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The Beauty Advantage: For Men

Like most men in the Pacific Northwest, I have never been accused of being a “clothes horse.” Or a “metrosexual.”

Stylish dressing and West Coast males have long had a wary relationship. For decades I have joined other laid-back British Columbian men in being ultra-casual to the point of slovenliness.

That is, unless you find jogging shoes, fleece vests and yoga gear to be the height of sartorial expression. It appears many men and women do, based on the success of Vancouver’s Mountain Equipment Co-op, Lululemon and similar sporty B.C. outlets.

It has only been in recent years, as age does its transformative work on the mind and physique, that I have begun to pay a bit of attention to all the accoutrements available to array the human form.

It appears I am not alone among men.

A multi-billion-dollar industry is gaining momentum in North America as men — young, middle-aged and senior — experiment with the kind of wardrobe, cosmetic and plastic-surgery options on which women have long been spending. One estimate has the global beauty business valued at \$140 billion a year.

The latest boon to the looks industry is a host of sociological studies confirming there really is a “beauty advantage” in life — and that it doesn’t just go to women.

Men, in fact, may benefit more than women from looking their best.

That could be especially true in this age of rampant ageism, where “youthfulness” has a cultlike hold on the collective mind. New studies suggest attractiveness, including neat grooming, can boost men in both the boardroom and the bedroom.

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MAJOR STUDY

Economist Daniel Hamermesh, of the University of Texas, Austin, has found nicely put-together men generally have better luck than other men in snagging extra earnings, as well as fetching pretty, high-salaried wives. He led a major study in four countries, including Canada.

In his new book, *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful*, Hamermesh calculates that over a lifetime a handsome worker in North America could on average make \$230,000 more a year than a plain one. There is also evidence they bring in more business, so it can make sense for firms to hire them.

Hamermesh cites studies showing handsome men, on average, earn five-per-cent more than their less-attractive counterparts, while good-looking women earn four-per-cent more.

Even without being aware of sociological research into economic spinoffs, European men, as well as those in Eastern Canada and the U.S., have long tended to care about grooming. Some say they simply value taking care of themselves.

Will West Coast men seize on the chance to pursue the market advantages of decent grooming, even if some judge them to be merely skin deep?

Not necessarily. Vancouver men are infamous for dressing down.

“Vancouver men have been a little behind the times. They’re pretty casual. They’re still fighting it,” says Kimberley Law, a Vancouver image consultant with Personal Impact International. Forty per cent of her clients are male.

“Some Vancouver men are starting to dress up. I’ve had lots of men tell me how looking better improved their work and love lives. Everybody’s got a good feature they can highlight, that will make them feel better about themselves.”

Along with male image consultants such as Burnaby’s Giovanni Amenta, Law emphasizes the fashion mantra over and over: If you look good, you feel more confident.

And others will pick up that air of confidence, to your economic and relational advantage.



“We would love to think that looks don’t matter. I wish. I wish society only looked at a person’s essence,” said Amenta.

“But if you’re dressed your best, I’ve always found with my clients that you get the job, you get the promotion, you get the woman. How you look speaks louder than your credentials. You need to look like a product people want to buy, while still being authentic, still being yourself.”

Although image consultants have a vested interest in promoting such an intimate link between style and success, 21st-first century social science is giving their pitches some backup evidence.

Will the new research encourage more men to turf their sweatshirts, trim their hair, perk up their posture and wear collared shirts? Will learning how to iron be next?

GLOSSY ADS

In addition to marketing a vast assortment of clothes, ads in newspapers and magazines continually exhort men to “Look Smart!” and “Shape Up!” to the new rules of grooming. They offer products unimagined in earlier decades.

The glossy ads encourage men to try out skin “de-puffers,” shaving oils, hair-removal treatments, body talc, high-tech razors, hair-loss medications, flowery fragrances and body waxing, a.k.a. “man-scaping.”

The sellers of good looks, including the \$11 billion-a-year plastic surgery industry, have reason to delight in the psychological studies verifying what could be called the “beauty bias,” or the “handsome advantage.”

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reported an average 10-per-cent surge in 2010 in the proportion of middle-aged men seeking various kinds of plastic surgery. That adds up to 1.1 million annual procedures for men (compared with 13 million for women).

The plastic surgeons’ association said there was a 14-percent hike last year in the number of facelifts performed on men, as well as an 11-per-cent rise in ear-shaping surgery, a seven-per-cent jump in fat-removing liposuction procedures and a four per cent increase in eyelid surgeries.

At Dermal Laser Centre outlets in Metro Vancouver, operations manager Gina Henderson says she has seen “a dramatic increase in the number of men” coming in for everything from laser hair removal to Botox.

With their flagship shop in Vancouver’s West End, Henderson says men — straight, gay, white, Chinese, Iranian and South Asian — now make up roughly 15 to 25 per cent of the clientele for skin treatment, including tightening and micro-dermabrasion. The men invariably come away, she says, feeling better about themselves.

While the Dermal Laser Centre’s male clients would not agree to be photographed or interviewed about the procedures, a *Newsweek* magazine survey discovered that attention to one’s physical details, not to mention simple decent grooming, can make a big difference with company recruitment officers.

In an online survey of 202 corporate managers, the magazine found 57 per cent affirmed that “unattractive” people have a harder time finding a job.

Echoing Amenta's claim that people more strongly remember what you look like than what you accomplish, more than half of the company recruiters said it's more important for job applicants to "make sure they look attractive" than to perfect a resume.

HAPPINESS LINK

Regardless of whether many outdoorsy West Coast men believe it is "unnatural" to put effort into how they take care of their skin, cut their fingernails or choose a jacket over a sweatshirt, now they have to deal with sociological research suggesting it might be shrewd to give it a go.

The first wave of research data on beauty that came out showed a strong relationship between women's attractiveness and their reported "happiness."

According to Stefanie Johnson, who was involved in a study at the University of Colorado Business School, beautiful women have a big advantage in politics and when applying for almost any job, barring such things as engineering and prison work.

But, Johnson stresses, attractive men also on average do better, perhaps better than women, in virtually every aspect of the workplace and relationships.

The general thrust of research by scholars, including Thomas Hochschild and Aimee Li, is that men who are attractive, especially in their faces, tend to be rated by others as more intelligent, more experienced and more capable of leadership.

Barring genetically determined qualities, such as symmetrical faces and being tall, the good news for men is that many can benefit from making changes to their appearance that are within their power to do.

It's not crucial to have a "great face," says Amenta, who is based in Burnaby after stints in New York and Europe. "It doesn't matter at all."

As long as men are not committed to wearing black runners and a Star Wars T-shirt, Amenta said, they can go a long way with simple decent grooming, complementary clothing and, most importantly, the right attitude. After all, one doesn't want to look too beautiful.

European researchers have dug deep into the nuances of the beauty premium, where they have discovered a paradox: It can be dangerous to be too gorgeous, too handsome.

In a 2010 study in *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, titled *Don't hate me because I'm beautiful*, Maria Agthe and others found that ultra-attractiveness is an advantage only when those making selection decisions are of the opposite sex.

Indeed, men and women who screened applicants for jobs and scholarships often discriminated against people who were knockouts if they were of the same sex. They were seen as potential competitors.

Interestingly, Agthe found the worst discrimination against those who are visually stunning was meted out by “moderately attractive” people in power positions. They were most inclined to be threatened by the women and men who really turn heads.

PROFITABLE INDUSTRY

Given the new social science data, how far should men go in the pursuit of physical good looks and smart grooming?

Since some research continues to suggest faces tend to be the biggest indicators of attractiveness, I can understand why some determined men (and women) go the costly, risky route of cosmetic surgery. That said, such procedures are becoming less expensive and less risky.

In addition, how should men respond to the promises of the profitable anti-aging industry, which is trying to convince men to look younger by spending thousands of dollars on hormone-replacement therapies and \$325-a-bottle moisturizers and wrinkle creams?

Some of these treatments may be useful. Unfortunately, however, a study by Consumer Reports showed many wrinkle creams, including the priciest, made almost no difference.

Most men find it easy to laugh off wallet-breaking good-looks marketing. And Amenta is one image consultant who suggests men should be “leery” of cosmetic surgery, such as Botox injections and facelifts.

“Usually you can tell,” he said. And once people notice the unusual tightness or other side-effects of plastic surgery, Amenta said questions start to arise about character.

“People wonder if this is a person who is not comfortable in their own skin.”

That said, there is no doubt that men with pleasant but unremarkable faces can do a lot to spice up their appeal by simply getting in physical shape, being emotionally relaxed and dressing tidily, if not with flair.

Amenta starts with some simple tips.

Charging \$1,000 for a makeover, including clothes shopping, Amenta has seen dramatic turnarounds in the lives of his clients, including a good-looking accountant whom he said would, if he’d take care of the basics, be a “nice catch.”

But the accountant didn’t know he had bad body odour. So Amenta told him. He also didn’t realize, as Amenta said, that others probably associated his “uni-brow” (eyebrows with no space in between) with “thugs” and “dumb people.” The nose hairs and ear hairs also had to go.

It turns out that when the accountant made these changes and went out clothes shopping with Amenta, who is gay, he immediately ended up getting a date with the saleswoman.

When Vancouver's Kimberley Law and Gail Henderson were asked to name what they think are the most important things a man should emphasize in his looks, they added some more tips.

They stressed that men should have a tidy hairstyle; coordinated clothes (including polished shoes), radiant, unblemished skin, clean fingernails and good posture.

THE DOWNSIDE

Are there downsides to looking good? Some might ask about narcissism. Like some women, men can also go too far in fretting about the image they project, as if there were nothing else in this suffering-filled world as important as their latest belt or haircut.

Like some women, some men can succumb to an obsessive focus on clothing, their personae and their outer appearance. These are the people who worry too much about what others think of them.

Sartorial preoccupations, say psychologists, can often mask feelings of inner emptiness. They may be attempts to stop others from discovering that, as the saying goes, "deep-down he's really shallow."

Looking good is hardly an alternative to leading a meaningful life, which would include caring for someone other than yourself and your immediate family, and trying to embody a few transcendent ideals.

Even the image consultants emphasize the value of being authentic. But it's not as if slovenly people are beyond having their own emotional problems.

Therapists suggest that scruffy men (and women) who appear to put no effort into how they look or what they wear often come off as self-righteous. There are many in Vancouver, says Amenta, who are especially judgmental. Such people subconsciously believe their rejection of the idea of looking good makes them special.

And what about those men — especially those with a macho or forever-boyish personality — who feel compelled to tease, even mock, those who dress smartly?

There has long been a fear among some men that a sharp wardrobe suggests a man is effeminate or gay. Or worse: Pretentious.

I know a thoughtful man who buys all his mostly mismatched clothes at Value Village. This friend has long taken a kind of pride in dressing down-market. Until recently.

One of his family members told him that psychotherapists believe that people who dress on the shabby side often do so because they don't believe they deserve anything better.

In other words, it's highly possible my friend doesn't think enough of himself to go out and spend money on new, decent clothes. It was a new developmental theory to me, but it makes sense.

Indeed, self-respect is a concept that often comes up when speaking to those in the grooming and cosmetics business: The importance of feeling good about yourself.



Fernando Lamas

With all the things in life that are stressful, Law and Henderson repeated how being able to like what you see when you look in the mirror boosts your confidence. From that, good things happen in work and love.

Their emphasis on confidence evokes Billy Crystal's famous Saturday Night Live skit, in which he parodied Fernando Lamas, a movie star famous for playing the Latin Lover. The character's signature line to almost every man or woman he'd meet was: "It is better to look good than to feel good. And you look maaaahvelous!"

But maybe there's something hidden in the joke. There doesn't seem to be too much wrong with being a moderate metrosexual, as long as a man is confident there is also a person of substance beneath the natty wardrobe.

A sense of sartorial style is an indication a man could well be interesting — that he is not oblivious to beauty; that he has an eye for colour, texture, style and quality. That he treats himself as a bit of a work of art.

LEARNING CURVE

This comes from a chronically casual West Coaster, whose skills in the grooming arena are tentative at best. After all, it was Sun editors who asked me to take on this subject. Researching this topic has put me on a learning curve.

Nevertheless, in addition to noting there may be social advantages to dressing decently, I must also say I am glad to discover men's fashion advertising has returned in recent years to celebrating men, rather than scrawny boys.

A decade ago, Dior menswear started a trend by using skinny, skate-rat teenage boys as models to sell clothes. But that's ended with the recession, and the return of the perennial notion that men work, produce and take on mature responsibilities.

As GQ editor Jim Nelson told *The New York Times*: "The twink thing seems to be over. When we cast, we want a model with some heft to him and a few years on him. Someone who has aged a little bit, who feels like he's a real man."

That's encouraging. So, what's the bottom line, as some men like to say, on attractiveness?

One: It's not evil for men to adopt an unkempt, dishevelled look. (And, don't forget, even tatteredness is a "look.")

But, call me bourgeois, maybe it's time for Canadian men, especially on the fleecy-fixated West Coast, to think a bit about upgrading. It may give their lives and relationships a boost.

And would it be going too far to suggest a man who dresses well and looks solid – as long as he's not perfectionist about it – makes people around him feel better about themselves? Not only women, but also possibly men?

After all, it's not exactly inspiring when a bedraggled fellow shows up at your dinner party looking like he'd just got out of bed, or cleaned the gutters. It's hardly a compliment to the host.

I'm speculating here, but I'm starting to wonder if the image consultants have a point when they say it actually signals respect for others when men pay reasonable attention to how they look.