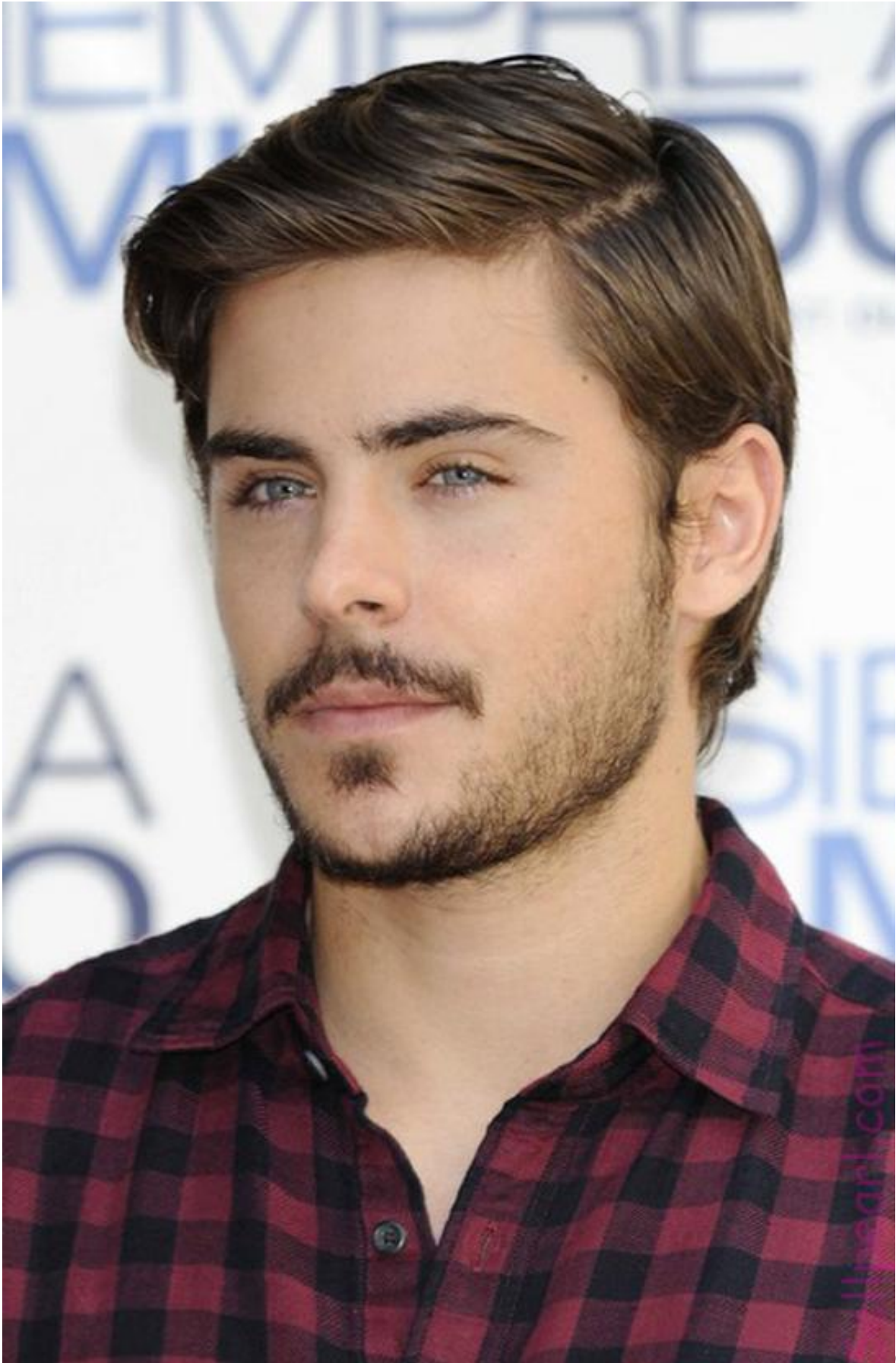


Hair Piece (February 2015 Sydney)

As so often happens in matters of dress something that at one moment is barely noticeable can suddenly start to become visible. This is exactly what happened with the style of facial hair currently being worn by certain young men. The group I have in mind are aged roughly between voting age and their early thirties. They are drawn from an urban, middle class and are, I suspect, well educated. The style taken by their facial hair is longer than what used to be called 'designer stubble' but it never attains (and never wants to.) the length and coverage of a full beard. Occupying this midway point between lots of hair and no hair at all is fundamental to what is happening on the faces of these young men.

The style (As I shall call it) has a number of features that ensure its occupancy of this mid-way position. Facial hair is kept at a length where the skin can be glimpsed through the facial thatch but stops short of vanishing altogether into being clean-shaven. In the other direction, hair length is not allowed to become a full beard that obscures all traces of the contours and surfaces of the skull. This means that the two poles of skin and beard can coexist without cancelling one another out. The maintenance of the 'natural' outline of the hair growth is important as a way of distinguishing the style from the other sorts of shapes.



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can be given to facial hair, for instance the moustache, the chin strap, and mutton chops. The work of the style is to maintain a place somewhere between the poles of clean-shaven and full beard. Too close to either of these would mean that the style would lose its identity.

Crucial to the significance of the style is how it sits in relation to the wardrobes of its wearers. It is able to migrate across a wide variety of dress styles that range from plaid shirts to business suits. If this is a sign of the style's compatibility then it is a compatibility born out of indifference rather than aesthetic harmony. It suggests that the style is not part of some movement that encompasses the entirety of the wardrobe. The style of facial hair is not part of a formal dress code, nor is it something that belongs with the realm of the casual. It can reside in both without being a compulsory part of either.

As already intimated, this is a style of facial hair that is 'owned' by a particular generation of young men and, making a guess, I'd say that it is the male cohort above them that they are marking themselves off from. Remember, it was this older generation who favoured very short hairstyle-buzz cuts- and clean-shaven faces. Even if they were not aware of it, they were part of a lineage of the clean-shaven that stretched back to Punk and beyond to the Skinheads.

Part 2

Ever since modern beards made their first appearance in Europe in the 1850's, male facial hair has attracted to it explanations that are many and various. It has been seen as an emblem of virility, a sign of hyper-masculinity, an indicator of social freedom and personal authenticity, amongst numerous other explanations. Most of these explanations share a similar set of formal properties. Facial and cranial hair is seen as an expressive vehicle through which a shifting set of qualities, or contents,

flow. I want to suggest that the facial hair we are discussing is organised according to a different set of principles than those present in the explanations of positive content mentioned above.

What might be called the *presence* of what we wear carries not only a positive assertion as to what an item of dress is, or aspires to, it can also carry a negative assertion of what it is not. It is this strand of negation that is at the heart of the style of facial hair we are discussing here. Generally, these two elements are co-present and operate in tandem, but there are occasions when sartorial negation alone is present. The style of facial hair is a generational turning away, a not-that, which sits within a delicate network of negations. Because of this it needs careful maintenance to ensure it doesn't lose its position, and therefore its identity, between clean-shaven faces and those with a full beard. We have already seen that the mere presence of facial hair, let alone hair in the form found in our style, can negate the heritage handed down from the clean-shaven. The style is also able to negate current sorts of facial hair (and hair length) that exceed the limits set by the style. A good example of this is the deranged looking character that is Animal, the drummer in the Muppets house band.

Away from the intimacy of the face the style of facial hair is caught up in two broad narratives that shape how we understand male dress. For instance, the style is not just another episode in the apparently unstoppable, deregulation of male appearance. It is not part of a trajectory leading to bodily and existential freedom, so it can't be incorporated into a history of male dress as a struggle to liberate the body from the restrictive contours of mainstream male attire. The style is not a stopping point on a journey to look like Tim Minchin.

Nor is the style of facial hair part of the modernist, dress aesthetic that has for so long governed how men have dressed. This is an aesthetic that encompasses the whole ‘look’ of the wearer and while facial hair was not completely absent, the smooth contours of the clean-shaven were preferred. As we saw earlier the facial style is indifferent to such matters as aesthetic coherence and so is not part of a formal-informal dialectic. Within the aesthetic of modernism is a strand of improvement. It is a type of improvement that would come about via an ever-increasing thoroughness with which its principles are applied to the design of men’s attire: no such aesthetic goal is guiding the form taken by the facial hairstyle. It has no lineage of improvement nor is it on its way to the realisation of a superior form.

At first sight it might seem that the facial hair being discussed is simply one part of a generational style adopted by a rather hazily defined cohort of young men. And, from one angle this is precisely what it is. However, what I’ve called its presence is not that of a conventional sub-cultural phenomenon. It is not something that is an expression of collective values such as virility, masculinity, or existential freedom. These are all varieties of a *positive* presence. But this style of facial hair ‘works’ is less straightforward. It is a style that is built upon a set of negative signifiers, a set of not-thats.

This was written in February 2015 almost five years ago. Since then wearing facial hair has gone viral amongst young men. However, it has obeyed the rules of length and distribution that I have set out in my initial observations.