

“I NEVER REALISED THEY WERE  
**SO DIFFERENT**”

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UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF  
THE LABIA LIBRARY



OCTOBER 2018 ISSUE 2

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A Women's Health Victoria Knowledge Paper



# ABSTRACT

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The Labia Library is an online resource developed by Women's Health Victoria (WHV) in response to increasing demand for female genital cosmetic surgery, also known as labiaplasty. In order to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the resource in improving women's health literacy, WHV undertook a thematic analysis of 2979 free text responses to a user survey that was active on the site between 2013 and 2015. The vast majority of survey respondents indicated a positive perception of the resource, often experiencing a significant reduction in anxiety, and reassurance of normality associated with genital appearance.

## ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH VICTORIA

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is a statewide women's health promotion, advocacy and support service. We work collaboratively with women, health professionals, policy makers and community organisations to influence systems, policies and services to be more gender equitable to support better outcomes for women.

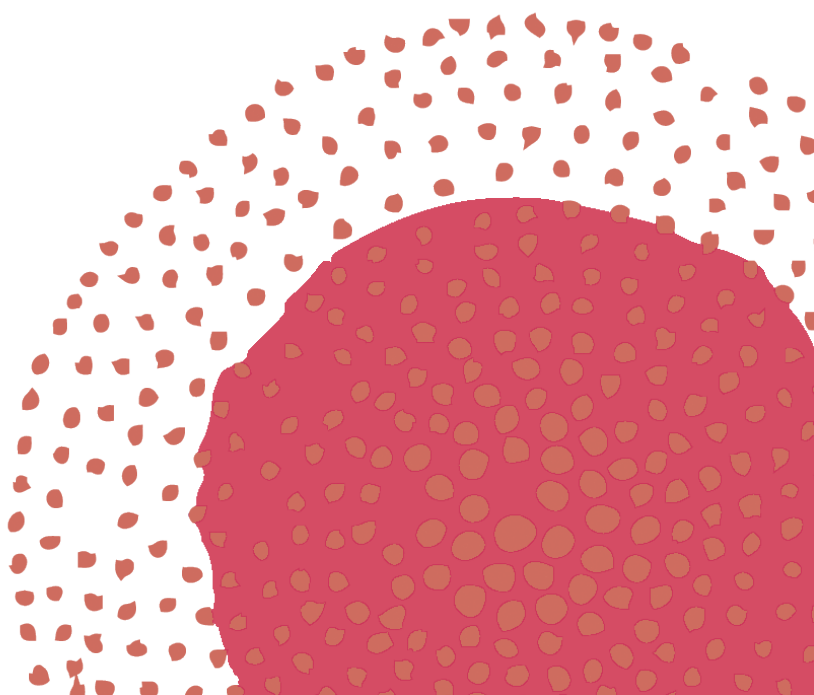
As a statewide body, WHV works with the nine regional and two statewide services that make up the Victorian Women's Health Program. WHV is also a member of Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women's health and the prevention of violence against women.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## ABOUT THE LABIA LIBRARY

Female genital cosmetic surgery was first described in 1976, and the first operations were undertaken in the mid-1980s. The term 'designer vagina' emerged in the popular vernacular to describe these procedures in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Women's Health Victoria (WHV), 2013, p. 2).

In Australia and internationally, researchers have documented a significant and accelerating increase in female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) since the early 2000s.

Research published by Women's Health Victoria (WHV) in 2013 found that the desire to be 'normal' was consistently reported by women as a reason for seeking cosmetic genital surgery. While their concerns about appearing abnormal suggested there was consensus on what constitutes normal genital appearance, these women were also unclear about what normal genitals actually look like (WHV, 2013, p 3).

Recognising that women are increasingly altering their genitalia through cosmetic surgery, WHV developed the Labia Library ([www.labialibrary.org.au](http://www.labialibrary.org.au)), a unique online resource that supports positive body image by informing women about the natural diversity in normal female genital appearance.

The Labia Library houses a gallery of 40 unaltered photographs of female genitalia. This provides viewers with the opportunity to learn about the diversity of normal female genitalia and make visual comparisons, in a safe and private way. The site also contains information about anatomy, female genital cosmetic surgery, hair removal, media literacy and pornography.

Created in 2013 with support from the Victorian Women's Trust, the Labia Library

has been so successful that, as of September 2018, it has had nearly 6 million unique visitors from around the world, with an average of 3,000-5,000 people visiting the Labia Library every day.

In 2015, the Labia Library won the Victorian Public Healthcare Gold Award for Excellence in Women's Health. It provides a compelling example of how a simple and relatively inexpensive online public health initiative can make a big impact.

*"I think it's great to show the differences. I am 38 and I have thought for a long time that I need labia surgery, it's a relief to see so many like me. Thank you for taking my worst insecurity and making me feel normal."*

## ABOUT THE SURVEY ANALYSIS

In order to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the resource in improving women's health literacy, a survey with a free text option was promoted on the Labia Library home page from September 2013 to July 2015.

In this Knowledge Paper, we present the findings from the Labia Library survey and investigate the effectiveness of the website in increasing awareness of genital diversity.

A thematic analysis of the 2979 individual responses to the free text option of the survey yielded significant information about the ways in which Labia Library users experienced the website.

Overall, the vast majority of survey respondents indicated a positive perception of the resource, often experiencing a significant reduction in anxiety and reassurance of normality associated with genital appearance.

# INTRODUCTION

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International studies have demonstrated increasing demand for female genital cosmetic surgery (Braun 2010 p. 1394). Within Australia, Medicare claims for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty grew from 640 cases per annum to 1,565 cases per annum in the years 2000 to 2011 (WHV, 2013, p. 8). Similar trends in growth are reported in the US and the UK (Braun 2010 p. 1394). However, publicly funded and audited practices of FGCS represent medically indicated cases only (WHV 2013 p. 8). Reported figures are therefore 'conservative' given that the majority of FGCS procedures are performed in private practice (McDougall 2013 p. 775). According to Braun (2010 p. 1394), there is a lack of reliable data with regard to the frequency or outcome of FGCS.

The increased demand for FGCS is attributed to heightened concerns about genital appearance. Data indicate almost all surveyed Australian GPs have encountered patient queries regarding genital normality (Simonis, Manocha & Ong 2016 p. 2). Norms associated with female genital appearance have emerged from the depiction of idealised genitalia within pornography (McDougall, 2013, p. 775), changes in fashion and depilatory (hair removal) practices (Tiefer 2008 p. 467), as well as medical and cosmetic marketing. It has been suggested that the increased demand for FGCS is cosmetically, rather than medically, motivated (WHV 2013 p. 8).

For women, idealised genitalia norms are characterised by a 'clean slit' (Davis 2002 p. 9), that is, a symmetrical genital appearance with invisible labia minora (Davis 2002 p. 13; McDougall 2013 p. 776). Censorship laws within Australia have also contributed to this standard.

According to the Australian Classification Board guidelines, softcore pornography must be restricted to "discreet genital detail" but no "genital emphasis" (Jones & Nurka 2015 p. 64), thereby prohibiting representations of protruding labia minora (McNamara 2013 p. 778).

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***"The increased demand for FGCS is attributed to heightened concerns about genital appearance."***

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Self-objectification refers to the way women and girls are acculturated to internalise a third-person view of their bodies as the main way to think about themselves (Johnson 2014). In this way, women may understand and relate to themselves as 'objects' and regard their body and appearance based on how they perceive that they appear to others. Those engaging in self-objectification preference the visual appearance of their body over the lived experience of capacity and feeling of the body (Aubrey 2006 p. 367). Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012 p. 869) argue that 'women and girls are expected to learn what the prevailing beauty ideals are from the media and to internalise these standards'. Culturally constructed ideals concerning the appearance of genitals are especially pertinent to the performance of gender and femininity.



# CREATING THE LABIA LIBRARY

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In response to the documented increase in demand for female genital cosmetic surgery, in 2013 Women's Health Victoria developed an online health literacy resource, the Labia Library ([www.labialibrary.org.au](http://www.labialibrary.org.au)) with funding from the Victorian Women's Trust. The Labia Library sought to inform young women in particular about natural genital diversity in order to inform and improve positive body image.

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***"The centrepiece of the Labia Library is 40 unaltered close-up photographs of unmodified female genitalia."***

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Partly due to an initial focus on young women, the Labia Library was designed to be accessible and welcoming. The Labia Library provides a few pages of information about the anatomy and appearance of female genitalia and contextualising health and wellbeing information.

One section of the website is titled 'everything you need to know about your labia' and addresses topics of labial diversity, hair removal, media images and female genital cosmetic surgery. It addresses common concerns around issues like labia size and shape and provides advice to women who are worried about how their vulva looks. It also includes information about genital cosmetic surgery and equips women with media literacy around images they see in magazines and pornography.

However, the centrepiece of the Labia Library is 40 unaltered close-up photographs of unmodified female genitalia. The photo gallery provides viewers with a unique opportunity to view a diverse range of genitalia from the privacy of their own home computer or phone. The website

was developed by WHV with input from young women and health professionals including GPs, gynecologists and psychosexual counsellors. The photographs are reproduced with kind permission from Show Off Books and were originally found in *I'll Show You Mine* (Photographer: Katie Huisman, 2011).

It is worth noting that in order to increase visibility of the labia the women photographed had their pubic hair removed more often than not. It is important to consider if this has the unintended consequence of normalising the removal of public hair – a related but separate trend in female genital norms.



*Illustration from the Labia Library, WHV.*

# FINDINGS FROM THE USER SURVEY

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In order to understand users' experience of the Labia Library, a short, optional survey was included on the website homepage from September 2013 to July 2015. More recent website analytics (as at 13 August 2018) reveal that the Labia Library has had close to 6 million unique users and 17.2 million page views.

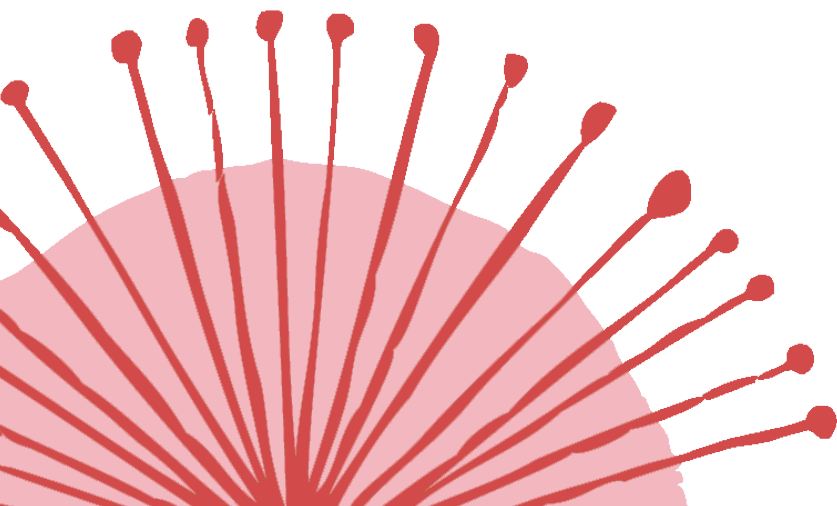
At the time of the survey, Labia Library users were predominantly based in the United States, Australia, the UK and Canada. While less prevalent, other countries of use included Germany, India, Norway, Taiwan, the Netherlands, and South Africa, demonstrating the international reach of the Labia Library.

In this Knowledge Paper, we present the findings from the Labia Library survey and investigate the effectiveness of the website in increasing awareness of genital diversity. The survey results represent a significant development in further understanding the emerging issue of FGCS and genital aesthetic norms. Thus far, large scale research discussing either broad perspectives on genital aesthetic norms, or the success of public health initiatives in addressing understandings of normal genital diversity, has been relatively limited.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly noted a positive experience using The Labia Library; with increased feelings of normality of appearance frequently mentioned. The survey results indicate the importance of public health initiatives in combating contemporary perceptions of idealised genitalia, promoted as normative by the mainstream media.

Platforms which provide alternative representations of the body (in the case of the Labia Library, unaltered photographs) can become powerful counterweights to dominant norms and discourses. This is evidenced through the reach and usage of the Labia Library. Our research contributes to broader sociological and feminist understandings of the body as culturally constructed and produced in accordance with social scripts about gender, sexuality and appearance.

The Labia Library enables current genital norms to be critically discussed and contested.



# GENITAL APPEARANCE NORMS

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As female genitals are usually concealed, there are limited opportunities for visual comparison. As a result, visual representations within popular media play a significant role in the communication of genital appearance norms (McDougall 2013 pp. 776-777). This makes texts and media that do depict genitalia, such as pornography, relatively influential in the construction of 'normality'. Medical representations of female genitalia typically encompass stylised line drawings (McDougall 2013 p. 776). Therefore, pornography and vulval art become the primary sites which display clear representations of female genitalia (McDougall 2013 p. 776).

Primary sites at which genital aesthetic norms are displayed or described include:

- **The mainstream media**, including in pictorial indications within women's magazines (Bramwell 2002 p. 190);
- **Pornography** (Braun 2009 p. 242; Davis 2002 p. 11; Jeffreys 2005 p. 83; Kapsalis 1997 p. 82; McNamara 2006 p. 7; Moran & Lee 2013 p. 374);
- **Artistic representation** (Kapsalis 1997 p. 82; Zwang 2011 p. 83);
- **Medical texts** (Kapsalis 1997 p. 82); and
- **Surgical advertisements** (Ashong & Batta 2012 p. 154; Davis 2002 p. 12; Liao, Taghinejadi & Creighton 2012 p. 1).

The relative lack of available realistic images of female genitalia for comparison has been suggested by theorists as a potential reason for women's increasing demand for FGCS. Jeffreys (2005 p. 83) considers 'one reason that heterosexual women may feel their genitals require surgery is that they do not

know what other women's genitals look like... Women who do see other women's genitals in pornography are therefore unable to make realistic comparison with their own'.

Within current literature, the idealised aesthetic standard to which women compare their genitalia has been identified as a hairless, 'clean slit, a minimalist ideal for women's genitals where the labia are symmetrical and do not protrude' (McDougall 2013 p. 776). According to Koning, Zeijlmans, Bouman & van der Lei (2009 p. 69), the majority of 'commercial' photographic representations available within the public sphere have been digitally altered to resemble genitalia with small or invisible, symmetrical labia minora.

*"Awesome to see other women's genitals, usually only see pornography images which are often not at all representative of what women really look like. I feel reassured that I am healthy and normal and am pleased to see wide variation in the way that vulvas look. Wonderful website."*



The potential for modified images within the media to impact upon women's perception of genitalia has been further asserted by Sharp, Tiggemann and Mattiske's (2016 p. 7) research which found women who had previously undergone labiaplasty to have had greater exposure to media images than a comparison group of women who had not undergone labiaplasty.

As a result, Sharp et al. (2016, p. 7) assert that 'the media is a powerful motivator and source of information about genital appearance and a strong influence on women's decisions to undergo labiaplasty'. However, it is worth noting that this study did not investigate whether a greater exposure to media images of female genitalia by the group of women having undergone labiaplasty was due to pre-existing concern about labial appearance. Nevertheless, the consumption and usage of media images depicting female genitalia is salient in women's construction of internalised genital appearance norms.

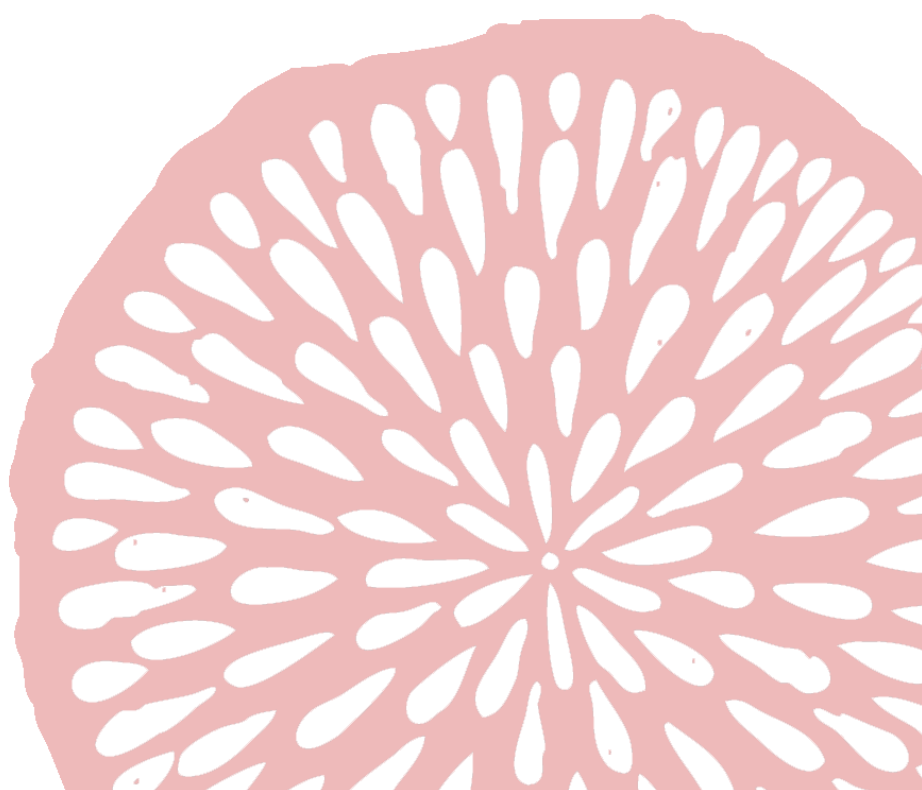
However, while current literature keenly identifies the increased proliferation of images for comparison within contemporary society (Schick et al. 2010 p. 396), predominantly positioning such images as contributing to negative perceptions of 'natural' female genitalia (Schick et al. 2011 p. 79), the potential for explicit images of unedited female genitalia to positively counteract the saturation of modified representations is, largely, yet to be considered.

Media literacy interventions can help to prevent 'internalisation and social comparison processes' that are associated with lowered body satisfaction (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac & Posavac 2005 p. 75). For example, research on the effects of media images finds that women exposed to 'heavy' models experience minimal 'body image disturbance' when compared with women who have been exposed to images of 'thin' models (Posavac & Posavac 2001 p. 325).

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***“The media is a powerful motivator and source of information about genital appearance and a strong influence on women's decisions to undergo labiaplasty.”***

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# METHODOLOGY

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In order to gain insight into the ways in which users experienced and utilised the Labia Library, an optional user survey was developed. The survey was located on the homepage of the Labia Library, and contained three questions with multiple choice responses. An open text option was also included in the survey which enabled respondents to further comment on their perceptions of the Labia Library. The inclusion of the open text option provided a qualitative component to the survey. The survey structure was designed to enable broad investigation into usage of the Labia Library while also allowing individualised responses in the open text option. Undertaking the survey was optional and anonymous; website users self-selected survey participation.

For the period September 2013 to July 2015, a total of 9559 survey responses were received; of these, 2879 respondents (approximately 30 per cent) completed the open text option. Basic statistical analysis was undertaken of the multiple choice questions. Thematic analysis was utilised in the interpretation of the open text responses. Responses were coded on the basis of emergent themes, ideas and patterns of terminology. The selection of thematic analysis as a mode of investigation allowed for the interpretation of a large data set with diverse responses.

Guided by the data, three primary categories were created to provide an overview of the responses: positive feedback, constructive feedback, and negative feedback. Thematic subsets were developed and associated responses recorded, detailing the key ideas within these broad categories. Responses often contained multiple themes and were thus recorded in accordance with all emergent themes. The analysis also included categorisation of 'frequently emerging themes'. In this way, an individual response may be regarded as containing both unequivocally positive feedback and constructive feedback containing recommendations for the Labia Library. A number of responses (n=323) were excluded from the analysis based on irrelevance, ambiguity, inappropriateness, or non-response.

An overwhelming number of the open text responses were categorised to be positive, with a total of 2175 texts out of the total 2879 open text comments received (or 75%) containing positive feedback. The vast majority of these responses contained expressions of thanks which were not considered within the detailing of key themes given limited applicability.

A significant proportion of survey responses (n=498) contained constructive feedback which provided suggestions and recommendations for improvement of the Labia Library. Responses containing constructive feedback often contained a number of suggestions and were thus recorded within numerous subcategories. Relatively few (n=25) responses emerged as solely negative feedback.



While it is not possible to determine the specific demographic characteristics of the survey respondents, data for overall website users was obtained via Google Analytics and may provide an indication of user and respondent characteristics. During the period of survey analysis, there were a total of 1,885,902 individual website sessions resulting in 5,077,605 page views. Predominantly, Labia Library users were based in the United States (41.10%), followed by: Australia (14.34%); the United Kingdom (9.72%); and Canada (4.86%). While less prevalent, other countries of use included Germany (3.46%), India (3.27%), Norway (1.71%), Taiwan (1.28%), the Netherlands (1.21%) and South Africa (1.20%).

Limitations exist in the initial survey design which failed to gather demographic data. However, the data are significant given the scale and reach of the website. Research has demonstrated the potential for bias in web-based survey responses (Bethlehem 2010 p. 162). This bias cannot be precluded from our data. However, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, the anonymity provided by web-surveys (Sills & Song 2002 p. 29) was considered important for ensuring respondent openness and comfort. The location of the survey on the Labia Library's home page ensured all website visitors were provided with the opportunity to evaluate the website and provide feedback.



*“Great work! Wow I had no idea and you presented the information in a positive and safe manner. I thought I would be uncomfortable viewing your website but I wasn’t.”*

*“Thank you!! I want to cry because I am so relieved. I felt like I had no clue if I looked normal and was worried and this helped put things in perspective for me and gave me more appreciation for my body. I am very glad to have found this.”*



# KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS

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## 1. NORMALISING FEMALE GENITAL APPEARANCE

Increased perception of genital normality emerged as a key experience of engagement with the Labia Library throughout the survey responses. A total of 140 open text responses reflected this theme. It was frequently noted by users that the potential for genital comparison enabled by the Labia Library provided users with reassurance that their own genital appearance was 'normal'.

Self-perception of body normality has previously been identified as significant in analyses of bodily modification behaviours, such as cosmetic surgery. Indeed, cosmetic surgery is conceptualised as a means by which the body may be produced in accordance with cultural standards of 'normality'. Davis (2003 p. 98) found women undergoing breast augmentation regarded the procedure as a means of achieving a 'normal', rather than a particularly beautified, standard of appearance. The potential for cosmetic surgery to reconstruct the body to a perceived state of normality evidently extends to the practice of FGCS, with Sharp and Tiggemann (2015 p. 71) noting of women who have undergone labiaplasty: 'it appeared that these women were attempting to achieve a "normal" genital appearance though surgery'.



The following extracts, selected from survey responses, illustrate the potential for engagement with the Labia Library to enhance conceptualisations of genital normality:

- *I have been wondering for years if I am normal.*
- *This is a good resource for making me feel like my vulva is normal.*
- *I loved realising my parts weren't disfigured!*
- *Thanks for putting this together, it's nice to know that I'm not abnormal.*
- *I feel much better knowing I'm "normal". Thanks!*
- *I had been thinking about surgery because I thought I didn't look "normal" but now I feel much better about how I look and don't think surgery is necessary for me.*

The significance of perceptions of normality is also highlighted by literature which examines the relationship between FGCS and understandings of 'normal' genital appearance. According to Bramwell, Morland and Garden (2007 p. 1495), women who had undergone labiaplasty expressed some uncertainty as to the characteristics of 'normal' genital appearance.

Despite this uncertainty, the women considered their own pre-surgical genital appearance to be 'abnormal', suggesting that the presence of discussion regarding abnormality served to highlight the existence of perceived standards of normality (Bramwell et al. 2007 p. 1495).

## 2. INCREASED AWARENESS OF NATURAL DIVERSITY

Survey respondents were asked to rate how much usage of the library had contributed to an increase in their understanding of normal genital appearance and genital diversity. Respondents were provided with a four point scale for each option: 'not at all'; 'a little'; 'somewhat'; and 'a lot'.

39.6% of users who completed the survey reported that the Labia Library increased their understanding of normal genital appearance by 'a lot'; a further 29.8% of respondents stated that the Labia Library 'somewhat' increased their perception of normal genital appearance.

Engagement with the Labia Library was particularly effective in increasing awareness of genital diversity, with 53.9% of respondents reporting that it increased their knowledge about the differences in genitalia 'a lot'; only 8.9% of respondents stated that the information provided did not increase their knowledge of genital diversity.

## 3. REDUCED ANXIETY AND INCREASED CONFIDENCE

Related to the theme of (ab)normality, a notable number of survey respondents expressed experiencing a reduction in anxiety. Indeed, a total of 177 respondents reported lessened anxiety in relation to their genital appearance; included in this category were responses which indicated a reduction in self-consciousness and/or an increase in confidence with regard to genital appearance. Exemplifying this theme were the following quotes from respondents:

- *Thank you for clearing up a life-long insecurity.*
- *Great to actually see the huge variety... thanks for making me much more comfortable with mine.*
- *Increased my self-confidence about my own appearance.*
- *This is the most useful and confidence restoring resource - just wow!*

The capacity for the Labia Library to increase awareness of genital diversity and normality reflects a lack of realistic representations of female genitalia within contemporary society. Cultural representations of female genitalia, most commonly and clearly depicted in pornography, have been noted to typically portray genitalia representative of the 'clean slit' ideal (McDougall 2013 p. 776).

While Moran and Lee's (2013) research showed that women's perception of genitalia can be impacted by subsequent exposure to images of modified genitalia, the Labia Library survey results indicate that the converse is also possible; perceptions of normal genital appearance may be influenced by viewing images of, and information about, unmodified genitalia.

## 4. EDUCATIONAL CAPACITY OF THE LABIA LIBRARY

Current literature highlights the importance of increased awareness of diverse genital appearance (Zwang 2011 p. 85), yet there remain few interventions which seek to promote genital diversity. The survey data demonstrate the capacity of the Labia Library to serve as an educational resource.

Respondents appreciated the informative nature of the Labia Library, as demonstrated by the following statements:

- *I'm sure it will be a big help to many girls and it is so informative without being boring! Really good job!!  
Ps I am a 17 year old girl.*
- *This is a wonderful site for teaching girls about becoming a woman and what is normal and not normal.*
- *Keep up the great work educating and empowering young women.*
-

Additionally, some users noted that they had lacked information prior to viewing the Labia Library. Usage of the Labia Library increased these respondents' awareness of genital diversity (n=57).

- *I had no idea of the diversity (I'm a straight female). Thank you for the education.*
- *Fascinating. I had no idea they were so different. I mean noses are different, but labia are a huge assortment!*

## 5. NEGATIVE SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Previous research has demonstrated the potential for women's self-perceptions to be impacted by the representations of genitalia to which they are exposed (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 764). While the vast majority of survey respondents reported positive experiences of viewing the photo gallery, in a small number of cases respondents experienced negative self-perceptions due to perceived limitations in the diversity of genitalia represented.

A small portion of respondents (n=9) reported an increase in self-consciousness as a result of viewing the Labia Library photo gallery. Some respondents also expressed self-perceptions of abnormality subsequent to viewing the Labia Library's representations of genitalia. Self-perceptions of abnormality among women who perceived their genitalia not to be represented within the gallery may have been exacerbated by the stated aim of the Labia Library, which is to represent and celebrate genital diversity.

The following excerpts from survey respondents illustrate some women's negative experiences with the photo gallery:

- *Unfortunately the photos have just highlighted how different mine looks. Now to get the guts to see a surgeon.*
- *I was surprised how many women are hairless. I wonder if I am unusual not removing hair from my pubic area<sup>1</sup>.*
- *To be honest it's just reinforced how different I look and confirmed my decision to seek out surgery.*
- *My labia are much bigger than the ones shown...made me feel like my labia aren't "normal".*

It is apparent from respondents' comments that representations of diverse genitalia are significant in encouraging feelings of, predominantly, bodily normality, but also abnormality, among women.

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1. Of the 40 images in the photo gallery, 12 photographs have all pubic hair removed and 20 have discernibly modified and shaped pubic hair.



# KEY USER GROUPS

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## 1. HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS

Respondents recommended increasing public awareness of the Labia Library (n=31) and also suggested that targeted promotion for differing user groups may be beneficial. On a number of occasions, it was suggested that the Labia Library could, in the future, include specific information tailored for use by medical professionals or students. 47 respondents identified themselves as a current medical professional or student.

Recent research has revealed the high rate of women seeking information about genital normality from general practitioners. Simonis et al. (2016 p. 4) reported that almost all surveyed practitioners had been 'asked by patients regarding genital normality at some time'.

Braun (2010 p. 1402) has also identified the potential for healthcare professionals to convey to patients their own perspectives about genital 'normality', as influenced by social and cultural representations of female genitalia. According to Braun (2010 p. 1402), healthcare professionals may also lack adequate knowledge about the normal diversity of female genitalia.

Indeed, analysis of representations of female genitalia in medical texts demonstrate an 'absence of accurate and consistent descriptions of normal female genitalia in the standard textbooks used by medical students and trainees' (Andrikopoulou, Michala, Creighton & Liao 2013 p. 650); the usage of an 'almost identical line drawing' is reported to be prolific within the medical texts examined (Andrikopoulou et al. 2013 p. 650).

Given this limited knowledge, the Labia Library may play a critical role in assisting GPs and their patients to understand the normal diversity of female genitalia. The Labia Library is a recommended resource within the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery Resource for general practitioners and other health Professionals (The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners 2015 p. 9). Future development of the Labia Library will consider options for sections targeting different user groups, including medical practitioners.

*"A great resource especially for young women. I am a GP and see a lot of young women and this will be a great resource for those women who are concerned about the appearance of their genitals."*



## 2. SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Another suggested user group and site for promotion pertained to the utilisation of the Labia Library within high schools (n=68). Applicability to high school sexual education classes was frequently noted, for example:

- *Go teach this in high schools, it would help young women and boys.*
- *Great project, it would be fantastic to have this as part of sex education at school.*

The capacity of the media and medical advertising to impact upon women's perceptions of normal genitalia has previously been asserted (Braun 2010 p. 1401). Research has also demonstrated adolescents' perception of pornography as ubiquitous or 'everywhere' (Häggström-Nordin, Sandber, Hanson & Tyden 2006 p. 389).

This can be understood in terms of the pornification of culture wherein images, tropes and norms associated with pornography are represented in the mainstream. As a result adolescents may regard the norms presented in mainstream pornography as creating expectations for female bodily appearance (Mattebo, Lasson, Tyden, Olsson & Häggström-Nordin 2012 p. 46). Indeed, the trend toward pubic depilation and FGCS has been previously attributed to pornographic fashions (Jeffreys 2005 pp. 80-82).

Therefore, health literacy programs, such as the Labia Library, which may be delivered through sex education within schools, are of particular importance in equipping 'women with information before they become dissatisfied with their genitals' (WHV 2013 p. 21).

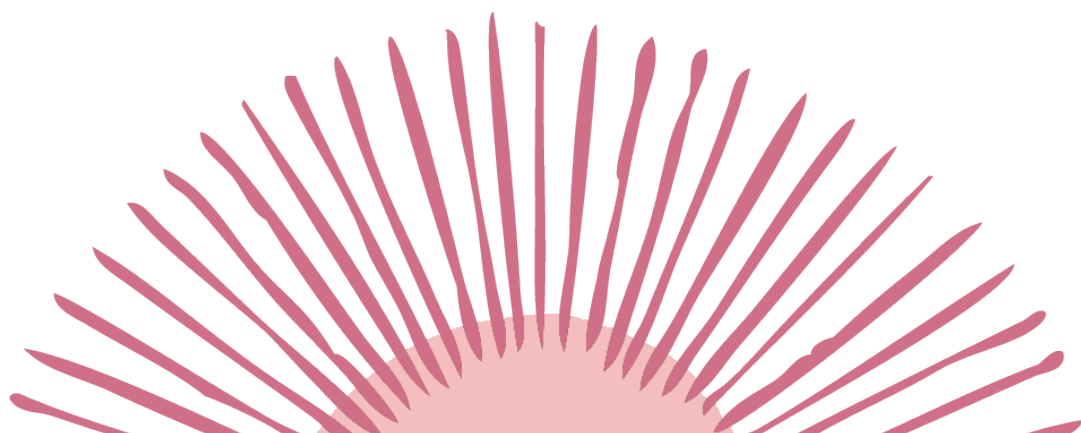
## 3. PARENTS

Finally, parents were identified as another key user group of the Labia Library. The utilisation of the Labia Library as a resource for parents to assist their children was noted by a number of respondents (n=78).

The following response highlights parental usage of the Labia Library:

*My daughter is going through puberty... we found this website and it totally put us at ease that these changes are normal even if she looks different from me or her siblings, that's okay. She's perfect just the way she is.*

The overall results from the survey data demonstrate the role of the Labia Library as an educational resource informing women of all ages, as well as health professionals, partners and parents, about diverse genital appearance. Respondents identified the potential for increased promotion and expansion of the Labia Library website in order to extend the website's reach.





# REPRESENTING DIVERSITY

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Throughout the academic literature, popular and medicalised representations of female genitalia have been identified as offering limited depictions of the normal variation in their shape and colour (McDougall 2013 p. 776; Moran & Lee 2013 p. 374; Zwang 2011 p. 82). The survey responses from Labia Library users provide further insight into the way in which contemporary representations of female genitalia are currently understood by a portion of the community.

Reflective of the literature, respondents frequently identified a lack of diversity within contemporary representations of female genitalia. The primary site of representation of female genitalia was identified as pornography, which respondents considered to unrealistically influence individuals' understandings of genital appearance (n=104). Following this, the media, and associated photoshopping practices, were considered as significant in influencing understandings of genital appearance (n=56).

The contemporary literature also identifies pornography and media as playing a significant role in determining norms of genital appearance (Moran & Lee 2013 p. 764), and the predominance of idealised genital representations within the mainstream media and pornography has been previously associated with increased demand for FGCS (Barbara, Facchin, Meschia & Vercellini 2015 pp. 915 - 916).

However, Jones and Nurka (2015 p. 64) have criticised the so-called 'porn thesis' which they consider to be 'based on the assumption that women consume pornography and internalise its norms, which then drives genital dissatisfaction and surgical modification of the labia'.

A key problem with the porn thesis as identified by Jones and Nurka (2015) is that the depictions of idealised genitalia within soft-core pornography are not representative of the wide variety of genital representations across different pornographic modes.

A very small number of Labia Library survey respondents (n=2) criticised the Labia Library's discussion of the role of pornography in influencing genital perceptions. For example, a respondent stated:

***The vulva is represented quite authentically in 'amateur' porn which dominates the porn market these days. Blaming professional porn (an increasingly reduced segment of the market) for some women's self-hate misunderstands the issue. Don't blame a convenient bogeyman - that is lazy popularist psychology; I'm an Australian male. I do not agree with the statement.***

Given a dearth of realistic genital representations within the public sphere, the Labia Library sought to provide women with an opportunity to view diverse and realistic female genitalia. Certainly, for many visitors to the site this goal has been amply achieved. However, there is a definite limit to how much diversity can be represented within 20 photographs given that there are well over 3 billion women and girls in the world today, each with their own unique labia. Work to increase the number of photographs, with a focus on representing an inclusive diversity of labia, is currently underway.



# CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

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As demonstrated through the survey responses, the Labia Library is a significant educational resource which promotes awareness of genital diversity. Overwhelmingly, respondents reported a positive experience of using the Labia Library. The capacity of the Labia Library to foster feelings of normality, provide information, lessen anxiety and increase self-confidence was highlighted by survey respondents. Despite having been designed with young women in mind initially, the Labia Library has proven to have a much wider reach and impact:

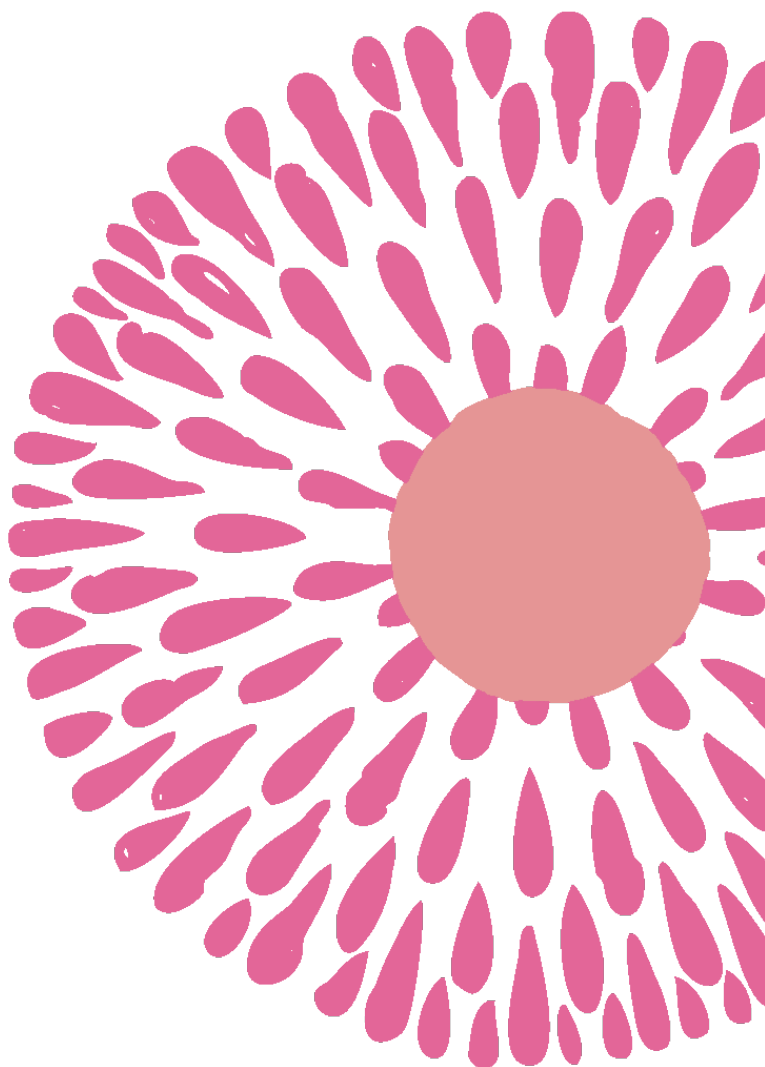
*I'm 52 and having questions answered that I've been too embarrassed to ask or realise that other women are feeling this way.*

The most significant recommendation from Labia Library users pertained to the expansion of the photo gallery (n=304). Of these, the most commonly occurring recommendations were to: increase the quantity of images (n=82); expand the diversity of depicted genitalia (n=48); include more images of genitalia with pubic hair (n=38); and include genital representations which are ethnically diverse and/or of various skin tones (n=25). Less frequently noted, but of relevance to potential expansion of the photo gallery, were suggestions to include depictions of genitalia from women of: diverse body weights (n=8); a variety of ages (n=19); and post-childbirth (n=14).

Based on the feedback received, and in order to further improve the effectiveness and reach of the Labia Library, Women's Health Victoria has begun reviewing and updating the website text and expanding the photo gallery, as well as exploring opportunities to add tailored content for specific user groups and increase active promotion.

Women's access to high quality sexual and reproductive health information supports their own health and wellbeing, their ability to have pleasurable and respectful intimate relationships, and is a key determinant for gender equality.

A deceptively simple intervention, the Labia Library has demonstrated the ongoing demand for and value of accessible and candid health literacy and positive body image resources for women and girls. Women's Health Victoria looks forward to the updating and expanding the Labia Library to include additional information about women's health and body image concerns: thereby ensuring that the Labia Library continues to improve women's health literacy and foster positive body perceptions.



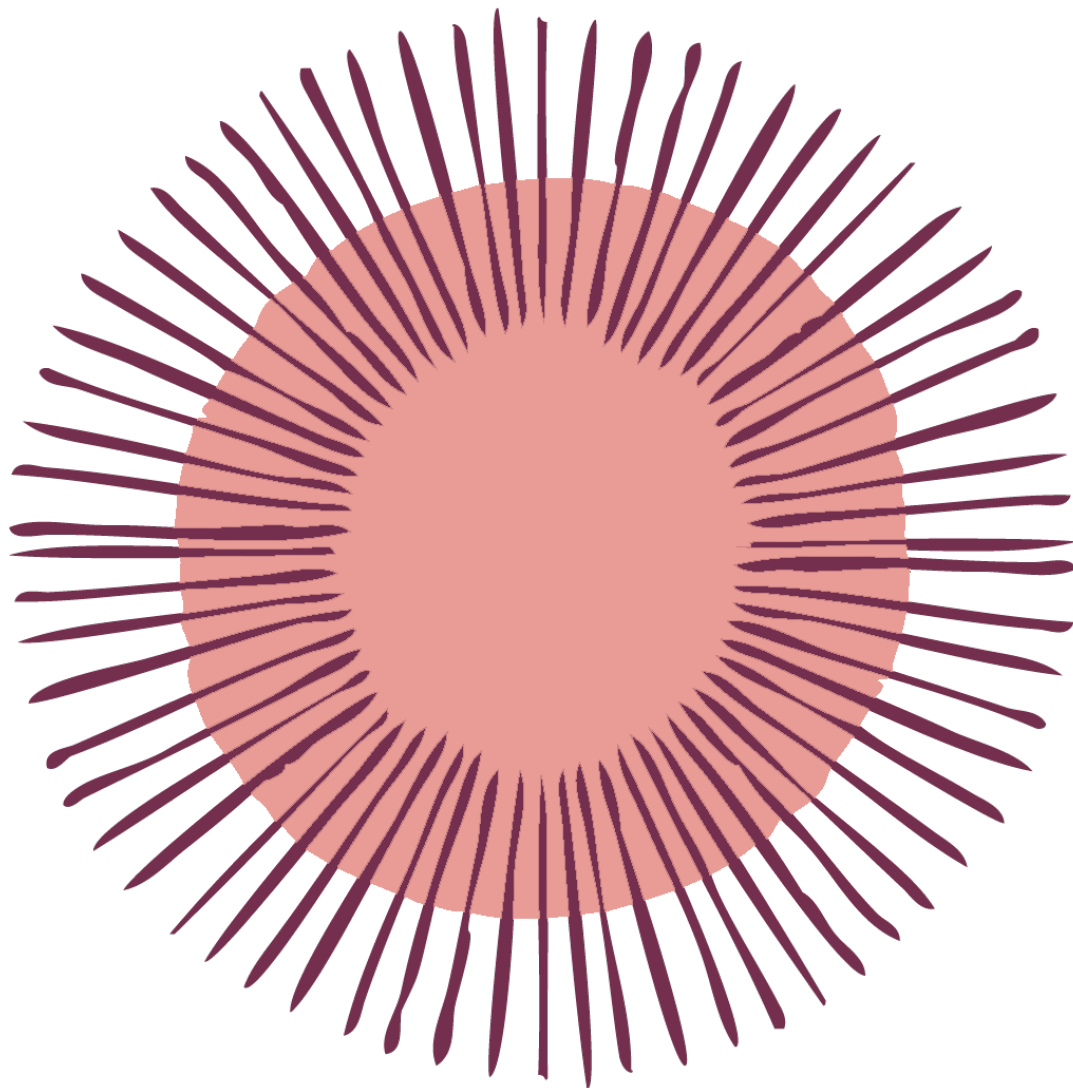
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## **'I NEVER REALISED THEY WERE SO DIFFERENT': UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE LABIA LIBRARY**

**Women's Health Knowledge Paper No. 2**

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Women's Health Victoria acknowledges and pays our respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.