski et al., 2014)
  ➢ Enjoyment of sex (Alter, 2008; Triana et al., 2012)
• However, methodological limitations:
  ➢ Non-validated outcome measures
  ➢ Retrospective design
  ➢ No control groups
  ➢ Lack of independent research
• Only three prospective controlled studies to date
Psychological Outcomes of Labiaplasty: A Prospective Study

Gemma Sharp, M.Sc.
Marika Tiggemann, Ph.D.
Julie Mattiske, Ph.D.

**Background:** Although the demand for labiaplasty has increased rapidly over the past decade, little is known about the psychological outcomes of this procedure. In particular, there is a lack of prospective controlled studies to assess

Study Design

Two groups of adult Australian women:
• 29 labiaplasty patients
• 22 general gynaecology patients (comparison)

Completed two questionnaires:
• Baseline (pre-op for labiaplasty group)
• 6 month follow-up
Measures

1) Genital appearance satisfaction (Bramwell & Morland, 2009)

2) Intimate relationship quality:
   - Relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988)
   - Sexual confidence (Abraham et al., 2009)

3) Psychological well-being:
   - Psychological distress (Derogatis et al., 1974)
   - Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)
   - Life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985)
Results: Surgical Satisfaction
Surgical Satisfaction

Labiaplasty patients were generally very satisfied:

- Aesthetic: 83%
- Functional: 86%
- Overall: 83%

Complications reported by 35%:

- Infection
- Severe pain/discomfort

Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske (2016b)
Results: Standardised Measures
No significant changes from baseline to follow-up for:

- Relationship quality
- Sexual confidence
- Psychological distress
- Self-esteem
- Life satisfaction

Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske (2016b)
Results:
Predictors of Dissatisfaction
Predictors of Dissatisfaction

Three categories of potential pre-operative predictors:

1) Demographic characteristics
   - Involvement in intimate relationship

2) Prior cosmetic surgery exposure
   - None

3) Psychological well-being
   - Higher psychological distress

→ Implications for pre-operative screening of patients

Sharp, Tiggemann, & Mattiske (2016b)
Psychosexual outcome after labiaplasty: a prospective case-comparison study

David Veale • Iona Naismith • Ertiniss Eshkevari • Nell Ellison • Ana Costa • Dudley Robinson • Lanka Abeywickrama • Angelica Kavouni • Linda Cardozo

Veale, Naismith, et al. (2014)

Method:
• 23 labiaplasty patients followed up at 3 months and 11-42 months
• Compared with 39 women (baseline) who “did not want labiaplasty”

Results:
• Improved genital appearance satisfaction
• Reduction in BDD symptoms – 8/9 women no longer met criteria for BDD after labiaplasty
• Initial increase in sexual function (not maintained at longer-term follow-up)
Evaluation of Body Image and Sexual Satisfaction in Women Undergoing Female Genital Plastic/Cosmetic Surgery

Michael P. Goodman, MD; Otto J. Placik, MD; David L. Matlock, MD, MBA; Alex F. Simopoulos, MD; Teresa A. Dalton, JD, PhD; David Veale, MD; and Susan Hardwick-Smith, MD
Method:
• 120 women (baseline) undergoing female genital plastic surgery followed up at 6, 12 and 24 months
• Compared with 50 women (baseline) attending same gynaecology/plastic surgery clinics

Results:
• Improved genital self-image
• Reduction in BDD symptoms
• Improved sexual satisfaction
Summary: Outcomes

• Limited research suggests women are satisfied with change in genital appearance after labiaplasty
• Impact on BDD symptoms?
• Impact on broader psychological and sexual well-being?
What is being done to address genital appearance issues?
Have you ever wondered "Is my vagina normal?"

Lots of women have.

When people say vagina, what they are often talking about is actually the labia. Labia are the lips or folds of skin that sit on either side of the vaginal opening. You might call them flaps or lips. Whatever you call them, it's worth knowing that labia are all different. Sometimes this isn't that obvious from what you see in magazines and pornography.

Educational Approach: Video

https://vimeo.com/10883108
Examined the effectiveness of these two resources on changing women’s attitudes:
1) Photograph Array from Labia Library
2) Hungry Beast Video
## Educational Approach: Effectiveness Study

| Measure                        | Control  
|                               | \( n = 37 \) | Photo  
|                               | \( n = 33 \) | Video  
|                               | \( n = 32 \) | Photo+Video  
|                               | \( n = 34 \) |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| Normality Perception          | 2.73 (0.79)  | 3.19 (1.05)  | 3.48 (1.18)  | 3.52 (1.11)    |
| Media Knowledge               | 2.86 (1.29)  | 3.21 (1.14)  | 4.06 (1.27)  | 4.06 (1.14)    |
| Genital Dissatisfaction - Pre | 22.57 (25.58)| 27.05 (29.33)| 15.08 (22.94)| 18.30 (23.86)  |
| Genital Dissatisfaction - Post| 14.90 (24.43)| 20.52 (26.61)| 11.78 (24.58)| 9.98 (19.23)   |

Short video appears to improve women’s knowledge of the diversity of female genital anatomy

Sharp & Tiggemann (2016)
Educational Approach: Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elva2m1KS-o
New Research: Therapeutic Approach

• In the process of designing a therapeutic program app for women with genital appearance concerns
• Based on cognitive behavioural therapy principles
Conclusions

• Labiaplasty is on the rise in Australia
• Aesthetic concerns are the main motivator
• Genital appearance concerns influenced by sociocultural and psychological factors
• Women are generally satisfied with their genital appearance after labiaplasty
• May not have broader impacts on psychological and sexual well-being
• Educational resources available to promote genital appearance diversity
Acknowledgements

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• Women who participated in the studies
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References


References


