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Metrosexuals Come Out

By WARREN ST. JOHN

BY his own admission, 30-year-old Karru Martinson is not what you'd call a manly man. He uses a \$40 face cream, wears Bruno Magli shoes and custom-tailored shirts. His hair is always just so, thanks to three brands of shampoo and the precise application of three hair grooming products: Textureline Smoothing Serum, got2b styling glue and Suave Rave hairspray.

Mr. Martinson likes wine bars and enjoys shopping with his gal pals, who have come to trust his eye for color, his knack for seeing when a bag clashes with an outfit, and his understanding of why some women have 47 pairs of black shoes. ("Because they can!" he said.) He said his guy friends have long thought his consumer and grooming habits a little . . . different. But Mr. Martinson, who lives in Manhattan and works in finance, said he's not that different.

"From a personal perspective there was never any doubt what my sexual orientation was," he said. "I'm straight as an arrow."

So it was with a mixture of relief and mild embarrassment that Mr. Martinson was recently asked by a friend in marketing to be part of a focus group of "metrosexuals" — straight urban men willing, even eager, to embrace their feminine sides.

Convinced that these open-minded young men hold the secrets of tomorrow's consumer trends, the advertising giant Euro RSCG, with 233 offices worldwide, wanted to better understand their buying habits. So in a private room at the Manhattan restaurant Eleven Madison Park recently, Mr. Martinson answered the marketers' questions and schmoozed with 11 like-minded straight guys who were into Diesel jeans, interior design, yoga and Mini Coopers, and who would never think of ordering a vodka tonic without specifying Grey Goose or Ketel One.

Before the focus group met, Mr. Martinson said he was suspicious that such a thing as a metrosexual existed. Afterward, he said, "I'm fully aware that I have those characteristics."

America may be on the verge of a metrosexual moment. On July 15, Bravo will present a makeover show, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," in which a team of five gay men "transform a style-deficient and culture-deprived straight man from drab to fab," according to the network. Condé Nast is developing a shopping magazine for men, modeled after Lucky, its successful women's magazine, which is largely a text-free catalog of clothes and shoes.

There is no end to the curious new vanity products for young men, from a Maxim-magazine-branded hair coloring system to Axe, Unilever's all-over body deodorant for guys. And men are going in for self-improvement strategies traditionally associated with women. For example, the number of plastic surgery procedures on men in the United States has increased threefold since 1997, to 807,000, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

"Their heightened sense of aesthetics is very, very pronounced," Marian Salzman, chief strategy officer at Euro RSCG, who organized the gathering at Eleven Madison Park, said of metrosexuals. "They're the style makers. It doesn't mean your average Joe American is going to copy everything they do," she added. "But unless you study these guys you don't know where Joe American is heading."

Paradoxically, the term metrosexual, which is now being embraced by marketers, was coined in the mid-90's to mock everything marketers stand for. The gay writer Mark Simpson used the word to satirize what he saw as consumerism's toll on traditional masculinity. Men didn't go to shopping malls, buy glossy magazines or load up on grooming products, Mr. Simpson argued, so consumer culture promoted the idea of a sensitive guy — who went to malls, bought magazines and spent freely to improve his personal appearance.

Within a few years, the term was picked up by British advertisers and newspapers. In 2001, Britain's Channel Four brought out a show about sensitive guys called "Metrosexuality." And in recent years the European media found a metrosexual icon in David Beckham, the English soccer star, who paints his fingernails, braids his hair and poses for gay magazines, all while maintaining a manly profile on the pitch. Along with terms like "PoMosexual," "just gay enough" and "flaming heterosexuals," the word metrosexual is now gaining currency among American marketers who are fumbling for a term to describe this new type of feminized man.

America has a long tradition of sensitive guys. Alan Alda, John Lennon, even Al Gore all heard the arguments of the feminist movement and empathized. Likewise, there's a history of dashing men like Cary Grant and Humphrey Bogart who managed to affect a personal style with plenty of hair goop but without compromising their virility. Even Harrison Ford, whose favorite accessory was once a hammer, now poses proudly wearing an earring.

But what separates the modern-day metrosexual from his touchy-feely forebears is a care-free attitude toward the inevitable suspicion that a man who dresses well, has good manners, understands thread counts or has opinions on women's fashion is gay.

"If someone's going to judge me on what kind of moisturizer I have on my shelf, whatever," said Marc d'Avignon, 28, a graduate student living in the East Village, who describes himself as "horrendously addicted to Diesel jeans" and living amid a chemistry lab's worth of Kiehl's lotions.

"It doesn't bother me at all. Call it homosexual, feminine, hip, not hip — I don't care. I like drawing from all sorts of sources to create my own persona."

While some metrosexuals may simply be indulging in pursuits they had avoided for fear of being suspected as gay — like getting a pedicure or wearing brighter colors — others consciously appropriate tropes of gay culture the way white suburban teenagers have long cribbed from hip-hop culture, as a way of distinguishing themselves from the pack. Having others question their sexuality is all part of the game.

"Wanting them to wonder and having them wonder is a wonderful thing," said Daniel Peres, the editor in chief of Details, a kind of metrosexual bible. "It gives you an air of mystery: could he be? It makes you stand out."

Standing out requires staying on top of which products are hip and which are not. Marketers refer to such style-obsessed shoppers as prosumers, or urban influentials — educated customers who are picky or just vain enough to spend more money or to make an extra effort in pursuit of their personal look. A man who wants to buy Clinique for Men, for example, has to want the stuff so badly that he will walk up to the women's cosmetics counter in a department store, where Clinique for Men is sold. A man who wants Diesel jeans has to be willing to pay \$135 a pair. A man who insists on Grey Goose has to get comfortable with paying \$14 for a martini.

"The guy who drinks Grey Goose is willing to pay extra," said Lee Einsidler, executive vice president of Sydney Frank Importing, which owns Grey Goose. "He does it in all things in his life. He doesn't buy green beans, he buys haricots verts."

Other retailers hope to entice the man on the fence to get in touch with his metrosexual side. Oliver Sweatman, the chief executive of Sharps, a new line of grooming products aimed at young urban men, said that to lure manly men to buy his new-age shaving gels — which contain Roman chamomile, gotu kola and green tea — the packaging is a careful mixture of old and new imagery. The fonts recall the masculinity of an old barber shop, but a funny picture of a goat on the label implies, he said, something out of the ordinary.

In an effort to out closeted metrosexuals, Ms. Salzman and her marketing team at Euro RSCG are working at perfecting polling methods that will identify "metrosexual markers." One, she noted, is that metrosexuals like telling their friends about their new finds.

Mr. Martinson, the Bruno Magli-wearing metrosexual, agreed. "I'm not in marketing," he said, "But when you take a step back, and say, 'Hey, I e-mailed my friends about a great vodka or a great Off Broadway show,' in essence I am a marketer and I'm doing it for free."

Most metrosexuals, though, see their approach to life as serving their own interests in the most important marketing contest of all: the battle for babes. Their pitch to women: you're getting the best of both worlds.

Some women seem to buy it. Alycia Oaklander, a 29-year-old fashion publicist from Manhattan, fell for John Kilpatrick, a Washington Redskins season ticket holder who loves Budweiser and grilling hot dogs, in part because of his passion for shopping and women's fashion shows. On their first dates, Mr. Kilpatrick brought Champagne, cooked elaborate meals and talked the talk about Ms. Oaklander's shoes. They were married yesterday.

"He loves sports and all the guy stuff," Ms. Oaklander said. "But on the other hand he loves to cook and he loves design. It balances out."

The proliferation of metrosexuals is even having an impact in gay circles. Peter Paige, a gay actor who plays the character Emmett on the Showtime series "Queer as Folk," frequently complains in interviews that he's having a harder time than ever telling straight men from gays.

"They're all low -slung jeans and working out with six packs and more hair product than I've ever used in my life, and they smell better than your mother on Easter," he said. Mr. Paige said there was at least one significant difference between hitting on metrosexuals and their less evolved predecessors. "Before, you used to get punched," he said. "Now it's all, 'Gee thanks, I'm straight but I'm really flattered.' "

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