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Spornosexual shenanigans

by Nigel Bowen

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Hot on the heels of the SNAG and the metrosexual comes the 'spornosexual'. So what's it all about?

Two decades ago, a British journalist you've almost certainly never heard of unleashed the term 'metrosexual' on the world. Even if you know nothing about Mark Simpson, you're no doubt familiar with the type he so memorably labelled – the straight man who's into guyliner, designer outfits and exfoliating.

Of course, the world's changed a lot since 1994 and Simpson has now written a sequel to his seminal article identifying the metrosexual's contemporary offspring – the 'spornosexual' (I promise I'm not making any of this up).

Observing that blokes spend a lot more time watching (much more freely available) porn these days, as well as being bombarded by images of incredibly buff male athletes in publications such as *Men's Health* and billboards for luxury brands, Simpson explains his coining of spornosexual thus: "The new wave puts the 'sexual' into metrosexuality. In fact, a new term is needed to describe them, these pumped-up offspring of those Ronaldo and Beckham lunch-box ads, where sport got into bed with porn while Mr Armani took pictures. Let's call them 'spornosexuals'."

Speaking as someone who spent several years toiling in the salt mines of gentleman's publications – from the outright pornographic to the aspirationally homoerotic – I've got two observations to make about the spornosexual.

First, Simpson is on to something. When a society changes, the men and women in that society adapt. The SNAG (sensitive new age guy) phenomenon of the 1980s, though widely overblown, did point to the fact that as women, especially younger ones, abandoned their own traditional gender roles, men were behaving in more 'feminine' ways. Likewise, the 'new lad' craze of the mid to late 1990s, though also wildly overblown, was part of a broader pushback against political correctness and signalled a desire among men (often raised and educated by feminist mothers and school teachers) to stop apologising for their blokeyness.

Second, while the sociological phenomenon Simpson identifies does exist to some degree, you should take anything you hear about spornosexuals with a man-sized grain of salt, especially if it's coming from someone trying to sell you stuff.

The dirty little secret about the media's obsession with different types of 'new man' is that the old man – unlike straight females and gay males – isn't that into consumerism, outside of the boys' toys category anyway. The long and thankfully failed push by the commercial media to convince Aussie men that metrosexuality was the hot new thing was, at its root, all about selling them \$100 bottles of moisturiser and \$500 saris.

While there's a tradition of dandyism in parts of Europe and even the UK (think Oscar Wilde and David Beckham) the fact is Aussie men, by and large, aren't narcissistic clothes horses. It's telling that the only Australian male ever actually identified as being a metrosexual was Ian Thorpe, and it turns out he was just a fashion-obsessed young gay man all along.

That Aussie men aren't more paranoid about their body image and are more likely to shop at Lowes than Ralph Lauren is a source of great sorrow for the fashion-industrial complex and its media lackeys. (And, okay, perhaps also for their girlfriends and wives.)

But, on balance, I'd argue it's probably a healthy state of affairs. Please keep that in mind the next time some men's mag editor

encourages you to embrace your inner spornosexual.

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