

GLADYS CHUNG  More grooming services and shops for men are popping up, feeding growing demand

PAMPERING MEN

After years of being sidelined, men in Singapore now have it good when it comes to their shopping and grooming needs.

Retailers, malls and service providers are pulling out the stops to pamper them.

For the first time, entire floors, sections and salons are being carved out and devoted to men's fashion, beauty and grooming services. In the past, services for men were often added as an afterthought.

Dr Seshan Ramaswami, an associate professor of marketing education at Singapore Management University, says the trend is a "natural consequence" as the women's market is near saturation because of fierce competition.

"Marketers are always looking for newer, emerging markets where there is potential for growth," he says.

The men's market is fairly underdeveloped, he notes, with the beauty and grooming sector "not much developed beyond just shaving creams and hair gel".

"This is a segment with much potential across the globe," he adds.

Indeed, Ms Tomoko Takanoura, a research analyst at market research firm Euromonitor International, says the men's skincare category in Singapore jumped by 10.4 per cent, from \$13.3 million in 2011 to \$14.7 million last year.

The men's fashion retail segment here, which covers clothing and shoes, also saw a 7.9 per cent increase from 2011 to last year. In 2011, the market was valued at \$1.1 billion and it was estimated to be worth \$1.2 billion last year.

Increasingly sophisticated Singapore men are fuelling the growth.

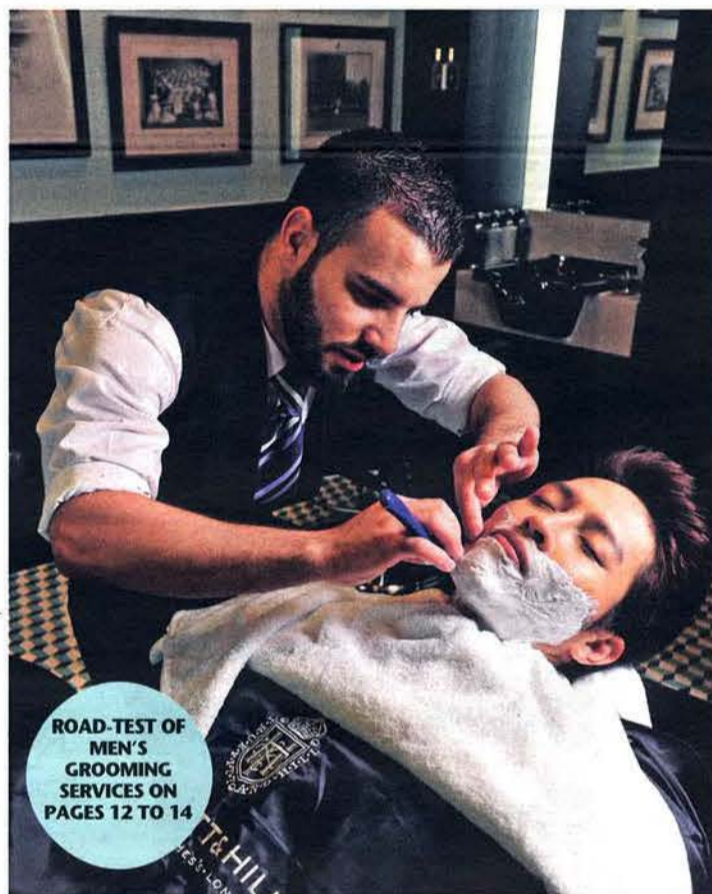
Through their travels, exposure to international men's magazines and blogs dedicated to men's fashion and grooming, they are now schooled in the finer art of looking good.

While most men here are still conservative when it comes to test-driving new fashion and grooming trends, eschewing primping is no longer a sign of manhood.

Associate Professor Sharon Ng, who teaches marketing and international business at Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University, says: "In the past, when men bought grooming products, it was frowned upon as many considered it feminine behaviour. The perception then was that real men do not use or need beauty products."

But times have changed.

"Now, men are increasingly aware that personal grooming is important, because a well-groomed man may have a better chance of success at work and in his social life."



ROAD-TEST OF MEN'S GROOMING SERVICES ON PAGES 12 TO 14

Photographer DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES; Stylist JEROME AWASTHI; Grooming FION TAN; Model ALLEN C, from Looque; Location: Truefitt & Hill

UPMARKET GROOMING SERVICES
 In recent months, at least five men-only grooming shops have opened in Singapore.

While hole-in-the-wall barbershops in the heartland have always been around, some entrepreneurs are kicking the old cut-and-shave up a notch and making it fashionable again.

Truefitt & Hill, a two-century-old British barbershop, is one. It set up its first branch here last month in Ann Siang Hill.

With its plush carpeting, British colonial decor and uniformed barbers, the outfit is set to impress. The range of shaving creams, soaps, colognes, shavers and badger-hair shaving brushes promise men a pampering time.

Mr Marc Nicholson, chief executive of the local franchise, says he spotted an opportunity when he noticed a lack of men-only grooming places here.

"Most guys in Singapore get their grooming done in women's salons," says the 44-year-old Canadian, who is married to a Singaporean and has been living here for more than a decade.

"I wanted to create an exclusive,

luxurious environment akin to a gentlemen's club, where men can be groomed in the comfort of their own masculine environment."

Anticipating the demand for such services, he intends to open two more outlets by the end of the year.

Hounds Of The Baskervilles, a tattoo parlour-cum-barbershop in Bali Lane which opened last September, was one of the first to revive interest in the old-school trade.

Besides haircuts and hot-towel shaves, the outfit also offers tattoos. Prices start from \$15 for a crew cut.

Its owner, Mr Feroze McLeod, a 26-year-old Singaporean tattoo artist, declines to reveal sales figures but says business is steady. There are now five barbers, up from two when it started.

The latest kid on the block is We Need A Hero, which opened earlier this month in the hip Tiong Bahru area.

Backed by the Spa Esprit Group, a beauty and lifestyle chain, it offers a comprehensive range of services, from shaving and haircuts to body hair removal and brow grooming. Prices start from \$25 for a brow threading session.

Ms Cynthia Chua, founder and chief executive of the chain, says opening a men's grooming store now makes business sense.

"The men's grooming market here is easily worth \$100 million now. Men already make up about 20 per cent of our customer base and we expect the number to grow," she says.

The Spa Esprit Group owns and runs Spa Esprit, a spa and beauty salon chain that provides head-to-toe treatments; Strip, a hair-removal studio; Browhaus, a brow-grooming salon; Qi Mantra, which offers traditional acupressure massages with a modern take; and Beauty Emporium, which provides grooming services and stocks cult beauty brands.

"With our expertise, we thought we would set up a men-only grooming space so guys can feel at ease when they pop in for treatments," she says.

Over at Tangs Orchard, The Gentlemen's Kounge on its beauty and wellness floor on Level 7, called Seviin At Tangs, opened in February. There, men can enjoy pedicures as well as hand and foot massages while knocking back a martini.

Grooming product brands are also getting their game on to lure men to their stores.

Last July, American men's skincare label Lab Series opened its first flagship store in the world at Ion Orchard.

Standing at 274 sq ft, it offers free skin analysis and quickie facials.

The brand declines to reveal specific sales figures but its spokesman says the revenue at the store is double that of its best-performing counter at Robinsons The Centrepoint.

Earlier this month, French beauty brand Biotherm followed suit by opening its first free-standing men's store in the world.

The 180 sq ft store in Ion Orchard is divided into a self-service area where products are categorised by solutions to skin problems, a consultation area and a lounge for quick grooming services such as mini-facials.

Mr Patrick Kullenberg, Biotherm Homme's international general manager, says it is time for brands to pay more attention to the male consumer.

"Until now, men's skincare was predominantly sold in feminine environments," he says.

"With demand for Biotherm Homme products continuously on the rise, we felt the timing was right to offer our customers a shopping experience tailored to their needs."

The brand declines to share specific figures and would say only that there was a double-digit percentage increase in sales in its Asian markets between 2011 and last year.

Personal care retail chain Watsons, too, is keeping an eye on its male customers.

From next month, it will roll out Men Care Bays at select stores here, including the one at the upcoming Jem in Jurong East. These retail clusters devoted to men's products will have video screens that offer more information on the items, among other features.

NEW SHOPPING OPTIONS

There may not be an entire shopping block dedicated to men's fashion here just yet, such as the 109 Men's Mall in Shibuya, Tokyo, but guys here now enjoy a wider buffet of shopping options.

Some malls, for instance, are carving out bigger retail spaces for menswear.

The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands will be turning part of its mall into a male shopping haven before the end of this year. It is unable to confirm where this dedicated shopping area will be or the number of labels it will carry.

But its spokesman says new-to-market labels in the line-up include Argentinian brand La Martina and Italian brand Brioni, alongside Ermenegildo Zegna which is new to The Shoppes.

Mr John Postle, vice-president of retail at Marina Bay Sands, says the mall is simply moving with the times.

"We want to cater to the rise of these well-heeled men who are seeking a variety of ready-to-wear high-end fashion, as well as niche and bespoke services under one roof."

Orchardgateway, a new mall along Orchard Road that is slated to open before year's end, will also dedicate an entire floor, which spans about 20,000 sq ft, to men. While no details have been released, the mall's spokesman says it will feature fashion boutiques, salons and a barbershop.

"The men's fashion and grooming sector has long been neglected," he notes. "The latent demand is making itself felt right now and this justifies a special floor which will be a one-stop destination for male shoppers."

Fashion labels are also turning to personalised services and innovative products to whet men's shopping appetite. Italian shoemaker Santoni, which opened its first store here in Marina Bay Sands last September, sends a master artisan from Milan to its boutique at The Shoppes twice a year to offer customers personalised leather shoes.

On May 24, Spanish luxury brand Loewe will launch its first men's pop-up store in Asia at Takashimaya Shopping Centre. The 400 sq ft store will be open for at least three months.

There, items such as leather trunks and mahjong and domino tiles can be personalised. The store will also offer its full made-to-order men's collection, which includes leather bags, suede espadrilles and accessories.

This collection is currently available only at select Loewe flagships, such as the ones in Spain.

High-street brand Ben Sherman also introduced a personalised service last month that is usually offered only at luxury boutiques.

At The Shirt Bar – a shelf filled with shirts, essentially – a "shirtelier", or a trained shirt expert, will help shoppers find the perfect shirt. Free alterations are provided.

To make the woollen suit more appealing to men who prefer fuss-free laundering, Raoul rolled out the Ultimate Suit last month. It is made of 100 per cent wool, but can be hand-washed or thrown into the washing machine and still retain its shape.

While it might be tempting for retailers and entrepreneurs to jump into the relatively untapped men's grooming and fashion markets, retail experts say they must first understand the male psyche.

"Men's purchasing habits are very different from women's," notes Ms Megan Ong, deputy director of the Singapore Institute of Retail Studies at Nanyang Polytechnic. "They are generally attracted to technical and functional aspects of a product or service. Unlike women, their buying decisions are based less on emotions and impulses and more on product features and benefits."

"So the ambience, merchandise, space allocation and service protocol in the store must be implemented with a clear and deep understanding of the male psyche."

A typical male shopper prefers an uncluttered layout and easy-to-understand product classifications, she adds.

Mr Kien Lee, 37, managing director of online lifestyle portal Senatus.net, agrees things are looking up for male shoppers.

"For one thing, the sizing at international brands such as Banana Republic, Brook Brothers and Zara now come in slim-fit cuts that suit Asian men better," he says.

He also likes how he can get everything, from a customised Dunhill suit to trendy casualwear from Tsumori Chisato and Undercover by Jun Takahashi, without having to leave town.

However, Singapore is still some way off from being a shopping paradise for men.

"Selections in Thailand and Japan have a much greater variety in terms of design, cut and silhouette," he says.

"Many items that are featured in international men's fashion titles are still not available here."

gladys@sph.com.sg