

## Cultural and Social Implications of Metrosexual Mode

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand changes of the current young generation's lifestyle, aesthetic attitude for an appearance, and way of thinking by making a close investigation into metrosexual, the recent mode, and find out its cultural and social implications. As a method of the study, the literature and the Internet data were reviewed. Articles from newspapers, magazines and the Internet were chosen roughly from the year 2000 to now because metrosexual mode remarkably boomed before and after 2000. Books related to the theory on the mode in a costume culture were referred. Also, articles in daily newspapers which dealt with cultural and social issues were reviewed, fashion magazines for men such as Esquire and GQ showing the new trend in men's lifestyle and fashion were examined, and the Internet providing us the latest news from cultural and social topics to fashion trends were investigated. The backgrounds of the rise of metrosexual mode were a collapse of stereotypes in various fields, spread of lookism in a visual image period, extension of commercialism, and expansion of men's character casual trend. Metrosexual was defined as an urban male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. His fashion style was characterized by slim and flowing silhouette, feminine and luxurious materials such as transparent chiffon, silk and cotton with a light and soft touch, and a knitted wear with a flowing line, a wide variety of vivid and pastel colors, floral and geometric patterns, and the decorative details like lace, beads, embroidery, and fur. From spread of this mode, two cultural and social implications were extracted. Firstly, the current young generation's aesthetic standards for the perfect man changed from macho man to considerate man who had a good appearance and this suggested that a conventional sex role broke down. Secondly, men began to explore for their own identity escaping from traditionally standardized masculinity that they had been forced to follow.

**Key Words :** metrosexual, aesthetic, lifestyle, appearance, implication

### I . Introduction

The mode in a costume culture does not spread in a society by accident. It becomes popular

because our contemporaries accept some silhouettes or colors as a beautiful or desirable thing and this has a great deal of significance in that appearance of a mode includes the spirit of the

times.<sup>1)</sup>

Gabrielle Chanel, the representative fashion designer who led the mode of the 1920s, designed simple, functional, and active style and it included women's yearning for emancipation and independence at that time.<sup>2)</sup> Mini style of the 1960s—the young were demanding a wardrobe of their own to suit their lifestyle<sup>3)</sup>— was extraordinarily sensational by the innovative boldness and a extremely miniaturized design and it contained aesthetics of modernism seeking for geometric form and optimistic anticipation for the promising future by technological development.<sup>4)</sup>

From above examples, the current mode is also supposed to include dominant mind of the present time. That is, a deep study on a prevailing mode is helpful to understand the spirit of the present generation. Here is a rapidly growing trend, metrosexual, the current men's mode.

Recently appearances of male models in the advertisements changed a lot from those of the previous ones. They have a pretty look with a fair skin and are interested in their fashion and beauty so much as well as making a slender figure. These men are called 'metrosexual'. The current young men yearn to look like metrosexual. They prefer a cute appearance with a soft skin to a manly appearance with a tanned skin. This trend shows changes of young generation's way of thinking by those of their preferred styles and especially it settles down as necessary etiquette for smart men beyond a mode as a taste at the beginning of a new millenium. This is a noticeable change compared with when men caring their appearances were looked at with contempt and the study on this trend has a significance as a way to find out new spirit of the present time.

The purpose of this study was to understand changes of the current young generation's lifestyle, aesthetic attitude for an appearance and way of thinking by making a close investigation into metrosexual and find out its cultural and social implications.

As contents of the study, firstly, the backgrounds of the rise of metrosexual were reviewed. They were a collapse of stereotypes in various fields, spread of lookism in a visual image period, extension of commercialism, and expansion of men's character casual trend. Secondly, definition and characteristics of metrosexual were examined. Finally, cultural and social implications of metrosexual were discussed. Firstly, the current young generation's aesthetic standards for the perfect man changed from macho man to considerate man who had a good appearance and this suggested that a conventional sex role broke down. Secondly, men began to explore for their own identity escaping from traditionally standardized masculinity that they had been forced to follow.

As a method of the study, the literature and the Internet data were reviewed. Articles from newspapers, magazines and the Internet were chosen roughly from the year 2000 to now because metrosexual mode remarkably boomed before and after 2000. Books related to the theory on the mode in a costume culture were referred. Also, articles in daily newspapers which dealt with cultural and social issues were reviewed and especially photos and reports shown in style and fashion section in the International Herald Tribune were very helpful to check out the latest style regularly. Fashion magazines for men such as Esquire and GQ showing the new trend in men's lifestyle and fashion were examined and the Internet providing us the latest news from cultural and

social topics to fashion trends were investigated. Particularly, the Internet data were mostly referred and frequently quoted because metrosexual was a newly appeared trend and the Internet quickly updated information that could not find out from the other types of data.

## II. Background of Spread of Metrosexual Mode

First of all, a collapse of stereotypes in various fields was behind the rising of metrosexual mode. It was said that new items such as hot ice cream, colorful flour and drinking vitamin which broke the existing stereotypes were popular by the news of chosun.com on May 20, 2004.<sup>5)</sup> These kind of novel products appeared as a competitive edge to meet consumers' diversified demands and played an important role in opening consumers' wallet in a bad economy.

Here is a good example. <Fig. 1> shows an animation, 'Shrek' that boldly broke a variety of existing stereotypes of animations and was a great box-office success. Generally, there are



<Fig. 1> Princess Fiona and Shrek with an ugly appearance  
<http://www.shrek.co.kr>

several stereotypes in animations. Usually, heros and heroines or good-natured people have a good appearance and wicked people have an ugly face. But Shrek, a hero in this animation was neither handsome nor wise. He was very ugly, fat, and dull. And the princess Fiona, a heroine of this animation, had a very active, tough, and wild character. That was quite different from a typical princess, a heroine in a animation, who was so passive and feminine. Moreover, when the black magic was removed, she changed from a beautiful princess to an ugly monster, not from an ugly monster to a beautiful princess as was usual with general animations.

There is another example. A traditional way of thinking related to sexuality have some stereotypes. For example, men have to be strong or women should be pretty. But this kind of fixed idea is gradually disappearing in these days. Instead, men and women who accept some characteristics of the other sex such as 'man wearing makeup' or 'woman taking hammer' are rapidly increasing. "Asian traditional way of thinking about sex is rapidly collapsing." Wall Street Journal reported on May 27, 2005.<sup>6)</sup> It commented that it was time that pretty men and strong women were accepted as a fixed idea of sex role disappeared and cosmetic advertisements showed very good examples.

<Fig. 2> is a lipstick advertisement. A man wearing makeup kindly put a lipstick on a woman's lips. In this scene, the woman has the initiative, not man.<sup>7)</sup> <Fig. 3> is another cosmetic advertisement. A male model wearing a flower crown shows his fair skin. These kind of advertisements may be somewhat unfamiliar from a conservative point of view but nobody thinks them strange nowadays.

These all examples show that people's way of thinking is changing. People want to free themselves from the past fixed idea and experience fresh and novel products. This social atmosphere has basically supported spread of metrosexual mode.

Secondly, spread of lookism in a visual image period was another background of metrosexual mode. Lookism means Discrimination or prejudice against people based on their appearance<sup>8)</sup>. William Safire, a columnist for The New York Times, spotted appearance as a new discriminating element appearing after race, sex, religion, ideology in August 2000. In these days, people spend a lot of time and money to take care of their appearance because they believe that appearance is important in a public sector such as getting a job or promoting as well as private one like dating or wedding<sup>9)</sup>.

Lookism already appeared to be a serious social issue. Here are several results of surveys by the Korea Times. According to these surveys, more than 70 percent of high school girls and 34 percent of high school boys wanted plastic surgery to improve their appearances. One out of every ten women in their 20s underwent cosmetic

surgery. Also, it is worth noticing that seven in ten women thought others treated them better if they went out after spending a lot of time for makeup. In particular, women aged between 25 and 34 regarded appearance as decisive means of enhancing their social lives, and thus had been eager to make their looks better through physical fitness, skin care, plastic surgery or dieting<sup>10)</sup>.

This is not reality only for women. In times past, men were usually evaluated by their own ability or riches. But now, a good looking appearance also has been added to a must list. So men began to be interested in and care for their looks and so far as to have a plastic operation. The number of skin or hair care clinics, plastic surgeries, and fashion or accessory brands for men is rapidly increasing and their business is thriving<sup>11)</sup>.

It's time when a man with better appearance is assumed as a more excellent man at work. Eventually, this social tendency has an apparent influence on expansion of metrosexual mode.

Besides above two main backgrounds, extension of commercialism and men's character casual trend are also worth reviewing.



〈Fig. 2〉 A man wearing makeup kindly put a lipstick on a woman's lips. May 27, 2005 from <http://www.edaily.co.kr>



〈Fig. 3〉 A male model wearing a flower crown shows his fair skin. April, 2005, from The Face Shop Advertisement

When it comes to commercialism, it is not exaggerated that everything turns into a commodity in these days. Entrepreneurs have continued to try to open up a new market by promoting new trends and producing goods related to those trends whenever the existing market reaches saturation because the capacity of the market is limited. For example, terms like culture, organic food and wellbeing have spread far and wide and products related to these trends are introduced to consumers and prompt them to buy them. Moreover, mass communication with an incredible power lures consumers by packaging them in a big way. Nowadays almost all commodities are related to culture, wellbeing, or organic items.

<Fig. 4> shows women who are interested in some organic fruits. According to Korea rural economic institute, the price of organic food was, on an average, 2.7 times higher than that of regular food and the scale of the market for organic food was 400 billion won in 2003 and is estimated at 670 billion won in 2006<sup>12)</sup>. In addition to food, daily necessities such as clothes, furniture, interior and home appliances are also made of organic material and their price is much more expensive. In <Fig. 5>, a

woman poses for yoga which has quickly risen as a representative exercise for wellbeing life. It was not so popular before wellbeing trend but nowadays it is likely to be recommended someone who thinks of dieting.

Meanwhile, how has men's character casual trend risen? Approximately in 2000, rich and young business men appeared when venture business boomed. They preferred casual wear because they didn't have to wear formal style everyday. Also, they wanted to reveal their wealth and individuality by clothes. Men's character casual brands were appropriate for satisfying their necessities.

According to Apparel News, the amount of sale of general men's formal wear brands has been declining since the latter half of 2004 but that of men's character casual brands continues to be rising. People concerned said that the reason was that main customers for men's wear who were in their thirties to forties preferred character casual wear that made them look young<sup>13)</sup>. Moreover, this trend was expected to be expanded more as 5 day per week working system went into operation since 2005 and business wear style gradually accepted casual trend.<sup>14)</sup>



<Fig. 4> Women looking at some fruits at organic food festival, June 2, 2005, from <http://news.naver.com>



<Fig. 5> A woman poses for yoga. from videotape for yoga

<Fig. 6> is one from Giorgio Armani collection for spring/ summer of 2005. This shows men's character casual style such as slim and flowing silhouette, pastel colors, and soft material and at the same time it also has the characteristics of metrosexual style.

### III. Definition and Characteristics of Metrosexual

#### 1. Definition

Mark Simpson, a British writer, invented this term at 'The Independent', a daily newspaper, in 1994 to describe the effect of rampant consumerism on traditional masculinity; it referred to men of any sexual orientation. And it drifted slowly from one media source to another throughout the rest of 1990s and early 2000s. Then Simpson wrote another article about metrosexuals entitled "Meet the metrosexual" in



<Fig. 6> men's character casual fashion, spring/ summer, 2005, Giorgio Armani collection

the online magazine Salon.com on July 22, 2002, and the term took off. Since then it has been picked up by thousands of media outlets and has made numerous TV appearances. What he mentioned in this article was as follows.

"The typical metrosexual is 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.<sup>15)</sup>"

Word Spy, the Internet dictionary, defined metrosexual as an urban male with a strong aesthetic sense who spent a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. The metro- prefix indicates this man's purely urban lifestyle, while the -sexual suffix comes from "homosexual," meaning that this man, although he is usually straight, embodies the heightened aesthetic sense often associated with certain types of gay men.<sup>16)</sup>

#### 2. Lifestyle

It is worth examining an international soccer player David Beckham's lifestyle to understand metrosexual's because Simpson held him up as a prime example of what it is to be a metrosexual.

He is a straight man who take pleasure in primping and shopping. He is almost as famous for wearing sarongs and pink nail polish and panties belonging to his wife having a different haircut every week and posing naked and oiled up on the cover of Esquire, a magazine for men, as he is for his impressive ball skills. He frequently goes shopping to choose his clothes or accessories at his leisure time and changes his hair style or has his hair dyed at a hair

shop. He loves to wear fashionable accessories like rings, earrings, and necklace and these are not so different with women's.

He may or may not be the best soccer player in the world, but he is definitely an international-standard narcissist. The truth that he is a married father of two confirmed that he's straight, but as he admits, he is quite happy to be a gay icon. As the American online magazine Salon said, he has admitted that he likes to be admired and doesn't care whether it is done by women or by men. This attitude is very modern and progressive and Beckham's open-mindedness has undoubtedly helped to change some unsophisticated attitudes in this very male, tough, still largely working-class sport.

To sum up from Beckham's example and the other data, a typical lifestyle of metrosexual is as follows.

1) He takes good care of himself and his belonging and gives priority to his private life and family than social life. He takes care of his appearance from head to toe by bodybuilding, styling his hair, waxing his brows, using plenty of skin/hair care products, wearing perfume and

has even considered plastic surgery to improve his appearance. In <Fig. 7> a man is taking pedicure service with other women. Metrosexual has a keen interest in fashion, cooking, brand names, interior decorating, and nice cars. He loves to read fashion magazines as well as sport newspapers. He dresses in style and enjoys shopping. He is sociable, charming, and always finds success with women.

2) He engages in activities such as ironing his jeans and t-shirts, sometimes wearing makeup, spending hours on his hair whether dyeing it, styling it, or talking about it. He enjoys hosting parties/events, generally prefers wine to beer. He is romantic with an appreciation for art and hip to all things sophisticated. When it comes to sexual orientation, he is normally straight though he has stereotypical "gay" interests.

3) He has a sophisticated aesthetic sense and often a well developed feminine side. He is emotionally sensitive and aware, verbal and communicative, physically fit and clean, and well-mannered. Sometimes he is narcissistic. Because these metrosexual's expressions are more likely to be considered as traditional female characteristics, metrosexual is often mistaken for gays. He is self-assured in himself enough to express his feelings without fear of feeling like he is homosexual in the process. What is more important is that he is open-minded to everybody and has a positive and passionate attitude for his work.

### 3. Fashion

Metrosexual definitely becomes creative and exciting in choosing his attire. All the latest trends from designers' collection show that all men have finally decided to explore untouched



<Fig. 7> A man is taking pedicure service with other women from [www.myphoto.com](http://www.myphoto.com)



territory before such as bright colours, contrasting shades, floral prints and funky shoes. Thousands of fashion styles of metrosexual can be found on the street nowadays. Generally common points among them were extracted and characteristics in silhouette, material, color, pattern, and detail were described briefly.

The silhouette of metrosexual is generally slim and has flowing line. On the whole, it is lightly fitted into the body and especially a fitting level of the waist area is very important. The shape of shoulder is soft and round, neither angular nor padded. This is apparently shown in <Fig. 6>. As a material, luxurious silk with a soft touch, transparent chiffon, cotton with a light and soft touch, a knitted wear with a flowing line, and other feminine and luxurious ones are used for men's wear and especially in case of shirts, blouses, and scarves, characteristics of material are well exposed.

<Fig. 8> shows a scene of TV drama televised in Korea in 2004. It's title is "something happened in Bally" and it was very popular at that time. Two heros who were described as typical metrosexuals, were so popular among TV viewers. Their fashion styles are revealed in <Fig. 8>.Both of them are wearing blouses made of



<Fig. 8> two metrosexuals wearing silk blouse with floral pattern and transparent shirts, from "something happened in Bally"

silk and cotton with a light and soft touch.

When it comes to color, a wide variety of vivid and pastel colors of red, pink, violet, blue, orange are used as a main or sub color. These kind of colors were not used for men's wear before. Now the days are over when colours like black, grey, and brown were the stamps of a man's masculinity while all other colours were shunned because everything that was not dark was too "girly." For example, as a working man, an aqua, baby pink, or pale lime tie added to a dark colored suit makes the perfect combination for an important meeting. Pin striped shirts with hints of fresh oranges, blues and greens are forever chic and all the rage.

Various stripes, floral and geometric patterns are expressed by a method of printing or embroidery. The latest trends among them were floral and printed shirts in an assortment of colours and shades. Surprisingly, these patterns looks very classy and attractive in a casual setting. Very decorative details like lace, beads, embroidery and fur are trimmed. In <Fig. 9> a man is wearing a fur coat and looks gorgeous, not strange.



<Fig. 9> A man is wearing a fur coat, from "something happened in Bally"



#### IV. Cultural and Social Implications of Metrosexual

As mentioned earlier, a mode includes the spirit of the times when it appears and becomes popular. In other words, it shows cultural and social changes of a society. Therefore the new spirit of the current generation can be found from an investigation on the mode, metrosexual, and it has cultural and social implications. They are as follows.

Firstly, aesthetic standards for the perfect man among both men and women have changed. In the past times, especially before the 1990's, macho or Marlboro man types were attractive to women. Macho, frequently quoted word, is used for man who is markedly masculine in appearance or manner. That is to say, stereotypically male characteristics such as virility, strength and toughness were essential condition to the perfect man. Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, respectively known well as Rambo and Terminator, are representative examples for macho. Both of them had so-called manly characteristics like overdeveloped muscularity, tanned skin, eyes burning with passion, few words and hit the headlines as a action movie star in the 1980's. They were very popular idols and clued us in understanding people's aesthetic mind of those times. But what is interesting is that they seem to be outdated in our eyes nowadays. This can be explained by change of our aesthetic view on the ideal man.

Currently, women with jobs are increasing and this leads to a collapse of conventional sex role. Traditionally economic responsibility was charged to men and women had to take care of houseworks and children. So women preferred macho men with an economic ability because

they needed supporter for living. However, more and more couples work together for a living and do housework together in these days. Eventually, conservative sex role has come to change little by little and women don't have to rely on men for living when they choose the men because they earn the money. They have come to want to meet a new type of men and their standards for the perfect man gradually have moved from macho man to considerate man who has a good appearance.

The more independent, wealthy, self-centered and powerful women become, the more they are likely to want attractive, well-groomed, well-dressed men around them. By the same token, the less men can rely on women, the more likely they are to take care of themselves. Finally, narcissism may become a survival strategy. Apparently, some men actually buy their own clothes and accessories in these days.

Secondly, men began to explore for their new identity escaping from traditionally standardized masculinity that they have been forced to follow. Popularity of metrosexual mode which is especially characterized by men's sincere concern for improving an appearance such as fashion and beauty shows this tendency apparently.

As Entwistle<sup>17)</sup> argues, the clothes we choose to wear can be expressive of identity, telling others something about our gender, class, status and so on.<sup>17)</sup> Indeed, an appearance is the means by which identities are marked out and sustained. For example, the figures of the dandy and the romantic in the nineteenth century represented two divergent practices of dress and consumption. The dandy style was an older aristocratic style of dress which articulated a concern for individual distinction, a never ending concern to appear 'distinguished', while the Romantic style represents a more familiar

desire within contemporary culture, namely to be an expressive individual and be 'true to oneself'. Thus the dandy style emphasized the artifice of appearance, the self as performed and perfected through self-conscious use of dress and the body, while the Romantic style was concerned with authenticity and the self as 'genuine' and 'natural'.<sup>18)</sup>

For a long time, men have been confined in social stereotypes about a sex role. They had to be so called strong and masculine regardless of their own preference. It was forbidden to men in public to express their feminine side such as sensitiveness, emotion or weakness or to have interest in lifestyle frequently relating to women like shopping, caring fashion and skin, chatting, cooking, and so on. Men breaking these taboos were considered as those with some problems and they had to restrain themselves and adapt themselves to a fixed frame of a society. Therefore it was very difficult for men to find what is their real identity and lead their own life according to it.

By the way, social conditions rapidly have changed during current some years and men actively have come to take part in this change, too. They willingly have accepted this metrosexual mode that boldly breaks existing taboos relating to men. This acceptance means that men have begun to explore for their own identity because an appearance including the clothes expresses a person's identity, as mentioned earlier. In the end, they will be able to find their genuine identity and lead their life according to their choices regardless of social stereotypes.

## V. Conclusion

There are millions of modes in a wide variety

of area. Some of them disappear and the others are spread out. The mode expand in a society because our contemporaries accept it as a desirable thing and rise of a mode includes the spirit of the times and has a cultural and social implications.

Metrosexual is quickly rising mode nowadays and there are some backgrounds. They are a collapse of stereotypes in various fields, spread of lookism in a visual image period, extension of commercialism and expansion of men's character casual trend. By Word Spy, metrosexual is defined as an urban male with a strong aesthetic sense who spent a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. He takes care of his appearance from head to toe by bodybuilding, styling his hair, using plenty of skin/hair care products and has much interest in fashion, cooking, brand names, interior decorating, and nice cars. He engages in activities such as ironing his jeans and t-shirts, sometimes wearing makeup, spending hours on his hair. When it comes to sexual orientation, he is normally straight though he has stereotypical "gay" interests. He has a sophisticated aesthetic sense and often a well developed feminine side. What is more important is that he is open-minded to everybody and has a positive and passionate attitude for his work.

When it comes to fashion, the silhouette of metrosexual is generally slim and has flowing line. On the whole, it is lightly fitted into the body. As a material, luxurious silk with a soft touch, transparent chiffon, cotton with a light and soft touch, and a knitted wear with a flowing line, and other feminine and luxurious ones are used. A wide variety of vivid and pastel colors of red, pink, violet, blue, orange are used as a main or sub color but these kind of colors were not used for men's wear before.

Various stripes, floral and geometric patterns are expressed by method of printing or embroidery and decorative details like lace, beads, embroidery and fur are trimmed.

From spread of this mode, two cultural and social implications were extracted. Firstly, the current young generation's aesthetic standards for the perfect man changed from macho man to considerate man who had a good appearance and this suggested that a conventional sex role broke down. Secondly, men began to explore for their own identity escaping from traditionally standardized masculinity that they had been forced to follow.

This study on fashion trend is very helpful to understand changes of the current young generation's lifestyle, aesthetic attitude for an appearance and way of thinking and this make it possible to forecast the change of our society and culture.

Meantime, tendency of men's adornment does not appear only in modern times. Considering historical facts, men's clothes were exaggerated so much and decorated elaborately in Italy, Germany, and Spain in the 16th century, the Renaissance period. For example, when Spanish style strongly influenced the mode of the other European countries, men wore the elaborately embroidered doublet with short skirt and puffed sleeves over an embroidered lingerie shirt and the narrow ruffles or ruches which finished neck and sleeves showed at neck and wrist. Later, the tiny neck ruffle became a fully developed ruff; then, a huge cartwheel, starched and wired. The width of the fashionable ruff was about a quarter of a yard and the frills contained eighteen or nineteen yards of fine linen lawn. Ruffs were starched in various colors, blue, green, with yellow being a favorite and worn all over Europe.<sup>19)</sup> Also in the 18th century, known

as "Rococo", elegance and refinement were regarded as a valuable standard aesthetically for men's wear in France and In the 19th century, a dandy, a stylish man who was very popular in England, considered high quality and nobility as an important thing but did not make outward show.

Then, it will be an interesting further study to find out metrosexual style appeared in a history of fashion.

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