

Experts lift veil on booming beauty industry in Riyadh

Women spend more on hair and cosmetics than anywhere else in the region

- By Abeer Allam, Financial Times
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Riyadh: When they leave their homes, the women of Saudi Arabia veil their faces and carefully shroud themselves from head to toe in black abayas.

While their faces might be invisible in most public places, the kingdom's female citizens spend more on hair and cosmetics per capita than almost any other women in the Middle East.

Saudi women trade beauty tips on Twitter and teenagers gather for "makeup nights", showing off their command of the latest "smoky eye" look. "Women of all ages spend more on their appearance," says Jacqueline Clarke, research director of Diagonal Reports.

"Hair salons are ahead of their counterparts in the US and Europe in using social networking sites, peer referrals, word-of-mouth and client recommendations for salon marketing."

Last year, Saudi women spent almost 9 billion Saudi riyals (Dh8.7 billion) on cosmetics, among the highest per capita sum in the world.

Analysts forecast that the market will grow by 11 per cent this year.

Most women prefer professional salon products, but official rules restrict licences for beauty parlours.

The strict gender segregation practised in the kingdom, along with bans on many forms of public entertainment including cinemas and nightclubs, make weddings and engagement parties critical for Saudi women.

At these occasions, they dress to the nines to impress each other and the mothers and relatives of eligible bachelors.

Noora Saeed, 25, spent nearly seven hours and 1,000 riyals on her hair and makeup at a salon in the capital, Riyadh, for a friend's wedding. In a typical week, she spends 300 riyals on beauty products.

"Weddings are the most important events and a good opportunity for us to dress up," says Noora.

"Men often complain that we spend a lot on appearance. Well, if you live in Riyadh, what else can you do but shop?"

Other social occasions that require a salon visit include birthdays, bachelorette and baby showers and even extending condolences. In the past, upper-class Saudis followed beauty trends by travelling abroad.

Latest look

Today, satellite dishes and the internet allow all Saudi women to discover the latest look, with many craving the appearance of western movie stars or Arab pop divas.

"Women watch a lot of TV, so they bring me a photo of a singer or actress and say, 'I want to look this way'," says Eman Fekri, a beautician.

With more women entering the job market and graduating from universities, analysts predict that the country's beauty industry will expand still further.

Salons also provide an opportunity to meet friends. "Saudi women spend a lot of time in the hair salon for socialising, and they buy higher end products," says Clarke. Yet they continue to face harsh criticism.

Shaikh Mohammad Al Habadan, a religious commentator, recently suggested that women should show nothing more than one eye in public.

Some beauty salons co-operate with such social pressures. They display stickers pointing out the dangers of damnation associated with plucking eyebrows or showing made-up faces to anyone other than your husband.