

Educating Women about Normal Female Genital Appearance: The Effectiveness of Two Brief Interventions

Gemma Sharp, Marika Tiggemann

School of Psychology, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

Correspondence to Gemma Sharp on e: gemma.sharp@flinders.edu.au, p: +61 8 8201 2996



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Introduction

There has been a large increase in the demand for labial reduction surgery or labiaplasty over the last decade¹ (Figure 1). Labiaplasty is commonly performed for aesthetic reasons², more specifically, patients desire a smooth vulvar surface with 'tucked in' labia minora. In general, women are not aware of the great diversity in normal female genital appearance and believe that the 'tucked in' look shown in the media is the norm³. The current study aimed to educate women from the general Australian community about the large variation in normal female genital appearance in order to improve their knowledge and also their attitudes towards their own genital appearance.

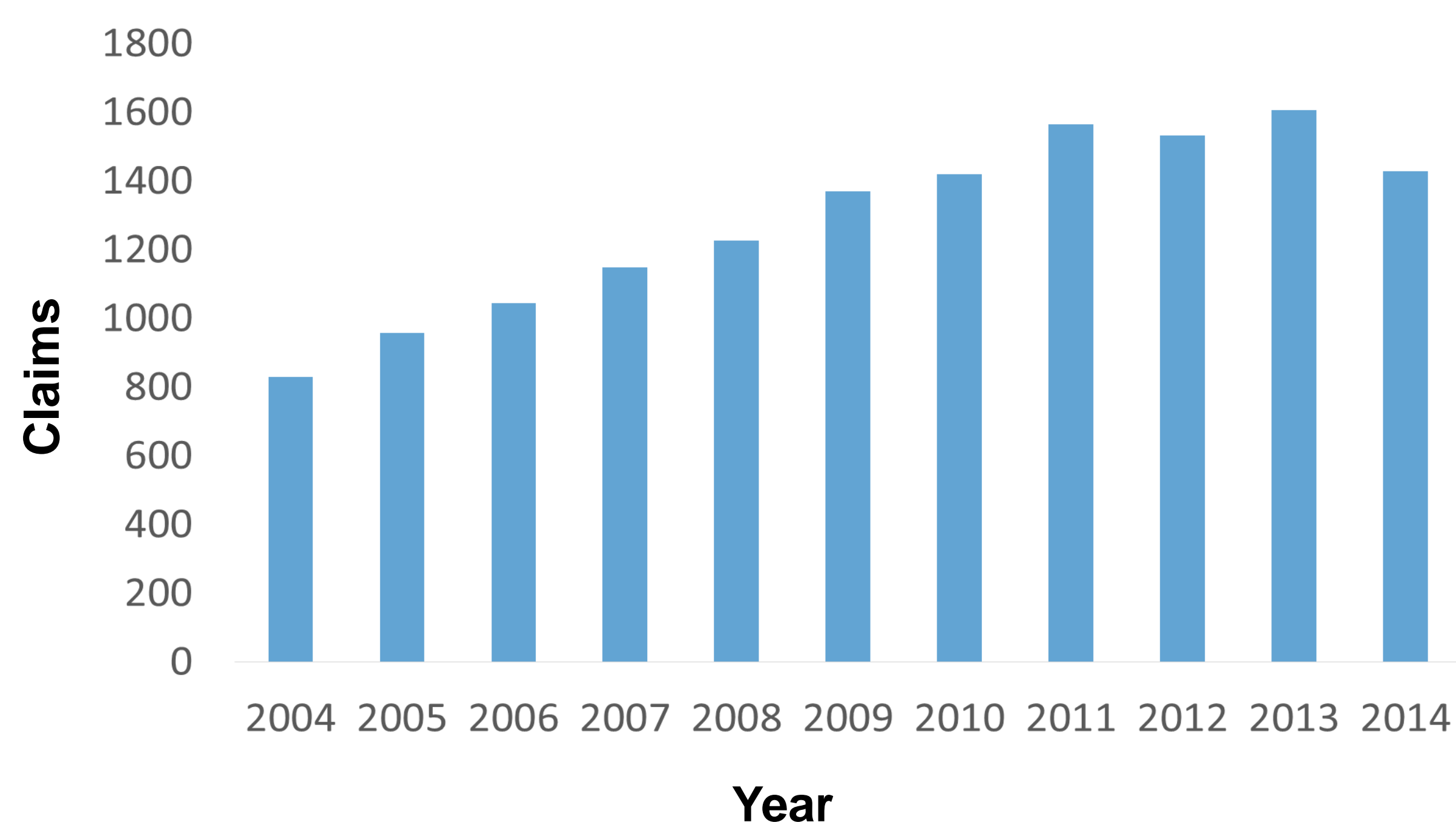


Figure 1. Number of Medicare claims for vulvoplasty and labiaplasty (Medicare claim number 35533) between January 2004 and December 2014.

Source: Australian Government Department of Human Services¹.

Methods

Two freely available online resources were employed as educational interventions. The first intervention involved viewing a photographic array of normal female genitals. These genital images were used with permission from the Women's Health Victoria Labia Library website⁴. The second intervention was a short video which explained the digital removal of protruding labial tissue in soft-core pornography images in relation to Australian media classification guidelines for nudity (Figure 2). The video was used with permission from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation⁵. A sample of 136 Australian women aged 18 to 49 years ($M = 21.0$, $SD = 5.9$) was randomly assigned to view the photographs, video, both the photographs and video, or neither.

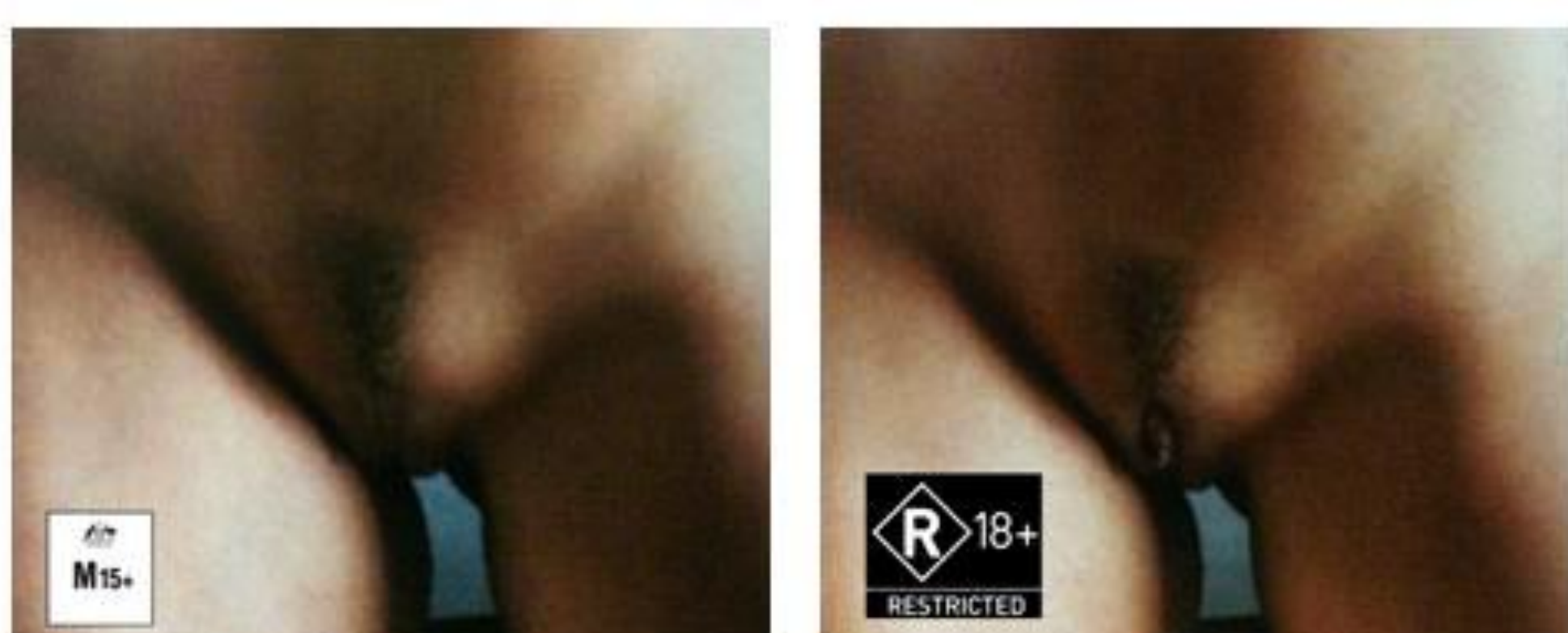


Figure 2. The digital removal of protruding labial tissue is performed in M15+ publications (see left) as this level of genital detail is considered to be too obscene for soft-core pornography⁵. However, restricted publications (see right) are allowed to show protruding labial tissue. Source: Mamamia Women's Network, Australia⁶

Results

We found that the video intervention significantly increased women's perceptions of the diversity of female genital appearance, as well as their awareness of the digital airbrushing of genital images in the media (Table 1). There was no effect of either intervention on women's attitudes toward their own genital appearance as all four groups experienced a small, but significant decrease in their level of genital dissatisfaction from pre- to post-intervention (Table 1). However, it must be noted that the women in our sample were generally satisfied with their genital appearance at baseline. Nevertheless, when asked what they would say to a female friend who was highly concerned with her own genital appearance, the women who viewed the video reported that they would inform her about the digital airbrushing of genital images in the media in order to dissuade her from having a labiaplasty.

Table 1

Means (and standard deviations) for normality perception, media knowledge, and pre- and post-exposure genital dissatisfaction by intervention type

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

Conclusions

Our results suggest that health practitioners could potentially use this short video to educate women who are questioning the normality of their own genital appearance and are considering labiaplasty. However, future research should address whether these educational interventions are effective in reducing the appearance concerns of women who are highly dissatisfied with their genitals. Potentially the most important use of this video would be in sexual education programs in schools with young girls to potentially prevent the development of genital appearance concerns as they enter puberty.

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