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Gay or Straight? Hard to Tell

By [DAVID COLMAN](#)

ARE you confused that the newly styled Backstreet Boys, hoping for a comeback, look an awful lot like the stars of "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy"? Are you curious why Brad Pitt, to promote his new film, dyed his crew cut so blond that even his hairdresser is scratching his head?

Well, how about that guy you see in the locker room, changing out of his Prada lace-ups, Hugo Boss flat-front pants and Paul Smith dress shirt and cuff links into a muscle T-shirt and Adidas soccer shorts. Does he wear that wedding ring because he was married in New York - or in Massachusetts?

Or those two 40-something guys walking in the park in pastel oxford-cloth shirts and khakis, collars turned up and cuffs rolled, one of them pushing a stroller? Is that baby his - or theirs?

Confused? You are not alone. It is late June, when many cities across the country celebrate gay pride, and bare-chested he-men dressed in very little are out in the streets again. But look past them, and June is more confusing. As gay men grow more comfortable shrugging off gay-identified clothing and Schwarzeneggerian fitness standards, straight men are more at ease flaunting a degree of muscle tone seldom seen outside of a Men's Health cover shoot. And they are adopting looks - muscle shirts, fitted jeans, sandals and shoulder bags - that as recently as a year ago might have read as, well, gay.

The result is a new gray area that is rendering gaydar - that totally unscientific sixth sense that many people rely on to tell if a man is gay or straight - as outmoded as Windows 2000. It's not that straight men look more stereotypically gay per se, or that out-of-the-closet gay men look straight. What's happening is that many men have migrated to a middle ground where the cues traditionally used to pigeonhole sexual orientation - hair, clothing, voice, body language - are more and more ambiguous. Make jokes about it. Call it what you will: "gay vague" will do. But the poles are melting fast.

The new convergence of gay-vague style is not to be confused with metrosexuality, which steered straight men to a handful of feminine perks like pedicures, scented candles and prettily striped dress shirts. Gay vagueness affects both straight and gay men. It involves more than grooming and clothes. It notably includes an attitude of indifference to having one's sexual orientation misread; hence the breakdown of many people's formerly reliable gaydar.

"I don't have a clue anymore," said Brad Habansky, whose four-month-old men's store and salon, Guise, in the tony Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, specializes in fashionable men's wear. "Some of the straight guys who come in, I never would have thought were straight, and some of the gay men, I never would have guessed either."

Confused as he is, Mr. Habansky can at least relate. "A lot of guys think I'm gay," he said. He added that it is his gay customers who need the most convincing that he's straight.

"Have I been called gay a gazillion times?" said Robert Vonderheide, a straight man who is a sales representative for a several clothing lines in New York. "Yes. Do I give a damn? No." He added, though, that it does not happen as much lately, as he sees less difference between gay and straight men in terms of how they express masculinity outside the bedroom.

"If you don't care less, it just adds to your appeal now," said Kate White, the editor of Cosmopolitan. She pointed out that Seth, the sensitive, moody character played by Adam Brody on "The O.C.," who is constantly razzed by the straight jocks on the show for seeming gay, has become the surprise heartthrob among viewers.

Just as there are gay-vague television characters, there are gay-vague bands like the Bravery (which was photographed by Steven Klein for L'Uomo Vogue looking like 1970's gay hustlers). The group's single "Honest Mistake" seems to be about getting your best friend's sexuality wrong; but then again it may not be. The lyrics are kind of vague.

"The codes have broken down completely," said Valerie Steele, the director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. "The other night I was at a dinner sitting next to someone who was talking about how he couldn't tell anymore, that he just didn't have any gaydar. And it was so funny. I couldn't tell if he was gay or straight."

WHAT has sped the change is the erosion of the time-honored fashion hierarchy. For years gay men were the ones to first adopt a style trend - flat-front pants, motorcycle jackets, crew cuts - and straight men would pick up on it more or less as gay men tired of it. Now gays and straights are embracing new styles almost simultaneously.

"The lag time between gay innovation and straight appropriation is nonexistent now," said Bruce Pask, the style director of Cargo magazine, who is gay. "They're picking up the trends as fast as we are."

Marshal Cohen, the chief analyst of the NPD Group, which researches trends in the fashion industry, noted that far more men now feel free to indulge an interest in style. In 1985 only 25 percent of all men's apparel was bought by men, he said; 75 percent was bought by women for men. By 1998 men were buying 52 percent of apparel; in 2004 that number grew to 69 percent and shows no sign of slowing.

"We have left the era when the defining line for men is one of sexual preference," he said. "Now, it's either 'I want to be stylish' or 'I don't.' " With the coming of the Internet, men, away from the scrutiny of salespeople, are free to shop in places they might not visit in person and to buy clothes that, stripped of the context of a store, lose not only gay or straight meanings but also intimations about class, age and race.

The result is a full-blown category of men's wear that draws equally from skateboard and surf culture, the preppy canon and the runways of Prada and Marc Jacobs, hot brands like James Perse, Rogan, Rogues Gallery, Trovata, Energie, Original Penguin, Le Tigre and Libertine.

Even the once gay-oriented underwear brand 2xist, now credits straight men, a spokeswoman said, with 50 percent of its roughly \$40 million annual business, a statistic helped along by mentions on "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and numerous sightings of the 2xist waistband on Justin Timberlake.

"All the brands I rep are gay vague," Mr. Vonderheide said, referring to, among others, Modern Amusement, a mainstay of Urban Outfitters; Wash; and the sexy Da'mage line of denim. He does not use the word metrosexual - "that horrible term" - because he thinks it marginalizes fashionable men by implying that there is something unusual or unmanly about liking clothes. "Men are aware of fashion, and they're not afraid of it anymore, gay or straight," he said.

Ms. White of Cosmopolitan said that her teenage son and her husband, who used to shop with her, have been going out stag and bagging some interesting choices. "My husband came home with a sheared beaver coat," she said. "He said he thought it was shearing. He never would have been shopping for that, but the salesguy whipped it out, and . . ." Beaver or not, the coat stayed. "He loved it too much," she said. "It's definitely gay vague."

Overall she and her readers approve of the trend, but there is a limit. "You like the fact that's he's paying more attention," she said, "but on the other hand, the thought of him getting a pedicure makes some women a little squeamish."

Some gay men are of like mind. As they shift their athletic interest from the gym to sports or become parents and find it hard to work out as often, the classic gay gym body is becoming just one of several options. The term "Chelsea boy," denoting a bronzed, buffed, waxed gay ideal, has even acquired a pejorative tint.

"It's easier for gay men to come out of the closet as slobs, just as it's easier for straight men to be dandies," said Brendan Lemon, the editor of Out, the gay men's magazine. "One of the things that's breaking down how gay guys are seen is that people know more kinds of men who are gay, nonstereotypical ones like soldiers and athletes rather than stylists and fashion designers and decorators." The lack of any one gay sensibility has meant that Out and other gay publications have struggled to reconcile a host of identities, while gay-vague magazines like Details and Cargo, aimed squarely at savvy, fashion-conscious men, are having a heyday.

Mr. Lemon suggested that for a generation that grew up watching "The Real World" on MTV, in which the gay and lesbian characters were no more or less flamboyant in dress or persona than their straight counterparts, being gay carries neither the stigma nor the specialness it once did. That, he said, has also altered the landscape of men's style.

"If you can hang out with your straight buddies and be part of the group," he said, "why would you feel the need to look different as an assertion of identity? That show is a great example of normalization and dressing to reflect sexuality."

Mr. Pask agreed that many gay men, younger ones especially, don't want to feel, or look, that different. "They didn't need to assert their place in society, their right to be who they are," he said. "They're not fighting for visibility. We got it; they don't need it." Young men may associate the gay looks of the late 1980's and early 90's with the anger and anguish that AIDS wrought on the gay world, a time they have little connection with.

Of course there are still places that gay men will go that straight men will not. The Speedo swimsuit is still off limits to even the most vain heterosexual American men, as is knowing the words to Kylie Minogue's latest hit single.

And Alice Eisenberg, who works the door at several New York gay bars, said her supersensitive gaydar remains infallible. Last weekend she surprised onlookers when she stopped a gay-vague guy, complete with a fedora, in line at the Boys Room, an East Village bar, asking him, "You know this is a gay bar, right?"

"The jeans were right, the loafers were right, and he had a good body," she recalled. "But the shirt was completely untucked, and I think it was Old Navy."

The guy thanked her, turned and fled.