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A Man's New Best Friends: Diamonds, Gold and Pearls

**Sales of Men's Jewelry Surge
 As Bling Goes Mainstream;
 A Run on \$250 Bracelets**

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An enduring image of men and their jewelry is the 1970s guy with his polyester shirt unbuttoned to reveal a regrettable glimpse of gold chain. So it may seem strange that jewelers from Harry Winston to Kay Jewelers have been rolling out men's pearl necklaces, pavé diamond rings and gold bracelets.

Annual sales of men's bling have taken off, nearly doubling from 2004 to 2006 and reaching \$6 billion in the U.S., according to Unity Marketing, a research firm in Stevens, Pa. While we often blame trends on the young, it was a middle-age businessman seated beside me at a dinner last spring who unbuttoned his shirt collar to reveal a glowing black pearl on a leather cord.



Simmons Jewelry Co.

Music entrepreneur Russell Simmons recently launched a line of jewelry for men.


Frederic DeNarp, chief executive of Cartier North America, said recently that Cartier has been selling an unusual number of diamond-encrusted men's watches.

And there has been a recent run on \$250 pearl bracelets for men at PearlParadise.com, where 5% to 10% of sales are for men these days, up from almost nothing five years ago. More than half of the 1,052 men surveyed recently by Harris Interactive said they view grown men wearing jewelry -- other than watches, wedding bands and cuff links -- as "fashionable" and "sophisticated."

These days, luxury brands are hoping to spur new sales growth by luring in men, and jewelry marketers are going after a market they perceive as untapped. But the companies have seen the opportunity for years; why are they now starting to succeed? For most grown-ups, men's jewelry has long been so loaded with subliminal messages concerning sexuality, masculinity and class that no Madison Avenue advertising guru could persuade the average man-among-men to wear it. For men to get past these associations and wear the stuff, there must be some cultural explanation.

A 20-year-old surfer wearing a silver chain at his collar bone simply looks virile. But on an older man, the look is more complex; at its worst, it can be dangerously close to the look of a too-skimpy T-shirt on a grown woman. A graying fifty-something man I know recently confessed to me that he purchased a necklace, saying it reminded him

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of one he wore back when he was in his 20s, the last time men's necklaces were mainstream. This time around, "I just had to feel it on my skin," he said, sounding primal. His wife rolled her eyes.

Some men may be taking their cues from celebrities. Among the men with gray at their temples who are adorning themselves, Pierce Brosnan wears a Tahitian pearl at his neck.

The growth in men's jewelry tracks a broader interest among men in their own appearance, with sales of men's apparel, accessories, and even cosmetics on the rise. Indeed, the jewelry boom may be the latest outgrowth of the now-aging metrosexual phenomenon, in which young, urban, heterosexual men began to adopt personal-care habits such as eyebrow grooming that had long been more common among women. "In the post-metrosexual world, with David Beckham wearing nail polish and sarongs, you have the baby boomer who's not growing old gracefully," says Michael Macko, men's fashion director at Saks Fifth Avenue, which has been selling a lot of men's jewelry lately. "He's exercising and having cosmetic surgery -- there's so much more acceptance of what you can wear."

Fifty-year-old Milton Pedrazza, chief executive of the research group Luxury Institute, posits that "men are beginning to adorn themselves more because women are so much more self-sufficient and successful and far more picky, and now men need to compete in a more Darwinian fashion."

"Just a theory," he adds.

Neil Patak, a 20-year-old college student in Northridge, Calif., seems to concur. Mr. Patak, who has set his sights on a certain young lady, recently had an American Express platinum-card concierge chase down a \$155 Dolce & Gabbana pendant for himself at Harvey Nichols in London. It's important "to distinguish yourself among the other guys with the girls," he explains. "Girls want to see something noteworthy." American Express concierges have fielded many requests for men's necklaces, including an antique Roman-coin pendant and a black-diamond dog tag by jeweler David Yurman.

The jewelry boom is also part of the ebb and flow of fashion. After the freewheeling 1970s, most men avoided jewelry or hid it under their clothes. But a market for humongous pendants and rings grew among the hip-hop subset, and eventually, the style caught hold in the generations that followed the boomers. Hip-hop youth culture became normalized and toned down. Diamond Cartier watches? "That's a carryover from hip-hop and bling," says Tyler Thoreson, executive editor of fashion site Men.Style.Com, "and now it's made it to orthodontists in New Jersey."

Music entrepreneur Russell Simmons figures he can cash in on the interest in men's jewelry. He became a mogul by selling hip-hop and rap culture outside the 'hood. The jewelry industry, with its limited offerings for men, has overlooked the market "in the same way that the music industry missed what rap was," says Mr. Simmons. He recently launched a line of men's jewelry called the Simmons Jewelry Men's Collection, with a broad choice of chains, diamond crosses, dog tags, bracelets and rings. He reports it has a healthy 40% sell-through, meaning that 40% sells at full retail price, and it's sold in 1,900 stores, up from 180 in January 2007. "I've never seen a more untapped market," he says.

But still, unless you're Johnny Depp, there are limits to men's new freedom with jewelry. Judith Bright, a Nashville, Tenn., jewelry designer who works in hammered gold and silver, said she has received requests for men's pieces with semiprecious stones wrapped in silver or gold wire. She said this with her eyebrows raised and her nose wrinkled.

And even individuals who wear jewelry don't wear it everywhere. Diversity Affluence, a Hamburg, N.J., consulting group that helps marketers reach the "affluent ethnic consumer," recently surveyed 30 African-American professional men about their attitude toward jewelry for men. The verdict was widely in favor of buying it and wearing it almost anywhere except the one place where first impressions count most: a job interview.

Perhaps this explains why so many of the necklaces being sold to men these days aren't visible on the street: They're disappearing under men's shirts.

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