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Gender identities in e-shop perfume descriptions

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Abstract

Perfume descriptions serve as an important persuasive tool in fragrance advertising. Scents traditionally elude clear verbal description, yet perfumes are nowadays frequently sold online, with no direct olfactory experience on the part of the consumer at the point of purchase. The products are thus often represented by metaphorical means depicting a desirable experience or portraying attractive identities of wearers, including stereotypical images of men and women. This article analyses 80 e-shop fragrance descriptions equally divided among adverts targeted at males and females. The sample texts were collected randomly from British and American e-shops, with the primary research objective to determine how male and female identities are reflected in these descriptions. The method of discourse analysis was applied and the AntConc 3.4.4 toolkit was used to calculate the frequency of words and their collocations. It was found that current female perfume descriptions on e-shops generally suppress gender stereotypes quite successfully, while gender stereotyping is more prominent in male perfume descriptions. The possible causes as well as ramifications of this disparity are also discussed.

Key words

perfume description, perfume advertising, e-shop product description, perfume, fragrance, identity, gender stereotyping

1. Introduction

Luxury items such as haute couture clothing, jewelry and fine wines have traditionally been purchased in specialty shops, often run for decades or even centuries by one family or set of partners. Brick-and-mortar shops with famous brand names are often located in exclusive districts of large cities such as Bond Street in London or 5th Avenue in New York. With the internet, consumers can now surf the websites of these established companies from the comfort of their own home. As online marketing has become a major stimulus for sales, naturally retailers of upmarket merchandise have found their own niche in e-commerce. Whereas in face-to-face encounters merchants could once provide persuasive details about their merchandise in person to potential purchasers, today more and more information about products comes from descriptions on the websites of retailers, and the market for luxury goods has not failed to follow this trend.

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Perfumes[1] were generally marketed as an affordable luxury item in the West until the mid-1960s (Mortelmans, 2014, p. 193). Fragrances and scents continue to have "socio-cultural implications", as an individual's sense of smell represents a primary parameter for classifying and labelling others (Classen et al., in Tuna and Freitas, 2012, p. 95). In terms of body image and self-concept, the choice of a scent to apply for a particular situation can be the finishing touch which completes the "social skin" (Turner, 1980, pp. 110–140) of the individual, helping the projected identity to be recognized and remembered by others.

The analysed corpus (Appendix) consists of 80 perfume descriptions randomly chosen from texts displayed on three British and American e-shops retailing perfumes: www.perfume.com, www.luckyscent.com and www.thefragranceshop.co.uk. Half of the sample texts focus on products marketed to women, with the other half on men's products. The research focuses on examining how texts in perfume advertising descriptions reaffirm and construct social identity, specifically the degree to which gender stereotypes are reified or challenged, a practice observed in many forms of advertising. The analysis evaluates the headlines of each perfume advertisement as well as the body copy. For a detailed textual analysis of the body copy text, the freeware concordance toolkit AntConc 3.4.4 was used to determine the most frequently used words and their collocations.

Our choice to analyse internet product descriptions as opposed to earlier forms such as print advertising and in-store marketing materials reflects the tremendous overall growth of online shopping versus brick-and-mortar purchases. Internet sales had been dramatically increasing for many years even before the Covid-19 restrictions on the "physical presence" of businesses (Hudson, 2019). By 2020, 69% of Americans were shopping online, with 25% making a purchase at least once a month. By 2023, it is further predicted that 91% of US consumers will be shopping online (Ouellette, 2021). More pertinent for our study, while global sales of perfumes in 2020 fell by 10% as compared to the previous year, online purchases have been stable and in the case of high-end fragrances have even increased. Many designer brands have moved to promoting their products primarily through online campaigns (O'Connor, 2020).

The research corpus of women's and men's perfume descriptions was analysed to disclose how texts in online perfume advertising construct and reaffirm the wearer's social identity. Specifically, we are interested in the degree to which gender stereotypes are either reified or challenged. Headlines as well as body copy texts of the perfume ads are analysed. While the analysis yields several identities in both women's and men's perfume descriptions, the results suggest that women's identities tend to suppress gender stereotyping, while gender stereotyping is more obvious in men's perfume descriptions.

2. Research methodology

We set two limiting factors for the perfume e-shops from which we collected our research corpus. The first criterion was specialization in the sale of perfume by multiple producers, i.e. the e-shop must sell a broad range of perfumes for both women and men from well-known as well as more exclusive producers. All the identified e-shops sell perfumes as well as other goods, such as bath, body and wellness products, candles and essential oil diffusers as well as makeup, skincare, shaving, hair care and other products. Nevertheless, perfumes clearly dominate in their merchandise, a fact that is obvious from the offers on their home pages and in the construction of their websites, i.e. the perfume rollout menu is always positioned in the prime location of the top left corner to guide the recipient's gaze through a Z-pattern or F-pattern layout (Jones, 2012).

The second limiting factor we chose was the geographical location with which the e-shops are associated. Because of the English language focus, we opted for e-shops based in the USA and Great Britain.[2] Eventually, we built the corpus of perfume descriptions from three e-shops: Luckyscent

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[1] As in Tuna and Freitas (2012) and other research, the term perfume will be used throughout this text to refer to all personal fragrances, e.g. for products marketed as "cologne," "eau de toilette," "aftershave", etc. These terms often themselves entail gender identities that evolve over time, e.g. in what may be considered a relatively early "unisex" fragrance, "eau de toilette" was used by both men and women in the 17th century (Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994, p. 192).

[2] However, "[w]hether they target Asian, European, or Latin-American consumers, advertisers seem to regard the use of English words, sentences, and even entire texts as an efficient strategy to sell brands and products to consumers used across the world" (Kuppens, 2010, p. 115).

(luckyscent.com) based in California, Perfume (perfume.com) based in New York, and The Fragrance Shop (thefragranceshop.co.uk) based in Great Britain. The corpus collection was accomplished in late 2017 and early 2018. As of 2020, the majority of the perfume descriptions were still in use to advertise the chosen perfumes. Most of the texts no longer in use in 2020 described perfumes that are no longer sold.

The corpus was collected from women's and men's perfume descriptions randomly chosen from the selected e-shop websites. Originally, we aimed to choose one perfume per producer, but since some fragrance producers display a rather extensive range of products compared to others, we added two or three perfume descriptions from major producers such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. The final corpus (see Appendix) contains 80 descriptions from the chosen websites; of these, 40 texts describe women's products and 40 men's products. The minimum length of one description is 20 words; the maximum length is 193 words. The average length is 90 words per description.

The corpus, saved as two plain text (.txt) files (a separate file for the women's and for the men's descriptions), was subjected to a text-mining procedure via Antconc 3.4.4 concordance freeware. Antconc offers several data analysis tools, of which two were used in the processing of our corpus: a word list tool, which calculates the number of all the words and presents them in a list ordered by the frequency of appearance of each word, and a concordance tool, which presents the search results in a KWIC (KeyWord in Context) format.

The word list tool was used to calculate the frequency of individual words in two plain text files. The two word lists were further subjected to sorting by relevance, i.e. deleting words that could not contribute to the clarification of identity and gender stereotyping, and only retaining words which could. We first omitted all the grammatical words, i.e. determiners, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. As a second step, we omitted the words serving only as technical terms describing the olfactory structure of the scent, i.e. *notes* (which determine or classify the scent) and *base* (the scents that bring depth and solidity). The word *heart* (the middle notes of a fragrance – see subchapter 4.1 below) was retained in the list because it was used in both forms – as a structuring element of a scent but also as a non-technical word. The next group of words omitted from the list were words used only as characteristics of perfumes, i.e. vanilla, jasmine, orange, rose, amber and musk. The fourth group of omitted words represents names, i.e. Dior, Dolce, Ralph, Calvin, Chanel, Chance, etc. The last group of removed words was related to production and marketing terminology, such as *introduced* (as in "Introduced by Donna Karan") and *created* (as in "Created in 2015"). The resulting lists of words were selected as contributing to the creation of an identity of the target perfume customer. Lists of terms presented below occurred in the corpus from 4 to 40 times (female fragrances – Table 1) and 5 to 45 times (male fragrances – Table 2).

As a follow-up step to create a detailed data view of the items on the word list, the concordance tool was used to study and analyse the collocations in which the individual items appeared in the corpus. Descriptions of the chosen items and their use are presented throughout chapter 4 below.

3. Online advertising

The word "advertisement" comes from Latin through the Old French *avertir*, which in English means "to turn, direct, make aware" (Harper, 2001–2020). This connotation communicates the function of the genre to attract customer attention and interest as well as to instantly convey a readily comprehensible message, which will in turn be beneficial to the ad creator by stimulating sales (Goddard, 2002, p. 11). An applied linguistics view identifies advertising as a "site of language contact" which generally intersects with other genres (Piller, 2003, pp. 170–193). As Goddard (2002, p. 10) points out, advertisements tend not to be simple texts, i.e. they nearly always contain multiple messages.

As it has revolutionized the way goods and services are purchased, the ubiquity of the internet continues to challenge traditional advertising conventions. One current trend is the use of smartphones, computers and other electronic devices for communication as well as merchandizing: "The digitalization of markets has changed the physical product into a digital one" (Hanafizadeh, 2012, p. 5). As an article on the website Small Business featuring statistics from the U.S. Department of Commerce indicates, while "people still love" to make purchases in brick-and-mortar stores, each year sales in e-shops have steadily increased, from 5.1% of all sales in 2007 to 13% by 2017. This increase is especially shown in the younger generations, with 67% of millennials indicating a preference for online shopping and only 28% of seniors doing so (Ward, 2019). In the goal of e-shops to reach the widest possible demographic

range as is commercially viable within their target market, it is crucial for them to create a responsive design for their web pages. "Content marketing" must be frequently updated to maintain steady traffic and increase brand awareness (Sinicki, 2019). In addition, the ever-changing content must be optimized for the great variety of digital devices in common use today (McGruer, 2020, pp. 128–130).

The fact that the internet enables online users to control and manage content themselves also complicates online advertising (Cook, 2001, p. 31). Customers are empowered to purchase a product immediately and even impulsively without ever visiting a brick-and-mortar store. Moreover, thanks to widespread access and use of analytical tools and measuring devices, the highly specialized targeting and personalization of ads is made possible. The specific context of e-commerce requires a supplementary advertising form which is often not necessary in a brick-and-mortar shop – a verbal product description. In order to "convince or assure" a customer to buy the product or service, it is essential for e-shops to provide an enticing and detailed product description which includes a number of desired and/or useful parameters. E-commerce product descriptions which are "incomplete or unclear" have been found to be responsible for one fifth of all "task failures [indicating] times when users failed to successfully complete a purchase when asked to do so" (Schade, 2014).

As described by Applegate (2015, pp. 40–41), copywriting is an advertising activity with the goal of creating notable content. A major feature of copywriting is product differentiation, i.e. the communication of a unique selling proposition that distinguishes the product from its competitors. Copywriters today often work in teams of other writers or advertising professionals, notably graphic designers, campaign managers and sometimes even product creators themselves. In the process of developing a unique selling proposition, the team is required to thoroughly understand both the product and their target customer base through extensive research, and, ideally, to combine the features and goals of the product with their own knowledge and experience in the field. Through a marketing strategy, copywriters may take advantage of the physical attributes of the product related to its colour, flavour and size etc., what the product is made of, or details regarding how it is manufactured, with the green economy and sustainability emerging as a major factor encouraging interest in a brand (Eneizan, Wahab, and Bustaman, 2015, pp. 954–958). Advancing claims of fast delivery or exclusiveness as well as unique packaging can also help motivate a purchase. The result of the successful communication of the selling proposition is the ability of a customer to identify the unique features of a product, including tangible or intangible benefits that would result from using it. The primary goal of an emotional selling proposition is to create affective associations with the product or company and otherwise influence the feelings of customers to positively change or reinforce their attitudes towards a product. Thus, technical features and practical benefits are not emphasized unless they can be linked to a particular emotion.

Copywriters and their collaborators carefully consider what should be included in a primary message and in supporting information (Applegate, 2015, p. 39). Secondly, they must take into account the targeted audience/s in terms of gender, age, income, desires and needs. Cultural specifics and the idiosyncrasies of a target population must also be considered. Finally, copywriters must use an appropriate tone corresponding with a brand's image and personality.

Layout elements constitute the typical formal features of an advertisement. These elements are tightly integrated within a carefully planned overall layout design scheme, including a coordinated colour pallet as well as eye-catching shapes and arrangements. The placement of the various components creates sightlines to direct the eye to target areas of the ad to "speed up visual processing, reduce cognitive load, and increase comprehension" (Bradley, 2014). The main verbal elements of ads are usually the headline, subhead and body copy. As the element situated in the most prominent position, the headline functions as the primary attention-catcher, yet it also provides basic information about the content of the other textual parts of the ad (Kišiček and Žagar, 2013, p. 460). Subheads are small units of text usually placed under or adjacent to the headline. The main functions of subheads are to clarify the headline and the main idea as well as to naturally lead a reader towards the body copy (Altstiel and Grow, 2006, p. 163).

Although the majority of contemporary internet ads are image-based (Applegate, 2015, pp. 57–59), a textual component – the body copy – is usually present and distinct in its form and function. Typically, the body contains a description of the product features and benefits, accompanied by a call-to-action sentence or paragraph. The purpose of the body copy can vary for different goals and contexts, e.g. factual copy is information-dense, containing technical details and reasons for obtaining the product (Applegate, 2015, pp. 91–94). Using factual copy is a strategy used primarily in the marketing of expensive products associated with sophistication, elegance and luxury. Narrative copy uses elements

of storytelling that may comprise storylines featuring the origin of the product as well as how a product helps to solve a problem or meet a desire. Testimonial copy, sometimes referred to as monologue copy, is text voiced through a particular easily identifiable personality. This interlocutor may be represented as an expert, a celebrity or a fictional character. The consumer is typically meant to understand the voice as invoking authority; thus, the claims being made are meant to seem unimpeachable. Dialogue copy features two voices discussing a product or a service; this type is today rather rare in written ads. Humorous copy is more frequently used in advertisements targeted at men as opposed to women, although paradoxically "[h]umorous stereotyped advertising produces stronger effects for women than for men" (Eisend, Plagemann, and Sollwedel, 2014, pp. 267–269). At any rate, humour in ads can be a double-edged sword. The subjectivity and culture-dependence involved in the interpretation of humour necessitates that it is generally used in cases when the audience is rather homogeneous as well as when copywriters are thoroughly familiar with the target market (Hoffmann et al., 2014, p. 95; Ford et al., 1997, in Eisend, Plagemann, and Sollwedel, 2014, p. 268).

Since product descriptions predominantly comprise short texts, copywriters face the challenge of condensing the desired meaning into a limited space. Sentences in product descriptions often include information-dense items such as strings of adjectives and compound words. Adjectives are often used in their connotative meanings. As indicated by Kaur, Arumugam, and Yunus (2012, p. 64), positive connotations tend to relate to the qualities of a product intended to stimulate fantasies, dreams or desires, while negative connotations are linked to problems that can be solved through the use of the advertised product.

3.1 Perfume advertising

Perfumes are cosmetic products that play an important role in social interactions. The human olfactory system continuously encounters scents and odours sorted by personal preference and other criteria. Often unconsciously, people tend to classify and judge objects or individuals by their smell, with some aromas creating positive associations that evoke comforting or pleasurable impressions, e.g. the scent of baby powder, a mother's hand lotion, or, notably, Play-Doh modelling compound, which can be evoked as a favourite childhood olfactory memory in many cultures (Walsh, 2005, p. 115). On the other hand, particular smells might have an opposite effect, creating negative associations with inferiority, impropriety, uncleanliness or fear. The English language lexicon readily demonstrates the connection between smell perceptions and mental associations, such as with untrustworthy people commonly described as "stinkers" (Largey and Watson, 1972, p. 1022). As a form of classification and judgment, aromas alone or in blended mixtures are also used as an instrument for demonstrating membership of a certain social group (Hemme, 2010, p. 6), which is a significant consideration in perfume design, composition and marketing.

Advertising copywriters responsible for composing advertising texts are not identical in the linguistic sense to the text author (i.e. the sender of the message). The authors of written perfume advertisements are typically business entities in the olfactory or fashion industry. These companies tend to be represented by an established brand name as well as clearly charted images, goals and visions upon which their marketing strategies are based, all of which are reflected in the texts of their perfume advertising. As is the case with many products, the marketing projections for fragrance lines are often planned to be executed over years to seek "profitable long-term results" (Reichert, LaTour, and Kim, 2007, p. 64). Large-scale e-shops, which in many cases also serve as perfume retailers, often employ their own content-creating copywriters to incorporate the goals of the original distributor as well as to persuade their target audiences in culturally specific ways. Moreover, an advertising text in the form of a perfume product description must function in accord with the overall concept and strategies of the e-shop (Barker, 2018, pp. 244–246). The target audience of perfume descriptions are individuals with internet access who are inclined to buy a fragrance product either for personal use or as a gift.

Perfume advertisements often borrow adjectives from semantic fields connected to food, flowers and fruit, the components or analogues of which are typically used as ingredients in the fragrances themselves (Islam, Endrissat, and Noppeney, 2016). Since perfumes are beauty products closely connected to sexual attraction (Lunyal, 2014, p. 119), the field of eroticism is also frequently represented in perfume descriptions. While in written texts these suggestive features are generally rather subtle, in printed magazine ads or in TV commercials, these elements tend to assume more prominence within multimodal discourses. However, as Cook (2001, p. 107) points out, "descriptions of smell are

necessarily indirect," since smell has "no denotation, no component which distinguishes it from another." Copywriters can take advantage of this ambiguity to create polysemantic messages geared to stimulate a wide range of positive responses in target audiences. This is in sharp contrast with, for example, descriptions for cars, in which precise adjectives are used to adhere to a rigidly defined set of conventions and expectations regarding information.

A byproduct of the lack of conceptual precision in fragrance ads is that copywriters and their collaborators can operate with more creative freedom. On the other hand, this flexibility brings with it the challenges of verbally describing the implicit, the abstract, the elusive. Cook (2001, p. 107) proposes a way in which a perfume might be categorized in terms of the product's effect, the projected user, a setting associated with the scent, and its availability. The goal of this classification is connected with projected results or effects the perfume may have on the wearer and the people in the vicinity of the wearer. In the case of fragrance ads, until relatively recently the user has been traditionally determined by gender. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the marketing of so-called unisex fragrances by its very nature seeks to violate the gender binary, often as an important component of the image associated with the product line's "gender-fluid" marketing campaign (Cosmetics Business, 2019).

3.2 Gender identities in advertising

Individuals construct reality by self-identification and by creating and maintaining relationships with other people. The way we behave, speak about ourselves as well as about or to others "turns individuals into subjective selves" (Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002, p. 23). Brian Paltridge (2012, pp. 40–42) defines identity as a "socially-constructed self that people continually co-construct and reconstruct in their interactions with each other." Paltridge (2012, p. 40) highlights the fact that each individual has more than one identity, any of which can be presented depending on the particular situations a person faces at a certain time. The theatricality of personal and social identity is an idea that originated in in the mid-1950s in the groundbreaking works of Erving Goffman. "Off stage," a woman "performs" the identity of a caring mother as she is reading a bedtime story to her child, while the very same woman "on the stage" enacts the identity of a high-performing professional in her job (Goffman, 1959).

In opposition to biological sex (Udry, 1994), the term gender can be described as "socially produced differences between being feminine and being masculine" (Holmes, 2007, p. 2). While gender is today often projected as a social construct, it remains an important cultural category, as "any spoken or written text concerning people must be gendered in some way" (Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002, p. 29; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004, p. 27). The justification for such a rationale is that "we live in a world which is organized around the idea that women and men have different bodies, different capabilities, and different needs and desires" (Holmes, 2007, p. 1). Traditionally people automatically assign a female or male subject identity when they conceive of or interact with individuals and groups, although a number of social science researchers have presented "challenges to the gender binary" (Hyde, et al., 2019). When a recipient reads a piece of text that does not explicitly specify the gender of a human protagonist, the brain automatically makes decisions about gender in order to understand the meaning of the text (Holmes, 2007, p. 1).

Since identity in its various permutations is partially expressed through the goods individuals buy, "[a]dvertising plays a strong role in promulgating dualistic gender roles and prescribing sexual identities" (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004, p. 21). Purchasing and using a certain product enables the owner to express will or power over the material object. Furthermore, through positive and negative feedback loops, objects help create the desired appearances of both males and females based on societal norms and conventions which shift over time, for example in Western countries long hair on males as well as not wearing a suit and tie in public became acceptable in the 1960s. Although trends have been gradually changing in recent years, most notably the rise in market share of unisex products, in advertising a man's body is still typically used to show power and the ability to control objects and other people. A woman's body, on the other hand, traditionally did not communicate physical power over others, but rather reflected her presence and the way how she perceived herself at a particular moment (Barthel, 1989, pp. 2–9). Kendall and Tannen (2001, p. 555) recognize a pattern according to which men prioritize being taken as experts or authorities, while women are more likely to avoid these roles. Schroeder and Zwick (2004, p. 34) claim that men are presented more often as an "active subject, business-like, self-assured decision maker, while the female occupies the passive object, the observed sexual/sensual body, eroticized and inactive."

The number of stereotyped activities in ads that can be perceived as typically feminine have somewhat decreased, notably since the dot-com economic bubble burst in the 1990s (Tungate, 2007, p. 192). Women were once frequently presented as shopping, cooking, cleaning, daydreaming about love, socializing with friends, relaxing, and engaging in pleasurable activities. Even today, the lifestyle of men presented in advertising still often includes activities such as socializing with beer or alcohol, driving powerful cars, or engaging in high-income earning activities. Verbs might indicate an identity as well. The usage of verbs such as *to imagine*, *to relax*, *to think* and *to wonder* within ad copy can be seen to indicate that the described person engages in escapist fantasies. In accordance with the classifications of gender-stereotyped advertising activities discussed previously, women would likely be targeted with this discourse.

Apart from physical features, lifestyle or performed activities, a particular smell is often associated with a particular gender. Perfumes that are flowery or fruity are usually connected with women, whereas spicy and strong perfumes are linked to men (Sczesny and Stahlberg, 2002, pp. 816–817). Even though fragrance marketing has experienced a certain evolutionary development over the decades, with perfumes no longer viewed as strictly feminine products, advertisers are still very careful about communicating the feminine associations with the word *perfume* to male customers. Gendered terms such as *cologne* and *after-shave* were introduced in the second half of the 20th century (Tuna and Freitas, 2012, p. 104). In order to avoid undesired associations, marketers and copywriters highlight traditionally masculine themes like sport and business in ads targeted at men, a trend which became even more apparent in the late 1960s. Possible explanations for this trend, which is reflected in our research results, are postulated in the Discussion section below.

A wide range of strategies is at the disposal of advertisers to capture a targeted customer's attention. Among other strategies, heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981; Nemčoková, 2013) in ads can be employed, with some discourses voicing both genders together. One tone considered to be typically feminine, however, is the "mother-daughter voice", the goal of which is to create an impression of motherly advice being given. It consists of phrases such as *it takes only a minute* or *if you care about* (Barthel, 1989, p. 40). The power of such advertising messages may lie in nostalgia as perceived by mature and more traditional women. On the other hand, teenagers or young adults may reject such content immediately, i.e. the advice is made to seem outdated, and the young woman is shown to know better (Davis et al., 2019, pp. 6–7). In considering men as the target group in an analogous situation, the rejection of motherly advice is virtually inevitable: an advertisement featuring such a discourse would contrast sharply with the desired and stereotyped identity of a strong, masculine, powerful and self-sufficient man.

Among the other articulations found in perfume ads are the anonymous voice, scientific voice and celebrity voice. Probably the most frequent type found in ads, the anonymous voice (Barthel, 1989, p. 39) typically employs an imperative mode toward action, although the person voicing the message tends not to be identified by textual or visual clues. The voice of science or scientific authority is meant to be seen as based on logic and putatively proven facts. Customers usually associate this type with the generally male voices of medical doctors or researchers (Barthel, 1989, pp. 39–51). The voice of science is also closely linked with rationality, which men tend to apply when making purchasing decisions as opposed to impulse. The testimonial, frequently voiced by a celebrity, works well especially for the marketing segment of teenagers, as celebrities (such as actors, singers, sports personalities and social networks influencers) who endorse the product are perceived as authorities. In addition, many celebrities participate in the creation and marketing of their own fragrance lines, although according to the industry website AdWeek sales seemed to be declining by the mid-2010s (Klara and Mann, 2014).

4. Creating gender identities in perfume descriptions
4.1 Identities and gender stereotypes of women

The names of female-marketed perfumes that serve as headlines for body copy serve as representations of how women are portrayed in these texts. Each of the first group of fragrance names analysed for this study creates images of women desiring to be irresistible. Such is the case with (2) *Opium*, (13) *Poison Girl*, (20) *Obsession*, (23) *Very Irresistible*, (31) *This is Her*! Once achieved, this irresistibility is shown as enabling the woman to experience desirable feelings and situations.

The second group of names specify wishes women are projected to have (3) *Romance*, (5) *Euphoria*, (21) *Happy*, (24) *Fancy Love*, (25) *Envy Me*, and (37) *Cinema*. These appellations suggest that women

fantasize about an idealized love that could include romantic dates in cinemas and other pursuits through which they might experience gratification and euphoria, such as leading the life of a movie star. Secondly, competing with other women is projected as natural, so the motive for being irresistible is also to cause envy in other women.

The third group of names targets women as strong, independent, non-conforming individuals, e.g. with a passion for travelling. The group includes (16) *POP* and (28) *Journey Woman*. While the research investigates language in e-shops with .com and .co.uk suffixes which predominantly focus on English-speaking clients, the last group comprises perfume names which are phrases in a foreign language (19) *La Vie Est Belle*, (34) *Aqua Di Gioia*, (35) *J'ADORE*. These phrases are not expected to be understood through a semantic meaning in their original language, but rather to evoke connotations with the language and culture they proceed from. French names, for example, may evoke fashion, romance, cuisine or a holiday for women who imagine themselves as fashionistas, romantics, visionaries or travellers.

The body copy of each ad further expands the impressions of female identities identified in the headlines. To determine the identities or gender stereotypes indicated, the frequency of words that appear in descriptions are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of words in female perfume descriptions

Word list	Frequency
fragrance	40
scent	28
women	19
floral	16
perfume	15
light	15
love	14
sweet	11
wear	10
fresh	9
heart	8
sensual	8
girl	6
pink	6
perfect	6
romantic	5
beautiful	4
beauty	4
beach	4

Each instance of the body copy describing female-marketed perfumes makes use of an anonymous voice that describes products via the indirect imperative. No presence of a mother-daughter tone of voice is obvious here, even though its usage is quite common and exclusive to female perfumes. Nevertheless, as alluded to above, what may be considered a certain mother-daughter nostalgia can be observed in the usage of the noun *girl*. Gender stereotyping emerges in the usage of adjectives: descriptors such as *floral*, *light* and *sweet* are employed, as these fragrance characteristics are considered predominantly feminine. The adjective *floral* appears 16 times, *light* 15 times and *sweet* 11 times. Other gender stereotypes can be identified in the words *heart*, *sensual* and *beach*. In perfume design and manufacturing, *heart* is a term used to denote a fragrance's "middle" notes (the scents that emerge as the initial "top" or "head" impressions of a fragrance drift away, and which are in turn followed by the lingering "base" notes). The term *heart* is used more frequently in female perfume descriptions. A possible explanation for the lower occurrence of this term in body copy for products marketed to men may be the fact that the word *heart*, even if used to describe the notes of a fragrance, suggests femininity, passion and sensuality – features that are seen as undesirable in male-oriented descriptions. In other words, the use of *heart* in perfume descriptions may proceed from assumptions that decisions to choose the particular product are made emotionally rather than rationally, or what several teams of researchers

refer to as "hedonic and utilitarian shopping behavior," respectively, with women more likely to engage in the former and men the latter (Wahyuddin, Setyawan, and Nugroho, 2017).

The occurrence of the adjective *sensual* points to the fact that emotions have long been found to be important in the decisions of women (Huston, 2016). The use of the word *beach* in perfume descriptions seems to suggest a place women imagine as an escape from reality (Hemme, 2010, p. 12). This usage converges with the frequent advertising portrayal of housewives or professional women as daydreamers closing their eyes and relaxing during their busy working day. On the other hand, the usage of the word *pink*, a typically feminine colour, does not seem to stand for a gender stereotype in the perfume descriptions. It is exclusively used as a descriptor of ingredients (i.e. *pink* pepper, as compared to black pepper or red pepper), so similarly to the word *heart* it can also be seen as a technical term in perfume manufacturing. Still, the expression "pink pepper" can be analysed further. Including this particular term in the body copy may not have been simply to represent an ingredient – it seems to have connotations of feminine power or "spice" (in the sense of the 1990s pop music group the Spice Girls). This is perhaps the type of feeling that a marketer and copywriter (working together) would want to invoke in a potential buyer, especially in a younger woman valuing empowerment.

Perfume descriptions often include an advice section for the appropriate application of the perfume, specifically the timing and location in which the fragrance should be worn:

(2) *wear it **on a first date***
(5) *wear a bit **on these humdrum workdays***
(11) *wear **on your naked skin***
(24) *wear it **to school, work**…*

Two of these suggestions might be seen to place women into stereotypical positions, i.e. sexual object (11), and romanticizing dreamer (2). Subject positions such as these are termed by philosopher Evangelia Papadaki (2020) as "reduction to body" and "inertness," respectively. Samples (5) and (24) show the agency of potential women customers by placing them in the environments of working life and education. Nevertheless, *love* still plays a key role in perfume advertising for women, with the noun appearing with the second most frequency in these descriptions. Through such an observation, women might be identified as romantics, i.e., seekers or providers of love. The following are collocations in which *love* appears:

(3) ***love is in the air** when you use Romance for women…*
     *…for women who believe in **the power of true love***
(4) *the Mediterranean **love story** of an irresistible Italian femme fatale*
(17) ***a love-struck**, young couple enjoys an intimate*
(24) *evoke the deep feelings you get from **being in love***

4.2 Identities and gender stereotypes of men

Headlines including the names of male-marketed perfumes can be classified into several categories. The first classification contains fragrance names denoting desirable concepts that can be stereotypically understood as goals men want to achieve: (41) *1 Million*, (69) *She Came To Stay*, (76) *Success*. These names can be associated with seeking wealth, securing or maintaining fulfilling relationships, feeling desirable, and other forms of happiness-seeking, possibly connected with interactions, jobs or hobbies.

The second category contains names connected with projections of men's roles in society: (46) *Herod*, (50) *Diesel BAD,* (53) *Only The Brave Tattoo*, (55) *Gentleman Only Absolute*, (60) *Tsar*, (65) *No.1*, (70) *Pegasus*, (78) *I Am King*. All these names are closely related to power and masculinity. The titles *Tsar* and *King* are legally accepted honorifics demonstrating male monarchy, while *Herod* and *Pegasus* refer to horses, the former a famous racehorse, the latter the mythical winged creature that rode into battle. Both steeds became legendary because of their achievements.[3] The other names identify various archetypal male subject positions, all of which are reflected in the black packaging of the fragrances: the rogue or outlaw (53), a military or biker persona (55), an elegant man-about-town

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[3] The referents for both Herod and Pegasus may be other than the famous horses (e.g. Herod might refer to the biblical king), but the packaging in both cases features equine silhouettes.

(60). These roles can be reflected in the decision-making associated with these products – either to purchase a particular brand of fragrance or to wear it (e.g., instead of another scent) – when a particular image is meant to be presented. As individuals oscillate between several identities in various environments (Goffman, 1959), the same man who considers himself tough in the business sphere might seek to be debonair and alluring on a date.

The third category of names focuses on rationality: (47) *Russian Leather*, (56) *Grey Flannel*, (58) *English Leather*, (72) *Platinum*, (79) *Green Irish Tweed*. All these materials are known for their reliability tested during the centuries. Marketing research confirms that men tend to make their decisions based on rationality and scientifically approved facts rather than on emotions (Wahyuddin, Setyawan, and Nugroho, 2017). These names may also suggest conservatism in purchase behaviour, as those opting for these products might prefer classic or tried-and-true materials to untested novelties.

The last category of names conveys the image of a man as an adventurous traveller constantly pushing his limits: (45) *Escape*, (49) *On The Road*, (66) *14°S 48°E- Madagascar*, (73) *Horizon Extreme*, (77) *Aspen*. These fragrance names do not merely evoke the identity of a traveller and adventurer; they can be understood as suggestions of wandering, exploring and exotic journeys. In cases such as (77) the destination name may also reflect the features described by the first category of goal-related fragrance names, i.e., a remote ski lodge in the mountains where the rich and powerful meet and enjoy themselves. This is also one of several examples showing that these categories cannot be understood as absolute or mutually exclusive. Instead, they should be defined as fluid image-composites rather than according to steadfast rules.

The body copy of male perfume descriptions further reifies concepts of the received identities of men found in the headlines, including potential signs of gender stereotyping (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of words in male perfume descriptions

Word list	Frequency
fragrance	45
scent	38
men	26
leather	15
wear	15
fresh	13
spicy	11
perfect	9
black	8
green	8
first	8
masculine	8
classic	7
masculinity	6
perfume	6
bad	5
special	5
light	5

In all the male fragrance product descriptions, an anonymous voice is used. Although men's purchases have been found to be based on rationality, the voice of science is not used. The effects of fragrances on the human body are rather abstract and hard to describe. With both men and women, various factors such as "skin and body chemistry […] hormone levels, and […] diet" greatly affect the way a scent reacts with a particular body (Kessler, 2019). In the male-marketed perfume names, the frequency of words *fragrance* and *scent*, which prevails over the usage of the noun *perfume*, shows gender stereotyping that may attempt to diminish possible feminine associations resulting from the word *perfume*. Fragrance gender stereotyping is shown also in the descriptor *spicy,* which as indicated by Sczesny and Stahlberg (2002) refers to an overall characteristic of a perfume conventionally described as typically masculine (this is in contrast to "pink pepper" referenced above, which may be an attempt to project male power by the use of a spice). Conversely, the colours green and black, the usage of which

is recorded regularly in the body copy, do not seem to serve as a sign of stereotyping, but merely as a feature specifying the ingredients of perfumes (similar to the female perfume usage of pink).

The identity of a man who is perceived as a source of power and machismo is supported by the words *masculine* and *masculinity*, which are often incorporated into perfume descriptions. On the contrary, the terms *feminine* and *femininity* were used at a significantly lower frequency in female perfume descriptions. The reason for this overt identification with maleness may be in the fact that fragrances are inherently understood as feminine. The frequent usage of verbal items reaffirming the male identity assures purchasers of facing no risk of being misclassified in terms of gender. The following are examples of the usage of *masculinity* and *masculine* in perfume description body copy:

(51) *Spicebomb reveals* **masculinity** *from every angle*
(52) *for a man with a charismatic allure and an assertive dominant* **masculinity**
(58) *a balance that is both* **masculine** *and enchanting*

Further differences between male and female fragrance descriptions can be observed in the usage of the word *love*. Whereas in the female descriptions this noun is the second most frequent word, in the male descriptions it is not mentioned at all. This indirectness or even disavowal of the positive emotional, mental and physical states associated with love may be linked with the perceived risk of portraying male product users as vulnerable, feminine or soft. This is in line with the other attributes cited above in the male perfume descriptions that preserve an image of a dominant, masculine and powerful identity. Expressions possibly associated with love or relationships can be recognized mainly in collocations with the adjective *special*. The following collocations were found which feature projected situations in which the product would be used, i.e., they are not focused on the man himself:

(44) *this fragrance will make* **your special lady** *feel not only that she can feel secure*
(52) *to enhance a man's everyday charisma or* **for a special occasion**
(58) *to go out for* **a special night** *on the town*
(77) *to freshen up before your* **date with someone special**

The target demographic of males seeking products and services of high quality and exclusivity would expect their fragrances to include such features as well. With similar results to those found in the headlines, the analysed body copy includes terms like *leather*, *classic* and *first* promoting the putative quality, reliability, elegance and superiority of the perfumes. Nevertheless, in advertising body copy, male perfume customers are rarely placed in a pressure position in which they might be judged harshly or as having failed; quite the contrary – perfume descriptions show independent men with the freedom of choice to go against the grain. An example is the usage of the adjective *perfect*, which is not connected with a man's character or body image, but with occasions during which the perfume can be worn. These examples show a man in the role of a successful businessman or an active adventurer who can adapt to changing circumstances:

(42) *it is* **perfect** *paired with daytime* **business suits**
(56) *making it* **perfect** *for* **impromptu occasions**
(77) **perfect** *to wear* **on days spent outdoors** *or* **before heading to the office**

As a summary of our overall results indicates, the female perfume descriptions generally reveal little or no conventional gender stereotyping, while traditional masculine tropes and images are much more prominent in male perfume descriptions. In a discussion of these results, we sought to contextualize the findings by addressing the question of why this disparity exists. To do this we must consider a relatively long-term cultural view of changes in how women and men see each other.

5. Discussion

Throughout the first decades of the 20th century, gender roles continued to be firmly established in marketing and the mass media, thus, there was little mainstream discussion regarding the received images and language of masculinity and femininity. The situation regarding gender stereotyping in ads only began to change in wider society during the World War Two period when women had to enter

the workplace in the absence of men (Sutton, 2008, pp. 6–8; 95–97). As the soldiers returned home, an attempt at reestablishing the traditional role of woman as solely a mother and homemaker was made. Images of women in domestic roles dominated advertising and other mass media during the 1950s.

Regarding the choice of products in general, including fragrances, researchers have identified a "climate of change" beginning during the 1960s (Classen, Howes, and Synnott, 1994, p. 190). Historian Elaine Tyler May points out how ultimately the post-war efforts to restrict women to the home could not be successful. Social changes regarding equality of the sexes initiated centuries earlier were driven forward by the war. Technological changes facilitated the mass production and distribution of household appliances that made housework much less time consuming. Following the baby boom of the post-war years, the introduction of birth control methods in the 1960s gave couples more freedom of choice about having children (May, 2008, pp. 129–152). Further, by the 1980s the rising economic need in Western countries for two incomes to support a family practically forced many women out of the home and into the workplace (May, 2008, pp. 157–162). All of these challenges to traditional masculinity, e.g. the role of man as provider and breadwinner, proceeded incrementally in the post-war years, eventually by the late 1960s creating two tracks in the marketplace regarding gender specific products. Women began to seek products that emphasized their freedom to choose regarding career and/or family, etc. (Goffman, 1987, pp. 37–40). On the other hand, as men's jobs and other roles came to be filled by women, a need to "compensate" for this perceived encroachment into traditionally male domains caused a market need for products "imbued with images of exaggerated masculinity." Especially to "compensate" for the perceived "feminine associations" with fragrance products, by the 1970s no "suggestion of effeminacy" at all could be found in the advertising of male products (Classen, Howes, and Synnott, 1994, pp. 190–193). Thus, the results of our study regarding the gendering of male fragrances and the challenging of older norms for women's scents should not seem surprising.

In a more recent development, beginning around 2010, the gendered binary in the advertising of fragrance products came to be strongly challenged, especially in younger demographics. Unisex fragrances emerged as "the best performers in both premium and mass [markets] in 2019," although sales were "particularly badly hit" by the market effects of COVID-19 (Euromonitor International, 2020). As we have seen, this is somewhat in contrast to male- and female-targeted products, the sale of which remained stable and even increased in the case of exclusive brands (O'Connor, 2020).

6. Conclusion

Messages related to gender identity are communicated in the names of perfumes in ways ranging from the overt and striking to the subtle and nuanced. Popular images and impressions are often conveyed in terms of what an individual imagines achieving or experiencing when using "a product associated with the ideal self rather than the actual self" (Peruzzi, Pirouz, and Pechmann, 2015 p. 519). These types of messages communicated in body copy in product ads and especially in the names of products create or reaffirm the self-concept in sometimes complex ways. As indicated above, unisex fragrances using marketing campaigns problematizing the gender binary achieved the largest growth in market share, e.g. in Great Britain in the years 2009–2019, although "a fall in value in recent years" has been identified (Sabanoglu, 2020).

Surprisingly, the descriptions we found do not always portray women themselves as sources of perfection and ideals of beauty. The words *perfect*, *beautiful* and *beauty*, which appear quite frequently in the selected texts, are used to portray situations in which one may use the perfume rather than to describe the physical appearance of a woman. Based on our findings it can be said that current female perfume descriptions in e-shop advertising generally suppress gender stereotypes quite successfully, with only a few cases of clear typing noted. These were related to associations with the word *floral*, to irrationality regarding decision-making, to a lifestyle focusing on leisure and love, and to the female body as a natural or sexual object. Several identities were identified in body copy, including woman as a seeker of passion, affection and bliss who wants to be irresistible; woman as an idealist visionary; woman as a traveller; woman in a mother-daughter relationship; and woman as an emancipated worker.

We determined that perfume descriptions targeted at males include features of gender stereotyping more often, a result shown especially in connection with the *spicy* character of advertised perfumes. The putatively gendered term *perfume* is avoided, rationality in decision-making processes is encoded, and men's lifestyle choices are depicted. Headlines and body copy reveal several identities of

"exaggerated masculinity" (Classen, Howes, and Synnott, 1994, p. 190): man as an adventurous traveler, man as a source of power and masculinity, man as sexually irresistible, man as rational, and man as successful businessman.

A number of gender stereotypes can be recognized in the corpus; however, these are more prominent in male perfume descriptions, which both generally avoid feminine associations with the fragrance as well as emphasize active masculinity. As the overview in the discussion puts forth, the disparity can be linked to societal changes during the 20th century regarding gender roles as well as how men and women see each other and their place in wider society. There is also published evidence that this binary has been breaking down in the marketing of fragrances since around 2000, with unisex fragrances gaining popularity by the 2010s.

Certain limitations to this study can be identified as well as tracks for possible future research. Our relatively small corpus is a drawback that could easily be addressed in future studies on gender terms in global English-language fragrance advertising by expanding the corpus of terms analysed. Further, following sales trends, parameters of corpus selection could be extended to include linguistic features associated with unisex products, as this category is generally found today on retail, marketing and industry websites as a third classification of scents in addition to male and female. Fragrance has been identified by the industry website BeautyIndependent as the "first non-gendered beauty category" (Brown, 2017). Since gender-neutral brands make the challenging of stereotypes a key feature of their marketing campaigns, it would be interesting to track the linguistic features of their online advertising, e.g. in comparison with the marketing of products targeted specifically at males or females. Finally, in line with our current results, future research could continue to track the trends we have found. Will ads for fragrance products marketed to females continue to show more gender-neutral features, and will the trend of the use of traditional male stereotypes continue?

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Appendix

The corpus of E-shop perfume descriptions is available at https://fhs.utb.cz/o-fakulte/zakladni-informace/ustavy/ustav-modernich-jazyku-a-literatur/appendix-e-shop-perfume-descriptions/