

Skin Deep

Do Women Like Men That Cleanshaven?



By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

AMERICAN women didn't shave their armpits en masse until the 1920s, after a perfect storm of sleeveless dresses and a barrage of advertisements by depilatory makers characterized underarm hair as ugly.

Next came the taming of women's leg hair. By the 1930s, beauty writers scolded women with forests under their silk stockings. Decades later, what began as a fad had solidified into custom. Girls coming of age no longer needed to be told their leg hair was unsightly. They got rid of it.

Can the same thing happen with men?

These days, the hair on men's chests, backs, armpits and even "down there" has become suspect — if you believe the marketing campaigns. Several recent online videos created by brands like Gillette recast hair removal below the neck as the domain of average Joes.

Having a chest as smooth as Matthew McConaughey's is old hat for competitive swimmers, urbane insiders who became swept up in the metrosexual moment and some gay men who have long embraced hairlessness. To play Bruno, a gay fashion reporter who favors hot pants, the formerly hirsute Sacha Baron Cohen endured repeated waxathons to get bare nearly everywhere. But now evidence from market research and academia indicates that more men are removing hair from their chests, armpits and groins. The phenomenon skews to mostly college-age guys or those in their 30s. Reasons run the gamut from because My Girlfriend Likes It to a desire to flout a six-pack or be clean.

"It used to be a hallmark of male models and homosexuals," said Kat Fay, a senior analyst at Mintel, who writes an annual men's grooming report. She added that the high-maintenance primping of metrosexuals was "privileged" and clustered in cities; by contrast, this campaign has "more of an everyday middle-America feel" and aims to convince squeamish men that body shaving is "the greatest dating weapon."

Little research has been done on male body depilation. But a 2005 study published in the journal Sex Roles found that 63.6 percent of 118 men at the University of South Florida said they trimmed or removed body hair below the neck to be hygienic and attractive. And in a yet-to-be-published survey of 364 male students at the same university, more than 80 percent said they engaged in body depilation, said Michael Boroughs, the lead author of both studies and a graduate student in psychology.

What's more, he added, there was no statistically significant difference in the number of gay and straight men who tamed the hair on their chests, abs and groin.

Unsurprisingly, the loudest voices making the case for so-called manscaping are the creators of the five-blade shavers, multitasking gels and gadgets made specifically for trimming and shaving in the shower.

What may surprise, however, is how candid the pitches are, and that no fewer than four brands have broached the seemingly treacherous topic of manscaping.

In May, Gillette started a series of how-to and why-do-it videos online suggesting that men go further with body shaving. The rationale varied by part. Chest? "A sweater should be bought not grown." Armpits? "An empty stable smells better than a full one." And their coup de grâce is the groin: "Trees look taller when there's no underbrush."

A muscular cartoon with piteled privates even shows how to get bare without putting "your equipment at risk."

On the site for Nivea for Men, Justin Duval, a Canadian model, uses its Active3 shower gel to demonstrate how guys can go from hirsute to sleek in a jiffy. In the name of education, Mr. Duval is shown shaving starlike patterns around his nipples. As he gazes at his private parts, the camera stays waist-up; yet, the scene doesn't leave much to the imagination.

A comely blonde turns feral at the sight of a clean-shaven chest in a video advertisement for Braun's BodyCruZer, a precision trimmer with a Gillette blade.

In late May, Gillette's How to Shave Your Groin video ranked No. 3 on a list of the top online video advertisements compiled by Visible Measures, an Internet video measurement firm. In its three weeks on the list, it racked up more than 1.4 million views, not counting traffic to Gillette's site. (Previously, videos promoting the idea of shaving "everywhere" as well as specifically touting Philips Norelco's Bodygroom, a trimmer and shaver, also attracted notice with 880,000 views, according to Visible Measures.)

Three years ago, before catchy videos ricocheted Web-wide, the prospect of a company like Gillette talking to men about shaving their nether regions "wasn't in the realm of possibility," said Matt Cutler, the vice president for marketing and analytics at Visible Measures. But Gillette's whimsical videos prompted men to discuss their habits and "what their girlfriends ask them to do," Mr. Cutler said. More than 1,100 people have commented about the groin video at YouTube.com.



BODY BALDNESS

Clockwise from top left: On Nivea.com, a demonstration of male body shaving. A Gillette video online suggesting men go further with shaving. Sacha Baron Cohen, left, who was bare (nearly) everywhere for "Bruno," at the film's premiere in Sydney, Australia.

Which came first: the advertisements or a societal sloaching toward hairlessness? "Is the cultural trend dictated by marketing or is the marketing dictating the cultural trend?" asked Dr. Roberto Olivardia, an author of the book "Adonis Complex" and a clinical instructor of psychology at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass. "It's a little of both, but it leans more on the marketing being very influential in how people see themselves."

Showing men removing their body hair normalizes it. "Just having a video that's not threatening is helping them say it's fine," said Nicolas Maurer, the vice president for marketing at Betersdorf USA, of which Nivea is a brand. "That's a kind of reassurance for guys."

Nearly 10 percent of the 500 to 700 men Nivea surveyed nationwide were shaving their body to look "fit, groomed and clean," Mr. Maurer said. It's hardly minimalist behavior, but as he said, "one in 10 is not little."

Yet, do women prefer their men sleek? Not necessarily. Hairless armpits can be a deal breaker, which is odd, because those female naysayers may shave their underarms. Asbellygrad commented

about a Gillette video on YouTube: "Trust me, a girl is turned off by a man who shaves his armpits. It's kind of weird and creepy. Unless you're an Olympic swimmer."

Plenty of female commenters online dislike dudes with less body hair than they have. As Eleonorjane wrote about a chest-shaving video on YouTube, "I want a real man, not one that's trying to look like he's 12 again!"

Having hair on one's chest — as the expression suggests — signals maturity and boldness.

Think Hugh Jackman. "Guys of a certain age exude a certain confidence that says, 'I do have hair on my chest, I am cool with it,'" said Adam Rapoport, the style editor for GQ magazine. But, "22-year-old guys want to show off their pecs, abs and six packs and don't want hair getting in the way."

Will today's minority of men engaging in body shaving one day be the majority? Mr. Boroughs thinks we are on our way. He has heard from bewildered parents whose teenage sons shaved their chests and ended up with ingrown hairs. In the future, Mr. Boroughs wonders, "Are prepubescent boys going to feel pressure to shave like girls do?"



FOR THE HAIRY: Braun's BodyCruZer, a precision trimmer with a Gillette blade.

Nasty Job?

Do women really prefer men to remove their body hair? Smooth armpits or being waxed to the nines can be read as "overkill," said Kat Fay, an analyst at Mintel, a market research firm. And few women want to be enlisted to shave their man's back, however delightful Gillette makes it seem in one of their video advertisements. "Hon-ey, can you shave my back?" Ms. Fay quipped. "That's not very fun."

Jeffrey Steinberg from Scarsdale, N.Y., saved his wife that chore with a series of laser treatments by Dr. Arielle Kauvar, a dermatologist on Fifth Avenue. "I outsourced my lawn and gardening care to a nice Italian guy," said Mr. Steinberg, a



Use a Laser

marketing consultant. "Tidying hair off my back will go to Dr. Kauvar."

Dr. Kauvar used a LightSheer Duet (at left), a new laser with a large treatment head, so big swaths can be rendered hairless in five or six 15-minute visits. Men who want to have their back hair removed permanently often have to sit with a topical anesthetic for an hour before each of a half-dozen visits. Dr. Kauvar said, so there used to be the "time and pain and nuisance factor."

The cost of laser hair removal remains a factor, however. Mr. Steinberg said he paid \$1,000 for his back and shoulders.

CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS