

Slick and smooth: The role of petro-products in making and maintaining 'femininity' in the beauty salon

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Abstract

Drawing on research mapping the commodity chains associated with beauty salon consumption, this article examines the subtle yet pervasive ways in which oil works to make and maintain hairless 'feminine' bodies. Developing a methodological approach focused on the liveliness of depilatory wax, which included fostering a close attention to how wax behaves and asking Beauty Therapists to narrate what they were doing whilst carrying out treatments, the article explores not only why *but how* hair removal happens. The article shows how petro-products are a key and active force in the material production of smooth bodies, simultaneously entrenching socio-cultural expectations of 'feminine' hairlessness. Making the wax always-available – it is taken-for-granted that more can always be manufactured from a seemingly infinite source – oil is also active in enabling the maintenance of 'femininity' through the required repetition of hair removal. An attention to how these practices are quietly but deeply predicated upon petroleum, the prevalence of expectations of 'feminine' hairlessness and the social sanctions if one does not engage highlights the extent of the challenge facing calls for divestment from oil. The bi-monthly, 45-minute waxing treatment exemplifies the under-noticed but unrelenting ubiquity with which petro-products thoroughly permeate and produce the socio-material world.

Keywords

beauty industry, femininity, lively materials, oil, petro-products

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Introduction

My small bottle of moisturiser has run out. It has been sitting upside down on my dressing table as I try to eek out every last drop. Now I must decide whether the empty plastic bottle goes in the recycling bin or into the normal household rubbish. A bigger concern for me though, is whether I will be able to buy any more. A few months ago, I couldn't find it on the supermarket shelves. Then it was suddenly back in stock. A relief. I like this product; it's light, protects from UV and smells nice. I didn't want to change moisturisers and anxious of future sun damage and wrinkles, unbecoming signs of ageing, I didn't want to have to go without.

Contemplating the empty bottle and a trip to the shops, I read the ingredient list. A different language, it is reminiscent of secondary-school chemistry lessons. I start to Google. Contained by the plastic packaging – bottle made from high density polyethylene, cap from polypropylene – are other petro-products: Butyl Methoxydibenzoylmethane which provides protection from UVA; Carbomer which makes the cream viscous; Disodium EDTA, an anti-binding agent; PEG-100 Stearate which cleanses and moisturises.

A scan of the ingredients of other products on my dressing table and in my bathroom cabinet and make-up bag reveals the omnipresence of petroleum-derived compounds in my daily beauty regime. These in addition to those products with which I only come into contact in the beauty salon, equally replete with oil's by-products: wax for depilating body and facial hair, nail polishes and acetone removers, tints for eyebrows and eyelashes, and glues for attaching false lashes, to name but a few. And like my moisturiser, the majority of these products come in some form of plastic packaging – pots, tubs, or bottles, wrapped in cellophane wrap – for which oil, of course, is a key feedstock. (Fieldnotes, June 2022)

Oil shows up in everything (Watts, 2012, p. 439); irrefutably surrounded by things made from petro-compounds, we are '(en)plasticised' (Ghosh, 2019, p. 277; see also Altman, 2015; Davis, 2015; Liboiron, 2013; Mah, 2022). Or, perhaps, (en)petrocised. Oil and its by-products feature in the things in our kitchens (including fertilising the soil in which the food in the fridge is cultivated [Carson, 1962/2000]), living rooms, offices, bathrooms; they are in our clothing; they are in the materials which package and contain these goods (Marriott & Minio-Paluello, 2013a; Westermann, 2013). Oil literally powers the journeys that these consumer goods take from the factory to the marketplace and into homes, on ships, lorries and vans (Chua et al., 2018; Khalili, 2020). It should probably, then, have come as no surprise that it shows up in beauty products.

Guided by Savitzky and Urry (2015), who describe how oil 'oozes through the socio-material world in unexpected and often difficult-to-appreciate ways' (p. 181), I turn to the world of the beauty salon to consider oil's materiality and sociality, and how these are entwined. I explore both how oil materially 'shows up' as a constitutive ingredient in beauty products and how, in doing so, it plays a part in engendering and entrenching particular bodily expressions and socio-cultural notions of 'femininity' ('femininity' appears in inverted commas throughout to recognise that it is a social, cultural and, as I argue, material construction and, in the case of beauty work, heavily tied in with outward appearances). In this way, oil doesn't just *ooze* but vibrates and quivers, *making* the socio-material world.

This article focuses on depilatory wax, a key product in the making and maintaining of hairless 'feminine' bodies in beauty salons.¹ Like my moisturiser and innumerable

other cosmetics, the wax consists in part of petro-products which provide it with certain properties and affordances and thus certain ways of acting. In this way, I conceptualise of the wax and, in particular, the oil that constitutes it as lively materials. Drawing on new materialist theories (whilst acknowledging there is little ‘new’ in these and, moreover, it is problematic to posit them as novel [see Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016]), I take matter not as ‘a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification’ but rather as an ‘an active participant in the world’s becoming’ (Barad, 2003, pp. 821, 803). Oil is not “‘mere” matter’, but ‘active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’ (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9; see also Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). In the words of Bennett (2010), writing on ‘vibrant matter’, it ‘has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events’ (p. viii, original emphasis). Viewed thus, oil, the wax it makes and, as I have written about elsewhere, the largely plastic packaging in which beauty products come (Rondel, Forthcoming) play a dynamic role in making ‘femininity’, corporeally and conceptually.

Moreover, focusing on the ways in which ‘feminising’ beauty practices are deeply predicated upon petroleum highlights the extent of the challenge facing current calls for reductions in oil consumption. This is a product which imbues everything and every body. My analysis shows how in the beauty salon, petro-products seep in quietly so as to be almost unperceived, to literally make bodies and the socio-cultural expectations of what those bodies should look like. As a slick of oil permeates the life of the salon and the particular version of ‘femininity’ produced there, equally pervasive are the widespread harms of petro-products and the processes of their extraction, production, consumption and disposal. In its vibrancy, oil is also deadly matter:² toxifying places and bodies; a major contributor to emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gases; a factor in destroying habitats and damaging biodiversity; creating and exacerbating social and geographic inequalities; amongst an almost interminable list of impacts. Oil’s liveliness and deadliness are at once at odds and deeply entangled with one another. Its omnipresence and ‘vitality’ both enable how we live and, it seems, will eventually end it; its vitality feeding its deadliness. Attending to the liveliness of petro-products and how they saturate beauty practices and ‘feminine’ bodies which ensue, as well as investigating the products’ journey to and through the beauty salon – from the manufacturers to the wholesalers to the salon and onwards to an incineration plant – puts into sharp relief this deadly feedback loop and underscores the difficulties in uncoupling social life from oil. The under-noticed mundanity with which oil seeps into and makes ‘feminine’ bodies precisely demonstrates its absolute embeddedness.

Returning to the opening vignette in which I contemplate an empty bottle of moisturiser, there are two aspects which I unpack further in this article. Firstly, like in so many beauty and personal-care products, I discuss the constitutive petro-ingredients of depilatory wax and how these prompt it to act to remove body hair. Secondly, I consider the always-availability of these goods, necessary for the unending work of making and maintaining ‘feminine’ bodies at home and in the salon, a constant stream enabled (and literally fuelled) by oil and its seemingly infinite supply.³

Before turning to the empirical discussion, I outline work which has highlighted the centrality of petro-products to contemporary life and, interrelatedly, how oil is an active and generative participant in the social world. In particular, I focus on two strands of this

literature: firstly, work on how oil makes particular forms of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’; and secondly, research into the bodily impacts of oil, its by-products and the associated emissions. In the next section, I outline my methodological approach which, on the one hand, explores the reasons why (predominantly) women⁴ engage in hair removal and, on the other, pays attention to the liveliness of things in and beyond the salon. In the third section, I unpack three aspects of the research which centre how, in the words of the Beauty Therapist as she talks about working with wax, ‘it’s all about how it acts’ (interview, October 2019). And, more precisely, the role of oil in the wax’s actions. Firstly, I problematise the notion that technological developments in wax are merely responding to changing socio-cultural expectations of ‘feminine’ hairlessness. Instead I argue that the materiality of the wax and socio-cultural norms feed into one another in a reciprocal relationship. Building on this, I secondly consider the affordances of oil, what it enables the wax to do and so how it both imbues and ‘animates’ (Watson, 2015) the particular version of ‘femininity’ being made in the salon. I finally think through the constant availability of goods, essential for the never-ending repetition of hair removal and equally replete with oil. By unpacking how oil quietly infuses the actual (smooth) fleshiness of ‘feminine’ bodies and the gendered socio-cultural expectations of what those bodies should look like, this article makes a key contribution to the literature on beauty practices, examining *how* this work happens and what underpins it, in a practical, material sense. It makes an interlinked contribution to the literature on the ubiquity of oil by demonstrating how petro-products indeed ‘show up in everything’ (Watts, 2012, p. 439), including in mundane, under-noticed but no less pervasive ways in the beauty salon and the ‘feminine’ bodies made there.

Oil engenders

Oil is omnipresent, permeating every part of life, leaving very little untouched. Indeed, research across the social sciences, geography, arts and humanities as well as activist work has shown how oil is in everything. In this research, oil as a generative force has been put into relief. Far from a passive substance which is simply extracted, moved around and consumed, this work has shown how oil not only infuses but actively produces the social world: making lives and shaping social, economic and political relations (Appel, 2012; Knowles, 2014); enabling and promoting mass consumption (Gabrys et al., 2013; Westermann, 2013); ‘power[ing] modern movement’ (Savitzky & Urry, 2015, pp. 180–181); driving globalisation (Knowles, 2014, 2015); and producing places and forming bodies in myriad (often toxic and highly unequal) ways (Alaimo, 2008; Gbadegesin, 2001; Marriott & Macalister, 2021; Marriott & Minio-Paluello, 2013b; Tuana, 2008). As Savitzky and Urry (2015) state, oil is ‘*the* central material ingredient in social life, an obligatory passage point through which almost all taken-for-granted social activities are currently forced to pass’ (p. 181, original emphasis; see also Haiven, 2022 on palm oil, an equally omnipresent and generative material and equally tied up with beauty and personal care practices). Oil flows through and *makes* these social activities; it *makes* the social world. For the purposes of my argument, I am particularly interested in two interlocking ways in which petro-products shape social life: oil’s role in producing gender and how it configures bodies.

Firstly, existing work has shown how petro-products constitute particular gendered identities. For example, Daggett (2018) forwards the concept of ‘petro-masculinity’ as she addresses ‘the relationship – both technically and affectively, ideationally and materially – between fossil fuels and white patriarchal orders’ (p. 28). For Daggett (2018), in twentieth-century USA, ‘the achievement of hegemonic masculinity required intensive fossil fuel consumption and, for the working or middle-class, jobs within or reliant upon fossil fuel systems’ (p. 32): a particular (white, relatively wealthy and heteronormative) ‘masculinity’ forged by oil. Focusing on women’s relationship with oil, Wilson (2014) also describes how ‘petroleum-related innovations . . . came to define gender dynamics and gender roles in Western petroculture(s)’ where ‘[w]omen have long been identified as major consumers of petroleum products’ (pp. 248–249). In particular, Wilson (2014) lists ‘feminised/feminising’ products: fashion, beauty, housewifery and motherhood; products which are constitutive of a (again, white, Euro-centric, middle-class, heteronormative) ‘feminine’ identity (pp. 248–249). Through a focus on depilatory waxing, I build on this work by entering the beauty salon to look in depth at a specific instance of how oil actively works to make gendered norms, both materially and conceptually.

Secondly of interest for my purposes, there is a wealth of literature on how oil configures bodies. This work largely concentrates on how petro-products and petro-discards toxify bodies in unequal ways (Alaimo, 2008; Tuana, 2008). For example, research has reported on the harms to health from oil-originated air pollution: for example, from oil extraction and gas flaring (Pinnell et al., 2023), the production of petrochemicals (Davies, 2022; Jephcote & Mah, 2019), vehicular emissions (Barnes et al., 2019) or waste incineration (Citizen Sense, 2017). Showing how oil penetrates and constitutes bodies in different ways – manifesting as a persistent cough, increased prevalence of asthma or higher likelihood of developing cancer – these studies across the environmental and social sciences have highlighted how the most noxious burden of toxic air is borne by black and brown and economically-disadvantaged communities. There is also oil-originated toxicity in salons and, in a common pattern of social and environmental injustice, the most harmful impacts are borne by lower-income, black and brown and migrant women (Harris-Roberts et al., 2011; Kang, 2010; Zota & Shamasunder, 2017). However, this crucial focus on toxicity misses how oil shapes bodies in non-harmful ways too. By focusing on the world of the beauty salon, this article takes a different direction into investigating how petro-products are quietly pervasive in making bodies. I instead focus on the more mundane ways that petroleum enters into corporeal configurations, but in ways that nonetheless underscore its absolute ubiquity.

In the beauty salon

As has been explored in work on beauty and beauty work across the social sciences, feminist studies and cultural studies, beauty salons are places where women are ‘made up’, where they ‘invest in femininity’ (Black & Sharma, 2001, p. 114). Chief amongst the many practices which contribute to this particular version of ‘femininity’ are hair removal treatments for face and body: threading, electrolysis, laser hair removal and, most commonly, waxing.

Although there are some shifts reported in attitudes to body hair removal amongst millennials and generation Z (Singer, 2018; Wilkinson, 2023), research in critical beauty studies from the 1990s onwards has shown how a ‘feminine’ body has become almost entirely ubiquitously a hairless body, where ‘[e]ven a small amount of hair growth may be understood as a threat to femininity’ (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004, p. 88; see also Fahs, 2017; Herzig, 2009, 2015; Smelik, 2015). From the 1980s, which saw ‘a boom in waxing’ (interview with Managing Director of a wax manufacturers, October 2019), the ‘hairlessness norm’ for women (Tiggemann & Kenyon, 1998) has been sedimented and extended to ever-novel parts of the body whilst pressures to engage with it have intensified, as have the social sanctions for not doing so (Widdows, 2018). Even when the ‘hairlessness norm’ is refuted with an increase in those identifying as women opting not to shave, depilate or wax and instead display visible body hair, the social punishments persist (Weetman, 2024).⁵

The existing research on women’s depilatory practices has largely focused on the socio-cultural and psycho-social relationship between hair removal and ‘femininity’. It has investigated why, over the past 40 years, a woman’s body has become invariably a smooth body and unpacked the gendered, classed, racialised and heteronormative power dynamics threaded through this ‘feminising’ practice. This article extends this work to consider the material apparatus by which ‘feminine’ bodies get made and maintained, centring the role of petro-products. In this, I respond to Herzig (2009, p. 254; 2015) for whom studies of depilatory practices should interrogate not only *why* women remove hair or ‘the relationships between cultural norms of hairlessness and of femininity’, but *how* this actually happens. Herzig (2015) calls for an examination of ‘broader sea changes’ in social and economic life and their relationship to ‘feminine’ smoothness (p. 187). In particular, she highlights oil’s role in hair removal as a core ingredient in wax, showing how with increased demand for hairlessness, petroleum waste has been elevated into a ‘valuable cosmetic by-product’ and, simultaneously, as oil companies sought novel ways to profit from their waste, of converting their “‘excess” into useful commodities’, new parts of the body became targeted for hair removal (Herzig, 2009, p. 255; 2015, pp. 143–144). Approaching oil as a lively material, I bring some further empirical detail to Herzig’s history of hair removal by following wax into the salon and unpacking ‘how it acts’ to investigate the very practical ways in which petro-products get to work to make hairless bodies.

As constitutive ingredients in depilatory wax, I approach petro-products as a key force in hair removal practices. I additionally look to some of the other ways in which oil infuses ‘feminine’ smoothness. For example, depilatory treatments (as with nearly all beauty practices) require repetition as hair immediately starts to regrow and so must be removed again and again and again in order for a body to remain acceptably ‘feminine’. This appearance is thus also predicated on the constant availability of wax, equally oil-dependent (or oil-generated) as more wax can always be manufactured from a seemingly infinite petro-feedstock. Not to mention how wax’s journey to the salon is fuelled by diesel or gasoline. In myriad ways, petro-products come to subtly and pervasively seep into the repetitive work of making ‘femininity’. The monthly, 45-minute leg and bikini-line waxing treatment illuminates the unrelenting extent to which petroleum permeates our lives and bodies as a slick of oil oozes through the beauty salon. Not only as a toxic

material but as a mundane substance with which we unknowingly and unthinkingly engage. This quiet ubiquity also illuminates the scale of the challenge if we are to divest from oil, a substance which literally makes us.

Methods

Part of a larger research project which mapped the commodity chains associated with beauty salon consumption, this article draws on different aspects of the study. To understand more about engagement with beauty practices, I accompanied 10 salon customers (white women aged from 25 to 75, living in and around an affluent neighbourhood in south London) to their hair and beauty appointments and interviewed them afterwards about their salon experiences and the treatments they undergo and why. To arrange these appointment-interviews, I explained to participants my hope that I could go with them to the salon and left them to decide whether they were happy for me to do so and to which appointment. This resulted in my attending haircuts and colours, eyebrow waxing and tinting, manicures and (and receiving) pedicures. I further interviewed four other salon customers where it was not possible to coordinate an appointment together or they did not wish for me to accompany them. As, for perhaps obvious reasons, none of the participants invited me to join them for intimate waxing, I documented my own leg- and Brazilian-waxing appointments, with the permission of the Beauty Therapists performing the service. This approach is not uncommon in work on hair and beauty salons. For example, Black and Sharma's (2001, p. 102) study of the beauty industry included undergoing salon treatments themselves and Soulliere (1997, pp. 46–47) begins her research by interviewing hairdressers with whom she has a pre-existing relationship as a client of their salon. I also interviewed seven Hairdressers and Beauty Therapists, largely whilst they carried out treatments as I 'observed' them at work (the idea of 'observing' is applied in a loose sense as, of course, we are very quick to say 'observation' in social research when, in fact, the whole of our multisensorial body is present and involved [Back, 2012, p. 29]). This included interviewing Beauty Therapists whilst they carried out treatments on my body – intimate waxing but also lash tinting and perming, false-lash application, manicures and eyebrow tinting. These appointment-interviews were agreed at prior appointment once I had explained the study and the sorts of questions I would be asking. Of course, given that I was a paying customer and researcher, the power dynamics were heavily skewed towards me as the Beauty Therapists might have felt unable to refuse to take part for concern about losing income. In this set of interviews, I asked them about their work life more generally but also about the specifics of the treatment they were performing and the products with which they were working. Where practical, these interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the case where it was not possible to record, because of the presence of other customers in the salon for example, notes were made during the interview and extensive fieldnotes were written afterwards.

As well as speaking to women about their beauty practices and asking the Beauty Therapists to narrate what they were doing, core to the study is approaching things or materials – in this case, the beauty products and what makes them – as lively or vibrant (Bennett, 2010). I understand things as having 'capacity to prompt certain actions' (Hawkins, 2009, p. 193), animate particular socialities (Watson, 2015, p. 877) or

generate effects (Hawkins, 2013, p. 52). Taking things as active participants in the social world, I am guided by Coleman, who proposes that ‘methodologies of following’ are ‘a productive means of responding to the liveliness of things’, of ‘drawing attention to [their] material properties and the affects [they] elicit’ (Coleman, 2000, p. 1; Coleman, 2019; see also Appadurai, 1986; Knowles, 2014). And, I add, to the actions, socialities or effects they prompt.

Keen to get to grips with beauty products’ vibrancy, in addition to interviews, I followed them (primarily depilatory wax and its constitutive ingredients) through London: from the port to the factory to the wholesalers and onwards to the salon before the spent product is disposed of and taken to the municipal waste facility where it is incinerated, continuing its journey in a plume from the chimney stack. In some cases, such as in the wax-blending factory or the wholesalers’ store, I interviewed people working in the different locations or was taken on a guided tour. In other places where I couldn’t get access (for example, beauty supplies’ warehouses and seaports), I spent hours walking around trading estates, ‘observing’ what was going on from the side of the road, or watching traffic arriving and leaving the port, getting a sense of the place (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017). In each location, I heeded the advice of Bennett (2010) on attuning to ‘the power of things’, that ‘[w]hat is needed is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body . . . an attentiveness to things and their affects’ (pp. xiii–xiv). Thus, in and beyond the salon, following the products, I fostered an attention to how they were acting, to what they were doing, to what they were prompting. Combining interviews with this ‘materio-centric’ approach (Hurdley, 2010) allows me to respond to Herzig’s (2009, 2015) instruction to attend to not only the *why* of depilatory practices but the *how*, and, in particular, the lively role of oil in this process.

It is important to note that as oil and oil-derived products move and make, they impact upon differently-positioned people very differently. As stated above, oil forges and widens socio-economic and health inequalities, including in the beauty salon. The affluent, white women who I accompanied to their salon appointments are relatively unaffected; they spend a short time in the salon before returning home to parts of the city which are less impacted by air pollution originating from vehicles (perhaps transporting wax to the salon) and waste incineration (perhaps containing discarded beauty products) (Rondel, 2024; Roy, 2020). The Beauty Therapists I interviewed identified as women, white and working class and, although the wax may not be harmful, occupational research in salons has reported a range of skin, muscular and respiratory complaints stemming from carrying out repetitive beauty treatments using a cocktail of products with a gendered and classed pattern of impact (Hadei et al., 2018; Harris-Roberts et al., 2011). Studies have additionally shown that the most acute health impacts of this work fall on black and brown salon workers who have an increased risk of coming into contact with more noxious products such as hair relaxers (Zota & Shamasunder, 2017); or those from a migrant background in the UK and US who may lack the language ability and knowledge of local regulations to contest their working conditions or, for those with irregular statuses, have a fear of being deported (Kang, 2010). Following and replicating a global pattern of how and who it harms, even in the intimate and more everyday setting of the beauty salon, oil continues to create dangerous material and corporeal inequalities.

‘It’s all about how it acts’

In this section, I consider three interlinked ways in which oil makes and maintains ‘feminine’ bodies, as wax gets to work in the salon. Firstly, I discuss the mutually constitutive relationship between socio-cultural expectations of the ‘hairlessness norm’ for women and the material properties of wax. Secondly, building on this, I examine how what wax *is* (what it is made from; in particular, its petro-ingredients) impacts on what wax *does* (removes ‘unfeminine’ hair from increasingly numerous body parts). Finally, I consider the repetition of this ‘feminising’ process and the maintenance of a smooth body, equally enabled by oil as the salon’s shelves are replenished with these easily disposable and easily replaceable products.

Making wax making ‘femininity’

In the salon, the Beauty Therapist prepares for my appointment. I am her third client of the day to have a full-leg- and bikini-wax. There will be three more people after me. The pots of wax have already been warmed so the bright-orange floral-scented wax is at the right temperature and consistency and is ready to be used. Once I have arrived, removed the necessary clothes and am laying on the treatment couch, the Beauty Therapist uses a wooden spatula to scoop up a small amount of wax. Twirling the spatula constantly so that not a single drop of wax is spilt, she transfers it to my leg, spreading it at just the right thickness, following the grain of the hair growth. Leaving it a few moments to cool and dry, to reach just the right tackiness, she then smooths a fabric strip over the swatch of wax. Adjusting her body position and holding my skin taut with one hand, she uses the other to rip off the strip taking with it wax and hair. My body momentarily tightens and I let out a short exhale, before saying ‘it wasn’t as bad as I was anticipating!’ The Beauty Therapist nods and laughs in agreement, deftly folding the strip over and putting it in the bin. Turning back to the pots of wax, she picks up the spatula and repeats these actions until every part of my legs and bikini line is hair-free. (Fieldnotes, April 2017–October 2019)

Over the past 40 years, not only has the expectation that to appear ‘feminine’ one must be free from body hair become well-entrenched, but this has been extended to more and more parts of the body. Testament to this, telling me she likes their ‘matter-of-fact’ approach to waxing, one of the customers I interview shows me her salon’s treatment ‘menu’ on her phone: lower and upper legs, bikini line (basic, G-string, Brazilian, Hollywood), nipples, intimate bum, underarm, arms, bum cheeks, navel line, stomach, back, chest, shoulders, eyebrows, lip, chin, nose, ear and neck (interview, March 2017). Watching the Beauty Therapist as she ‘collaborates’ (Kontturi, 2018, p. 110) with the wax to remove hair from some of these places, I ask about the different waxes on the market and why she prefers gel over hot wax.⁶ Twirling the warmed wax on a spatula as she prepares to spread it on my leg, she emphasises ‘for me, it’s all about how it acts’ – the consistency, how it runs, how it holds its heat, how it shapes to the body part to be waxed (labia and armpits are tricky and hot wax is better), how it cools, its thickness, its malleability and flexibility, the resistance it offers when pulling it off (interview, October 2019). How the wax behaves is crucial to how it is worked with, to what it does and *what it can do*, its (potential) actions and capabilities, the hair it can remove.

A straightforward reading might suggest that the wax and ‘how it acts’ and so what it can do are simply responding to an increased demand for hairless ‘feminine’ bodies. However, centralising the active role of petro-products, I want to argue that the product and the socio-cultural norms co-emerge, feeding into one another. Viewed thus, wax’s behaviours not only respond to but, concomitantly, serve to *animate* hair removal practices and the associated expectations of ‘feminine’ hairlessness. Indeed, during my visit to a wax manufacturers, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate out the cultural factors propelling the boom in waxing from the material developments and innovations in wax. After being seated in the boardroom opposite a glass-fronted cabinet whose shelves are filled with the impressive range of products made by the company, the Managing Director starts my tour by talking me through the uptake of waxing in the UK since the 1980s. Initially it seems quite linear. For him, the changing trends in waxing are largely attributable to cultural preferences. For example, he explains that there is ‘no shadow of a doubt’ that the contemporary demand for less body hair is linked to the availability of internet pornography where ‘girls and boys now see body hair as just being weird’. Emphasising changing fashions and pornography as key drivers for the demand for waxing (and, of course, for wax!), it appears a straightforward chain of events: in response to social expectations that more and more body parts will be free from hair, products have been developed which meet this growing customer demand (fieldnotes and interview, October 2019). In this view, the liveliness of the wax and its ingredients are quieted, neatly contained in their pots in the glass hutch, reduced to a ‘blank state’ (Barad, 2003).

Yet throughout the Managing Director’s narration, the cultural preferences for ‘feminine’ hairlessness and the material innovations in the products are (perhaps unintentionally) interwoven. He moves backwards and forwards between explaining social trends in hair removal and developments in wax. Certainly, from his perspective, there seems to be a straightforward logic from demand (cultural preferences; fashion; porn) to supply (the waxes they produce and the ways these perform). But in his fast-paced explanations with which I struggle to keep up, this linearity of a product simply supplying a demand is disrupted as preferences for hairlessness and developments in the waxes which enable extended hair removal become inseparable:

Managing Director: [In the mid-1980s, wax-blending companies] started mixing rosin esters with some plasticisers and oils and they came up with a wax that looks very similar but is much much softer and that really took off in Europe . . . But it was really only good for below the knee because it’s very firm there and you’ve got muscle here, so below the knee, soft and sticky isn’t a problem. But above the knee, it’s much more problematic because you’ve got no muscle or bone in the most sensitive areas to support it so what you end up doing is stretching the skin and you snap the hairs off and it hurts like hell . . . whereas if you can get the wax to actually sheer off properly. It’s almost as if I’ve got a crib sheet there [indicates flipchart behind me with some indecipherable words and formulas written on it] because I can see it all there [laughter]. (Interview, October 2019)

Almost without drawing breath, he continues to explain how waxes were developed with increased dilatancy which meant ripping them away from the skin would be less painful and ‘then it became a lot more fashionable to start getting rid of all body hair’. Running

concurrently with innovations in waxes, fashions for ‘feminine’ hairlessness also evolved. Reflected in the Managing Director’s explanations, the shifting social expectations and the material and technological developments are interwoven and the straightforward pathway from a demand for hairless thighs to new forms of wax is thrown into question. Rather, the socio-cultural preferences for hairlessness and the product developments in ‘how [wax] acts’ are entwined in his narration. Far from still or passive, in a reciprocal relationship, as techniques and formulas change what the wax is and thus in what it is able to do, ever-more areas of the body are waxed and so have become normalised/expected as hairless. From this perspective, it is not that women suddenly started to demand hair-free upper legs, Brazilians or Hollywoods and the manufacturers started to produce the wax capable of this in response. Instead, as perhaps unintentionally highlighted by the Managing Director’s account, the growing and changing demand and associated expectations of ‘feminine’ hairlessness are inextricable from the developments in the wax’s (in part oil-given) capabilities. The wax is not only formulated in response to changing demands, it also works to *prompt and generate* hair removal practices. Viewed thus, the wax has an active role in making this particular version of ‘femininity’ as ‘how it acts’ enables it to remove ‘unfeminine’ hair from more and more parts of the body; including but not limited to legs, arms, pubic region, vulva, anus, underarms, eyebrows, upper lip, chin. Conceptualising of the wax’s materiality as lively, I argue that hairless ‘feminine’ bodies and the entrenchedness of this expectation of smoothness precisely co-emerge with the wax’s properties and capabilities.

What wax is, what wax does

Selecting a pot of wax from the wholesalers’ shelves which I recognise from the beauty salon, I read the list of its ingredients: Polycyclopentadiene, Paraffinum Liquidum, Jasminum Officinale (Jasmine) Flower Extract, Parfum, Linalool, Eugenol, Limonene, CI 26100. Using Google I can work out that, at the very least, the two main ingredients – polycyclopentadiene and Paraffinum liquidum – are petro-derived products. (Fieldnotes, October 2019; see Figure 1)

In order to remove hair, depilatory wax must be heatable and meltable; it must be malleable, sticky and spreadable; it must be able to quickly cool once applied and harden but not too much as it must remain flexible. Crucially it must be removable from the skin taking the hair with it. It is an added bonus if it smells pleasant and is colourful. If, as the Beauty Therapist states, ‘it’s all about how it acts’, amongst the other ingredients, it is petro-products which enable wax to be, to act and to do these things. Explaining what waxes are made from, the Managing Director tells me that they might have upwards of 15 polymers in stock at the wax-blending factory, ‘each one giving different properties’ (interview, October 2019). Likewise, in an email correspondence responding to my question about how depilatory waxes are made, the Quality Assurance Manager for a wax-blending company describes how ‘[d]epilatory waxes are typically made of blended resins and oils. The base resins and oils can be of natural, petroleum or synthetic origin’. Blended together at high temperatures, the ingredients provide the wax with particular ‘performance characteristics’. For example, for stripless or hot waxes which need to ‘remain malleable enough to be removed without the need for cloth waxing strips’,

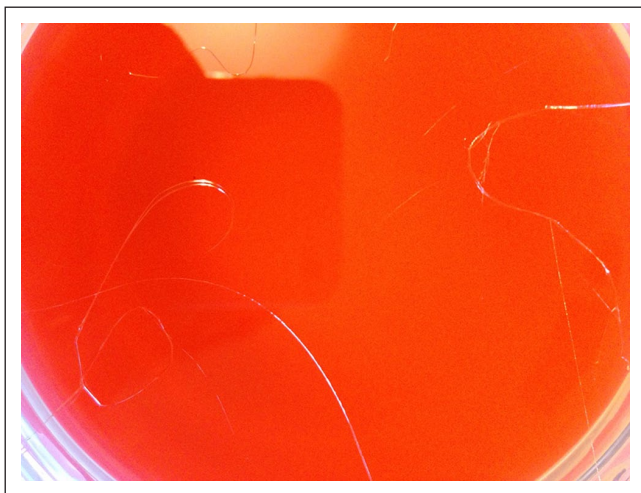


Figure 1. Wax.

Photo: Louise Rondel, October 2019.

polymers are added which enable the wax to be and to do this. He continues that white oil ('International Nomenclature Cosmetic Ingredient [INCI]: *Paraffinum liquidum*') – a by-product of the petroleum refining process – is 'fairly commonly used in depilatory products as the oil component' (personal correspondence, November 2019). Trying to follow the wax's various constituent ingredients, I then contact a UK-based supplier of white oil. They tell me that the 'major global producers' of medicinal white oil which is used in cosmetic products are Exxon and Petro-Canada (personal correspondence, February 2020).⁷

Polymers, white oil, hydrocarbon resins, parfum,⁸ seeping from petro-giants into the beauty salon, these various by-products are blended to allow the wax to flow, stick, bend, harden, to be ripped off and to take the unwanted hair with it. As an active force in hair removal, petro-products produce *and* entrench the hairless version of 'femininity' in both a material and conceptual sense. Materially, they afford the wax particular ways of working to remove 'unfeminine' hair, and from more and more parts of the body; conceptually, with the 'technological imperative', 'the increase in what *can* be done adds to the pressure of what *should* be done' (Widdows, 2018, p. 68; see also Jones, 2008) and 'femininity' becomes equated with smoothness. As in the Managing Director's explanations where social expectations and product developments are knitted together, a particular hairless version of 'femininity' is produced which is at once socially, culturally and materially animated, and thoroughly saturated with oil.

Maintaining 'femininity': The repetition of hair removal

A trip to the salon for a waxing appointment is far from a one-off. If one wishes to maintain an appropriately smooth 'feminine' appearance, one must return every four to six weeks and repeat the process. Indeed, as a customer tells me with a weary laugh as we

discuss her arm, leg and upper lip waxing regime, 'it's quite an ongoing process because the hairs grow back' (interview, March 2017). Much like the empty bottle of moisturiser with which I opened this article, the work to upkeep 'femininity' is constant, requiring an incessant stream of products (and creating an incessant stream of waste [Wang, 2011]). To sate (*and prompt*) this, oil has a seemingly endless supply, always available to manufacture more products.

The speed and ease with which the wax becomes waste show how it is taken for granted that more will always be available, that the next appointment can be booked, that legs will never be left hairy. On my guided tour of the wax manufacturing facility, the Managing Director explains that up until around 1980, used wax would be recycled by beauty therapists; it would be boiled up, filtered to remove the depilated hair, and then could be re-used (interview, October 2019). When I am next in the salon, I relay this information to the Beauty Therapist whilst she is waxing my legs and ask if she had heard about this:

She tells me that she had been told of something like that 'years ago at training'. At this point, as she waxes my thighs, I am visibly recoiling in disgust as I imagine the wax that has been used to depilate my beauty therapist's previous clients being used to remove hair from my legs, my bikini line, my upper lip! Noticing my reaction, she concurs: 'I know it's disgusting isn't it! A disgusting thought!' We laugh about the idea of filtering the hair out of the wax and how this could have been part of her job:

Beauty Therapist: 'Can you imagine that! Imagine what you'd end up with! A mass of sticky hair at the end!'

At this point in the appointment-interview, we are now laughing so hard that she has to take a break from the treatment to catch herself, so outlandish now is the idea of doing this. (Fieldnotes and interview, October 2019)

The disgust and hilarity provoked at the thought of reusing wax indicate that this is now so far removed from the reality of using and disposing that it is hard to even imagine. As the Managing Director succinctly tells me, nowadays 'people would not even countenance having somebody else's hair in something that they use'. In the salon, our mix of laughter and squeamishness show that this is something we can unquestioningly avoid (Hawkins, 2001). The seemingly inexhaustible supply of oil and its versatility, deeply tied in with economic imperatives to keep creating new uses and so markets for it (Herzig, 2015, p. 144; Mah, 2022, pp. 29–32), are important factors in making these taken-for-granted practices of disposing and replacing possible: the products can be discarded as more can seemingly be easily manufactured (and so the need to re-use is evaded).

Oil enables or, rather, animates this constant cycle of consumption–disposal–consumption as it provides an interminable supply of ever-new and ever-available products (see Figure 2) (in addition to fuelling the journeys that the products and ingredients take across the city and the world in diesel-powered vans, lorries and ships). The vibrant qualities of oil and its infinite uses (and profit margins) mean that the never-ending making and maintaining of 'feminine' bodies can continue apace.



Figure 2. Ever-available.

Photo: Louise Rondel, October 2019.

Conclusion

In the interviews with salon customers, visible body hair is described as ‘horrible’, ‘gross’ and ‘disgusting’. Getting my eyebrows waxed, a Beauty Therapist asks me in an aghast whisper if I want my upper lip waxed as well because ‘there are long hairs there, you can see them’ (fieldnotes, November 2017). Although it appears that norms around depilation might be shifting amongst younger generations, nonetheless research participants tell me that they want to remove hair in order to be able to wear ‘a feminine frock’ or to feel comfortable and confident to show their legs in the summer (me too, I am always glad of having had my legs waxed when the sun comes out). One interviewee expresses her belief that others might be ‘horrified by women’s body hair’ (interviews, December 2016–June 2017). Reflecting this, the Beauty Therapists tell me that depilatory waxing is one of the, if not *the*, most popular services that they offer. Hair-free legs, arms, underarms, feet, bikini lines, anuses, labia, stomachs, backs, chins, upper lips, etc. are seemingly still a ubiquitous part of a ‘feminine’ appearance. I have argued that the sedimentation and entrenchment of this norm cannot only be attributed to socio-cultural factors. This article has shown how petro-products play a lively and deeply embedded role in making smooth ‘feminine’ bodies.

Contingent upon wax, disposable plastic razors (Herzig, 2015, pp. 127–128) or depilatory creams and the moisturisers and soothing creams that are applied after the treatment as well as the containers in which these products are almost invariably packaged (Rondel, Forthcoming), oil seeps into the very ways in which these products work to make smooth ‘feminine’ bodies. Oil renders these goods disposable and replaceable as more can always be made; and it fuels their journey to the salon. Elements which are all crucial in the ‘ongoing process’ of hair removal and so in the making and maintaining of this particular version of ‘femininity’. This equally applies to the bottle of moisturiser on my dressing table, the mascara and lipstick in my make-up bag, the hair conditioning mask in my bathroom cabinet: all constituted by petroleum and each playing a role in the production of a ‘feminine’ appearance to be repeated daily, weekly, monthly. This article thus adds to the work which has explored ‘feminising’ beauty practices. Following Herzig’s instruction to think about not only *why* but *how* ‘feminine’ bodies get made in the salon, I bring some empirical detail to her insights on the role of oil in depilatory practices. The article also contributes to the literature which has examined the omnipresence and activity of oil in social life by exploring the under-noticed and yet still ubiquitous ways in which oil permeates and makes bodies in both a material and socio-cultural sense.

What is more, the unrelenting way in which petro-products are quietly active in both the material expression and socio-cultural concepts of ‘femininity’ reveals the challenges facing calls to reduce oil consumption. Towards the end of the research project, I attended a talk by local clean-air campaigners demanding action on vehicular-produced air pollution and highlighting the disproportionate ways black and brown and lower-income people are impacted. This echoes national and global campaigns around environmental and social justice and the focus on divesting from oil extraction and consumption. Whilst listening, I reflected on the trajectory of a pot of wax. With a sinking feeling, I thought about the carbon-based materials and fossil fuels on which the depilatory wax is contingent, what is emitted during their extraction, production, consumption and disposal, the wax’s packaging, its taken-for-granted disposability and replaceability, the amount of miles it has covered in different vehicles. All to result in a 45-minute salon appointment which must be repeated every five weeks. Underlining the extent to which our lives and bodies are entangled with petroleum in quiet and under-noticed ways, ‘femininising’ hair removal practices are telling of the slick of oil seeping through every thing and every body. In its vibrancy, oil is ‘lively’ but ‘deadly’, making worlds but also harming and eventually destroying them. The ‘grossness’ of visible body hair, the necessity of its removal in order to wear certain clothes and to feel and look ‘feminine’, the anxiety around the social punishment if one does not have ‘smooth’ skin, worries that one will be judged, that one will provoke horror in others attest to the deeply embedded, intimate and mundane ways in which petroleum makes us. By focusing on the mundane ways in which petro-products seep into ‘feminine’ bodies to make and maintain them, oil is shown as a material whose vibrancy is impossible to quell. In an unending feedback loop with a suite of environmental, bodily and social harms, oil vibrates and buzzes across the social world in very ordinary ways, not only permeating but producing this world.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that ‘femininity’ and ‘feminine’ bodies are not the only expression of gender worked upon in the salon and produced through hair removal and other beauty practices. For example, particular versions of ‘masculinity’ (Terry & Braun, 2016) are also made there, as are gendered expressions which are outside of the normative feminine–masculine binary (Corp, 2021; Ridley, 2022).
2. Thank you to Alex Rhys-Taylor for reminding me of the ‘deadliness’ of materials even as they are vibrant.
3. Of course, this supply is finite. Yet, given the rate at which oil is supplied and consumed, it may seem as if it is endless.
4. Research in the UK and the US has demonstrated that it is predominantly those who identify as women who engage in beauty practices (see Berkowitz, 2017; Elsesser, 2019). Additionally, this research has shown that most women modify their bodies in some way through beauty work (see Herzig, 2015; Mintel, 2017).
5. Even as hair removal practices are on the wane, a plethora of other beauty, personal care and make-up products which equally make ‘femininity’ contain oil and its by-products (Defino, 2024).
6. Gel wax is most commonly used for areas of the body with large surface areas (legs or arms) or the face and is removed using a fabric or paper strip. Hot wax does not require a strip to be removed and is most commonly used for intimate waxing.
7. At this point, it becomes difficult to follow the ingredients any further. Companies are not responsive to my requests for visits and in March 2020, the UK, like much of the world, goes into lockdown.
8. Amongst other oils, petroleum-based products are added to make waxes smell pleasant, ‘improv[ing] their scent’ (personal correspondence with Quality Assurance Manager, November 2019). Floral fragrances are popular and, during my visit to the wax-blending factory, a summer cocktail-inspired range was being developed (fieldnotes, October 2019).

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