

BOYS WILL BE GIRLS

Male grooming is a massive growth industry, but what has made men start taking care of themselves, and why now?

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The Elemis day spa in central London recently reported that an incredible 48% of its treatments are booked by male clients. Back in the days when men didn't smell of sandalwood such statistics would have been met with a raised and distinctly un-plucked eyebrow, but the last decade has seen massive changes in the way men present themselves.

According to Les Back, Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths University, this heightened interest in male grooming splits into three distinct social phenomena.

"Firstly," says Professor Back, "the reduction in manual work has had a profound effect on the way men view and relate to their bodies." It has been estimated that in the next 15 years, 300,000 further manual jobs will be lost in London alone, and in their place information-based positions will fill the gap. "Such jobs normally take place in an office environment and involve creativity and thinking." The body is therefore no longer used as a physical tool, opening the door to the notion of men attending to and caring for their bodies in much the same way that women have traditionally done.

Professor Back also points to the shift in the politics of gender that began to take place in the mid-1980s as essential in the new groomed man. In essence this is

when the metrosexual man emerges, a term often credited to the journalist Mark Simpson, who has since described metrosexual man as "a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference."

Clearly, Simpson's view of metrosexual man isn't entirely a serious one, but that hasn't stopped popular culture from embracing the term. In the public consciousness, metrosexual man is associated with attractive and positive values, which involve looking after oneself and generally aiming to look as good as possible. In his eyes, appearance is equated to success and affluence – and it's not surprising that the cosmetics companies have played an instrumental part in forging such a significant new revenue stream.

L'Oréal largely corners the market, concentrating on care products for men. The company's Men's Expert range, launched in March 2005, offers a complete male face range including shave and cleansing products, but its focus is on care products (think anti-tightness gel, wrinkle de-creasing cream). In its first year, they provided 72% of the £7.3m

(€11m) growth in the UK male grooming industry. Once upon a time men bought cosmetics for their wives and girlfriends; it's music to the beauty industry's ears that these days they're buying them for themselves.

Of course manufacturers like L'Oréal have played a major part in convincing men that they want the products in the first place, but they've also been given a helping hand. Professor Back's third factor is the rise of celebrity culture, which has transformed our relationship with body image and how it should be styled. "The influence we have from celebrities is huge," he says, "and has become instrumental in the concept of worshipping our bodies. In a sense, we are buying into the idea that wealth, prosperity, even social mobility, can be achieved through the perfection of our bodies."

The factors are all in place, then, for men to go the metrosexual way, but it's taken some careful marketing to make sure the phenomenon spreads. When The Refinery – London's first male-only spa and brainchild of former investment bankers Laith Waines and Omar Fadli – first opened, it was designed to look like the waiting area in a business centre, with neutral colours, plasma screens showing BBC News 24 and dark leather couches. Louise McIntosh, who has managed the spa for six years, talks of witnessing a shift in social acceptability: "At first, bookings were whispered down the phone. Today men will book a full wax from the trading floor". Social acceptance has given men the confidence to visit the spa – and it seems that once they've had a taste for it, they feel better and more productive at work. It's as if men have been given permission to enjoy a treatment without being ridiculed.

Unlike the training given to most salon therapists, the staff at The Refinery are taught



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the factual information behind a treatment – it appears that metrosexual man isn't interested in the holistic aspect of a treatment, but rather wants to know what happens and the million-dollar question: why. He also wants a treatment that provides tangible proof something is being done – which helps explain the popularity of more painful, deeper-tissue massages.

Nickel, which opened in London in May 2006, has a futuristic-meets-Zen feel to it: clean, modern, with an efficient edge and distinctive masculine feel. Founded by experienced product developer Philippe Dumont in 1996, the Nickel concept is based

on the fundamental principles of straight-talking, effective grooming products and speciality spas designed exclusively for men.

It's no surprise to learn that London has led the way in this new fashion, but the march of male beauty has no respect for national boundaries. The Dutch cosmetics and toiletries industry saw a 4% value growth in 2005, with men's grooming products emerging as one of the main growth sectors. Further evidence of men's international metrosexuality comes from the Dorint Sofitel Amsterdam Airport hotel, where the spa menus now offer energy alignment treatments such as 'Energy4Work' and 'Energy4Life' programmes that have proven particularly popular among business men. Kees Teer, general manager, states: "It is important for us that we can offer the services that suit the lifestyle of our male guests."

The city spa has become a perfect way of looking after oneself and managing the stress that comes with living life in the fast lane. Men are starting to incorporate treatments into their daily lives, with the average spa-goer visiting once every three weeks. Going to a spa is no longer perceived as an extravagance or embarrassment, but as a practical tool: a way to improve one's overall performance. Work hard, play hard is the maxim that these status-seeking men live by, and the more the demand grows, the more spas are popping up at hotels, airports and high streets alike.



Nickel treatment room

