

GENDERED ADVERTS: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE AND MALE IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY PERFUME ADS

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, in an increasingly more evident manner, perfumes assume the role of tokens of individuality and sexual orientation of those who wear them. Magazine ads that divulge the different perfume brands foreground that characteristic, by using partially stereotypical forms of representation when it comes to their protagonists: men, women (alone, in couples or in groups). After a brief theoretical contextualization on the verbal and visual signification modes in magazine ads, the present article undertakes the analysis of a corpus constituted by perfume magazine ads of different brands, gathered during 2010 and 2011, in order to detect recurrent themes, forms of representation and motifs as to the use of female and male images that can be found in this specific type of advertising.

KEY-WORDS

Advertising; perfumes; magazine ads; male images; female images.

INTRODUCTION

In a discussion on the socio-cultural implications of scents throughout the years, Classen *et al.* (1994) draw attention to the emotionally-charged nature of odour and to the marginalization of the sense of smell in contemporary Western societies. Today, in the world of commodities, besides the product category under analysis – perfume as an image enhancer – fragrance has extended to other toiletries, in which scents are often associated with different product properties, thus gaining importance and visibility both in the sphere of consumer products and in public (promotional) discourses. This is the case, for instance, with deodorant ads (especially for men), where the primary function of the product, i.e. to eliminate body odour is completely superseded by its powerful and enticing scent, in which case the association with something that is olfactorily pleasant counteracts the negative smell of bodily odours (Freitas, 2008: 143). In this instance, scent appears as a positive redeeming factor for a product whose main function is basically negative, because it neutralizes something undesirable:

Although natural body odour is stigmatized and suppressed, artificial body odour – in the form of perfume and colognes – is condoned and even celebrated. Thus, while deodorants strip the body of its natural olfactory signs, perfumes invest it with a new, 'ideal' olfactory identity. These ideal identities are promoted by the 'dream merchants' of the perfume industry who assure consumers that all good things come to those with the right sense. (Classen *et al.*, 1994: 180)

On the other hand, the large number of perfume adverts in all kinds of media increases steadily, as new fragrances are launched periodically by beauty

laboratories and fashion designers, in a demanding market that requires constant updating, thus making advertising a fundamental element in the commercial strategy of such products.

Thus, by looking into recent male and female perfume adverts, this short study seeks to identify recurrent themes and discursive patterns in perfume adverts in magazines, as well as to analyse the major strategies used in such messages, outlining, at the same time, differences and similarities between them according to the gender they are aimed at.

1- METHODOLOGY

The analysis undertaken is based on a significant collection of various brands 2010-11 fragrance adverts, collected from fashion and women magazines, namely various issues of *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*. Where necessary, adverts included in sites dedicated to the gathering of perfume adverts were used as they offer better editing quality. Notwithstanding, in every instance, these correspond to the adverts' print versions.

The methodological approach adopted in the present article consists mostly of content analysis, understanding 'content' to include every component of the advert, according to Guy Cook's (1992: 3) proposal, which considers both pictorial and verbal elements as essential and equally meaningful parts of advertising discourse in the print medium. In fact, to privilege textual analysis over visual matter (or vice-versa) would result in a severely unbalanced reading of the corpus, since the conveyance of meanings in print ads takes place by means of a process of convergence and reiteration of the same message via every channel available. Although a total simultaneity in the analysis of the channels is virtually impossible, we will try to take into consideration every element in the ads of our corpus in our readings.

In order to single out the main themes in this corpus, in addition to identifying the main characteristics of perfume adverts, we have looked into three major aspects – (a) recurrent visuals, which, in the case of print perfume adverts,, include mostly photographic images (Rose, 2001: 6); (b) perfume names, and (c) other verbal elements – though we understand this division between the ad's constitutive elements can only be postulated for methodological purposes and does not mimic the real-life experience of audiences when they come across them in magazines or even outdoors.

2- PERFUME ADVERTS: OVERALL FEATURES

One of the most prominent features of perfume advertising is that they are strongly based on visuals. A pioneer study carried out on perfume advertising in magazines in Portugal (Tuna, 2004) reveals that a significant number of print perfume adverts rely on pictorial elements alone, with no other verbal elements but brand and product names, which are also prominently displayed, thus providing enough verbal cues and contextualizing elements to the advertising message. The fact that scents are difficult to describe and verbalize may partly explain an eminently visual strategy in advertising: smell is a 'highly illusive phenomenon', as it cannot be remembered for a long time, and it can hardly be named, except by analogy (Classen *et al.*, 1994: 3). This lack of vocabulary on scents and fragrances may be attributed to their relative low status in contemporary Western societies, as it

is possible to confirm by looking at the scarce vocabulary on olfactory sensations, which, as claimed by Classen *et al.* (1994: 109-113) is relatively poor when compared to non-European languages:

Although the human nose is capable of recognizing thousands of different odours, nearly all of our odour categories – sweet, pungent, bitter, and so on – are borrowed from a limited selection of taste terms. Smells are otherwise designated by reference to things from which they emanate (...). It has been suggested that this poverty of olfactory terms is due to the relative unimportance of olfaction in the West.

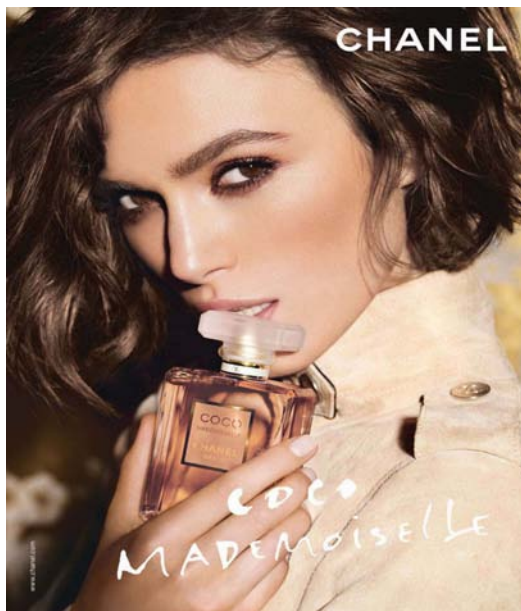


Figure 1: Coco Chanel, 2011



Figure 2: Ricci Ricci, 2011

Perfume ads also seem to confirm precedence of visual elements over verbal ones, not to mention that copy text elements tend to be rather repetitive, unvarying and exiguous. Phrases such as ‘The new fragrance for ... (men/women)’ seem to be rather common, although we intend to look into this aspect more thoroughly below. The names given to perfumes, however, present a richer variety, albeit some lack of diversity as far as motifs or themes are concerned, which justifies a specific analysis of the element ‘name’ in the present study. Even so, the latter are frequently the only or the most prominent verbal element in clearly visual-based advertising, which seems to be consistent with Classen’s view that there has been a rise of visualism in modern Western societies, related to an increased importance of the sense of sight from the Enlightenment on, intensified in contemporary societies: ‘Smell is such a neglected sense in the modern West that we can scarcely conceive of it as being an important subject of cultural elaboration.’ (Classen, 1993:7-8).

Reliance on pictures, on the other hand, may also be the result of an internationally-oriented standardized campaign. Indeed, like many fashion and cosmetics products, perfumes are often marketed as part of an international brand’s product range, which means that pictures are likely to be part of the overall advertising strategy. Despite acknowledged pictorial cultural dimensions, it seems to be a fact that the iconicity of pictures makes them more



Figure 3: Examples of 2010 ads



Figure 4: Examples of 2011 ads

suitable to cross borders (Messaris, 1997: 93), and this is commonly a feature of cross-cultural and/or global advertising approaches.

It is also important to note that, in perfume ads (which often strive for global markets), visual iconicity – which, as we have seen, can be a far safer bet than elaborated texts – often extends itself to (a) verbal matter, as in the case of special letterings that ‘signify’ the product by means of a metonymic relationship or even to (b) the container of the product itself. As Cook points out, bottle shapes are crucial in the conveyance of meanings in perfume ads (1992: 78), confirming the message that has already been passed on to us by the other channels.

Typically, the perfume advert consists of one or two people, a sophisticated perfume bottle, the perfume name and a short text line indicating the product’s target audience (for him, for her, for both). It may eventually depict the perfume bottle alone, even though this is a less frequent approach.

In the study mentioned above (Tuna, 2004, 157-160), which included 158 perfume adverts consistently collected between 1998 and 2001, 85% of the adverts included the picture of a woman or a man or a couple, whereas adverts that emphasized the product alone represented 15% of the adverts gathered. The proportions as far as male and female depiction is concerned may vary, though, but we will concentrate on this aspect below. An analysis of print perfume advertisement of 2010-2011 indicates similar proportions in overall aspects of perfume advertising.

3- THE PICTURES

We have discussed above that pictures, which in the present study consist mostly of photographs, are expected to travel best in a globalized world. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that they remain a more stable element in international advertising. Moreover, if, besides the adverts that consist of picture and product name, we also consider the significant amount of adverts that contain minimal textual elements, such as ‘Parfum’, or ‘Eau de Toilette’, the prominent role played by pictorial features in advertising for perfumes becomes even more obvious.

The themes more commonly featured in perfume advertising pictures coincide with the most recurrent concepts and motifs, which comes as no surprise since, as these adverts consist mostly of pictures, we can expect pictorial elements to convey the main concept developed in the advertising message. Even so, certain visual elements and themes are more recurrent. As far as settings and props are concerned, flowery images and contexts abound, and so do sea landscapes and waterfalls. Urban settings also constitute very recurrent sceneries, especially in brands that adopt this concept (see figures 3 and 4).

When it comes to participants, the depiction of female models is by and large the most common motif. There are indeed more adverts for female perfumes, and there are more perfumes for women in most brands, but it is also a fact that there are also adverts for men that use female models, and female perfume adverts that depict men. Even so, the image of the woman is extremely exploited in perfume advertising, and female nakedness has become very common in these advertisements. The typical image of the sensuous woman enticingly or defiantly addressing the viewer continues to be repeatedly employed in contemporary advertising, assuming the form of an ‘agent provocateur’, whose main function in ads is that of eliciting the desired emotional response in the viewer (Cortese, 2004: 29). As explained above, adverts that emphasize the image of the product itself are fewer (Figures 5 and 6)



Figure 5: Advert for male fragrance

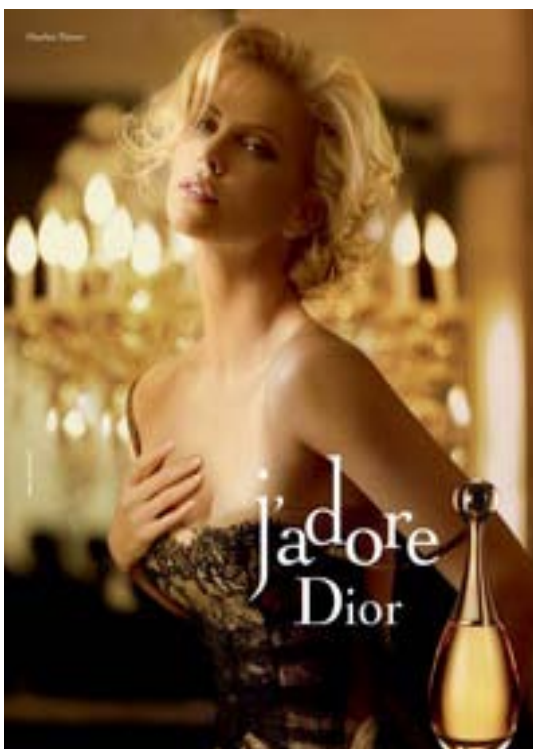


Figure 6: Advert for female fragrance



Figure 7: Adverts for male fragrances (2010)

Adverts for men's fragrances also use male models. However, the way they are depicted still differs considerably from the adverts for women's perfumes. Nakedness is less exploited, and models are frequently depicted in more casual positions, emphasizing lifestyle rather than sensuality. Nonetheless, there seems to be an increasing tendency to use the male figure in identical ways to their female counterparts, and the exploitation of men's body in advertising, including nakedness, has become increasingly more common (Cortese, 2004: 30) (Figure 7).

The adverts shown in Figure 8 reflect more recent tendencies towards convergence in men's and women's adverts, producing a rather 'effeminate' image, an effect especially obtained through the pose and the model's gaze.

When we compare these adverts or Gaultier's to that for Davidoff (or Lacoste), which also uses a half-naked male figure, we may see that the latter, despite an apparent use of the same visual devices, manages to preserve a more conventional



Figure 8: Trends towards convergence in male and female fragrances (Gucci and Gaultier)

image of masculinity. If these two adverts are yet compared to a third one, which illustrates a more traditional approach to advertising's display of male characters, differences become even more evident.

It is possible that this broadening of possibilities in terms of male representation corresponds to a more tolerant view of society as to what the concept of 'masculinity' might encompass. However, we might postulate with Cook that the depiction of tendentially traditional roles still prevails: 'Like other products concerned with sexual relationships, perfume ads wrongly assume an exclusively heterosexual market, although some recent ads may have been deliberately ambivalent about the sexual orientation they portray' (1992: 103).



Figure 9 Male adverts (more conventional approaches)



Figure 10: Adverts depicting couples

A motif that is frequently adopted by perfume advertising pictures is the image of a couple, which is recurrent not only in adverts that promote male and female fragrances simultaneously, but also in perfume adverts in general (Figure 10)

Some of these pictures exploit eroticism quite explicitly, which seems to reveal increased permissiveness in contemporary Western societies. This may raise some cultural issues, including that of taboo concerning the use of themes such as sex and eroticism in advertising. These motifs are often used as strategies for increasing the appeal of products that, intrinsically, do not present any kind of taboo association, in an

effort to make them look more daring and risqué (Odber de Baubeta, 1995: 95; Freitas, 2008: 148), as befits lifestyle goods such as perfumes.

4- THE WORDS OF PERFUME ADS

A closer look at advertisements for perfumes will reveal that there are few references to smell, which is, after all the sense directly affected by these products (see Classen *et al.*, 1994: 189). This does not mean, however, that there is no appeal to the senses, in general. On the contrary, the use of the terms 'sense(s)' and 'sensation(s)' is very frequent in perfume adverts, as the following example from a print ad by Calvin Klein Truth illustrates: 'Inspiration in the wind. Rhythm in the water. The senses don't lie' (Figure 11)

Cook describes perfume adverts as 'ticklers', with very short copy, and normally advertised through sudden burst campaigns, in special seasons, such as Christmas or Valentine's Day (1992: 103). In fact, the difficulty in describing a scent in objec-



Figure 11: Calvin Klein Truth ('Senses don't lie')

tive ways has not limited advertisers' choices; according to Cook, 'paradoxically, this resistance to description increases rather than decreases the verbal freedom of advertisers' (1992: 104). While the copy may play a relatively minor role, words too are used to create the overall image or effect of the advertisement. The scent is often described through emotionally-loaded, often abstract, nouns, such as 'se-

duction', 'love', 'pleasure', 'sensation', 'tenderness', among others. Thus, irrespective of the amount of verbal elements, perfume advertising resorts to an emotional appeal, in which the product is symbolically associated with sensuality, eroticism, mystery, exoticism, as well as with different kinds of images connected with lifestyle and status. These adverts try to create a mood rather than provide information about the tangible properties of the product, which, as we have seen, are difficult to describe objectively: 'the language is used to create a conception of the product, not to describe the product itself' (Classen *et al.*, 1994: 187). In fact, as Cook points out, perfumes are 'marketed and perceived as expressions of the self and of sexuality' (1992: 101), which means that a degree of indeterminacy is welcome by ads, in that self-expression that consumers which to attain and convey to others should not be too narrowly defined.

4.1- NAMES

In advertising, which relies so much on pictorial cues, the few verbal elements will definitely stand out, and are therefore likely to be the object of careful consideration. Brand and product (range) names are frequently the only verbal components in perfume ads, and therefore play a prominent role in these messages, as well as in the whole marketing strategy. They establish a close association with the brand and commonly, in signature names, only the brand name is used. Given their salience, normally both dimensions of names – their semantic-pragmatic features and their visual features – do matter (Goossens, 1985).

Perfume names are often connected with mood rather than with the description of some factual property. Thus, their associative meaning is largely dependent both on brand image and on advertising strategy. In addition, the typographical characteristics play an active part in the conception and completion of that message:

On the label of a perfume flacon, on the package surrounding the flacon, and in printed advertising for perfume, the typographic image of a perfume name is a form of symbolic synesthesia that connects visual, auditory and olfactory images- the graphic forms of the written name, the sound of the spoken name, and the fragrance. These images are not merely perceptions; they are symbols with meanings. (Bigelow, 1992:243)

The names of perfumes evolve greatly around the brand image and the pictures, revealing thematic convergence. It is not surprising then that names evoking love, glamour, eroticism, exoticism, lifestyle and colours are rather recurrent.

5. THEMES AND GENDER



Figure 12: Lifestyle ads



Fig. 13: Male and female adverts foregrounding gendered advertising approaches

As mentioned above, perfume advertising campaigns are often built to be used worldwide in standardized campaigns, and therefore resort to many of the appeals used in such campaigns, as claimed by De Mooij (1994: 244-249), who discusses the themes and concepts that seem more suitable for international campaigns, namely to lifestyle concepts, and to everyday themes, particularly youthfulness and love, as well as to 'made in' concepts, which are exploited in various ways.

Yet, there are some differences in perfume adverts according to the target gender. Although there has been a convergent move in male and female perfume adverts as far as images, themes and concepts are concerned, it is possible to trace divergence in the advertising approaches, namely in the strategies adopted, which seem to raise relevant discussions on gender discourses, as they point to the way advertising uses images of women and men to promote products, as well as in thematic preferences.

Classen *et al.* (1994: 189) claim that perfume adverts reflect the changes in the role and image of women in Western societies. The changes referred to by the authors concern the motifs and images explored in perfume advertising since the 1950s, when advertising messages drew on themes such as femininity and elegance, displaying images of glamorous social events, and projecting the idea of women whose main objective in wearing a perfume was to please men (1994: 189-190).

Images of the 'sensuous' and of the 'natural' woman became frequent in the next two decades (Myers, 1986: 75). And, in the 1980s and 1990s, images of self-fulfilment through the use of a fragrance took over (Classen *et al.*, 1994: 189-190).

Male perfume adverts have evolved in a different way, especially because this kind of product, and its advertising, was for some time considered as mostly feminine. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s, alternatives to the word 'perfume' (eau de toilette, cologne and aftershave) were preferred, so as to avoid feminine connotations, a concern that was also patent in the projection of blatant masculinity (Classen *et al.*, 1994: 190-191). The idea that perfume adverts would make men more attractive to women continued to be exploited, and, according to the authors, contemporary adverts have become more sophisticated, but they still avoid the traditional connotations of the term 'perfume', and still highlight the image of masculinity, which is now combined with an idea of sensitivity.

According to our research, while the increased sophistication of advertising can hardly be neglected, a clear-cut thematic evolution does not seem so obvious. Although

we have not carried out a diachronic study, the exploration of motifs present in the previous decades is still traceable in contemporary advertising (Figure 14).

On the other hand, traditional themes and less conventional approaches seem to co-exist. There are indications of some convergence regarding perfumes for men and women, which is well illustrated in adverts promoting male and female fragrances simultaneously and fragrances that are actually aimed at both.

It is also true that advertising has become more audacious, exploiting images of romantic love, but especially eroticism and hedonism, as well as images that clearly challenge and subvert traditional values. This also a characteristic shared by both female and male perfume adverts. Based on our analysis, we may claim that almost all of the adverts collected – for men as well as for women's fragrances – would fit into the themes of love and eroticism, with more or less extreme approaches, lifestyle (professions, fashion, sports, glamour and sophistication), exoticism and 'made in' concepts, as well as religious motifs, however subverted they may appear. However, if we look at the way such themes are distributed according to gender, there seems to be an emphasis on themes such as sports and business/professions in



Figure 14: Male and female adverts, from 2010 and 2011



Figure 15: Adverts for male/female fragrances, displaying more audacious approaches

men's perfume ads, whereas women's fragrances tend to be advertised through motifs such as love, eroticism, glamour and fashion.

Nonetheless, and despite the confluence mentioned above, we have confirmed that the depiction of women models is still more frequent, and that nudity and the erotic depiction of women participants prevail, when compared to similar proportion of men depicted in more business-like poses.

Conclusion

Through this brief incursion in the world of perfume advertising in magazines, it was possible to point out, in a tentative manner, a number of recurring themes when it comes to the promotion of this specific product. As we have seen, the product 'perfume' has a singularly elusive nature, which makes it virtually impossible to advertise in terms of concrete physical attributes; hence the displacement that can be witnessed in most perfume ads, where nothing specific about the product is revealed, and a fictional beautified world is created to replace the lack of hard facts. When it comes to the kind of settings preferred, it was also possible to identify some recurrent thematic clusters, such as love and erotic appeals in general, lifestyle appeals (where we can include professional and urban settings, sports activities, or even glamour and sophistication related to the fashion world), more or less explicit references to exotic settings, as well as references to religious motifs

As we have seen, perfumes appeal to one of our senses (olfaction) which is not highly regarded in the Western world, being normally subsumed under the sense of sight. This fact justifies the frequent use of synesthetic relationships between what the ads show us and the sort of olfactory feelings the perfume is expected to inspire. Even though the sense of smell is not given importance per se, perfumes have acquired high status, in that they are luxury items that most people can afford and which can say much about what they are in social terms.

This glance into the world of perfume advertising has confirmed these two general trends: (1) the emphasis on the replacement of facts for lifestyle scenes or mere portrayal of those who wear that specific scent, and (2) foregrounding of visuality, in that the specific action of smelling is never depicted or mimicked, being synesthetically replaced by the gaze of the actors portrayed, which in its turn, is replicated by the gaze of people who contemplate the ad.

It was also possible to determine some recurrent themes in point (2): the use of female models is (still) more frequent, even though the imbalance between the use of women and men in this type of ads has diminished. This is probably due to the fact that the use of perfume by men is now accepted as natural or even desirable, which did not happen in the past, where the use of fragrance for the purpose of smelling good has to be masked under some type of practical purpose.

Another theme that is recurrent nowadays is the use of couples in these ads. Even though they are normally formed by a man and a woman, assuming by default the existence of a heterosexual relationship, this couple (or sometimes group) representation might imply a degree of intended indeterminacy in terms of target audience, implying that one perfume can be used both by men and women or even that the target intended might be homosexual. This tendency is also visible in more effeminate portrayals of male actors (who, very often, are much more naked than they were in the past). Also, both men and women are often shown in provocateur roles, which were reserved to women in the past.

This alteration in themes can, in fact, correspond to the portrayal of new social trends in gender roles. Or, as some authors point out, it can be nothing more than a fanciful reshuffling of previous notions on 'proper' male and female images in society: in that case, the apparent novelty of some of the perfume ads we have discussed could be a mere scratching of the surface that only confirms what traditional advertising has been proposing for a long time, reflecting heterosexuality as the norm, as well as the widespread use of (naked) women as an enticement factor. Further research in this area may contribute to enlighten some of the issues we have tentatively raised in the present article. //

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