

Unisex Complexity: The Multifaceted Nature of Fragrance

2024. 06.06. JELIGE: KKR000

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Introduction

This thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of fragrances, by which I can, hopefully, challenge the myth that every fragrance is gendered by nature. Fragrances, as a culturally approved marketing strategy, tend to be categorized as either feminine or masculine. In the niche fragrance sector, however, the creation of unisex fragrances is much more common, which offers customers a wide variety of choices.

Recently, several studies from various fields have begun to explore the complexities of olfaction, the findings of which have shown that one should either go beyond the conventional feminine-masculine divide or create new ways of categorizing fragrances. Joining these efforts, I will explore how one can approach fragrances without sticking to traditional gender norms. For instance, it is possible through drawing on insights from impression management or investigating how smell influences communication. I will also discuss the possible influences of biology and culture on scent preferences, as well as how societal views on gender can impact consumer habits. Then, with the help of examples taken from various advertisements, I will illustrate how perfumes are marketed differently to men and women.

To provide a deeper understanding of how the niche market circumvents gender generalizations and shows the complexity of olfaction, I will rely on qualitative research methods. During my research, I interviewed five perfumers from Europe, three women and two men, and before that, a male perfumer, similarly from Europe, who had helped me formulate relevant questions during a pilot interview. The various perspectives of these perfumers have broadened my knowledge of the complex interplay present between scent, gender and culture. Consequently, I hope that my research will help challenge stereotypes and similarly, offer new perspectives on how fragrances can be experienced and appreciated by people of all genders. All the more so, since existing knowledge about smell overrides the common belief that perfumes are gendered by nature.

1. Exploring the Power of Scented Communication

This chapter aims to create a foundation for my main argument, which is that olfaction is far more faceted than commonly assumed. One might think that fragrances are either feminine or masculine, which perspective, however, eliminates other views on olfaction. This section will examine the role of olfaction within the framework of non-verbal communication and will also delve into impression management since the two are strongly connected.

As Mark L. Knapp mentions in his 2006 historical overview of non-verbal communication, in the 1950s, various scholars, such as Trager, Birdwhistell and E. T. Hall, primarily focused on comprehending how communication is organized, which led to the foundation of nonverbal behaviour studies. Paradoxically, their attention was directed more toward communication than to nonverbal behaviour (Knapp 2006, 9). Nevertheless, their research contributed to the formulation of a definition of non-verbal communication, which raises two important problems. One of them is where the boundary between verbal and nonverbal communication resides, while the other one is that nonverbal behaviour and non-verbal communication are different in the sense that nonverbal behaviour is not intentional (Knapp 2006, 3). Furthermore, intention is often thought to be an essential characteristic of communication; however, some scholars take into consideration unconscious intentions as well (Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank 2016, xxi).

According to the findings of David Matsumoto and his colleagues, nonverbal communication and nonverbal behaviour are commonly mixed up. In order to avoid this, in this thesis, I use Matsumoto's categorization, according to which non-verbal communication is a broader term compared to non-verbal behaviour, which is a less complex notion (Matsumoto, Hwang and Frank 2016, xxi). In fact, nonverbal communication is so complex that it encompasses such diverse environmental messages as colour and design, with the help of which one is able to guide other people's behaviour. For instance, fast-food restaurants employ vibrant colours such as orange, yellow and red to encourage their customers to eat more and eat faster. As opposed to this, fine-dining restaurants use soft lighting, pastel colours and comfortable seating to create an intimate atmosphere, prompting diners to stay for dessert and coffee (Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank 2016, xix).

Similarly to colours, as Andrew G. Parsons points out, scents are also able to have an effect on people's behaviour. Since scent has the potential to trigger memories, which I will explain later, it is no wonder that shops using a specific fragrance can prompt consumers to revisit them when they encounter the familiar scent elsewhere, thus bringing the retailer to the forefront of their customers' memory (Parsons 2009, 450). As this example illustrates, scents are able to convey messages. Furthermore, each individual's physical characteristics, including

smell, height, weight, as well as facial features, also contribute to nonverbal (information one unintentionally conveys) messages. Additionally, dynamic actions of the face, voice and body, known as nonverbal behaviour, also transmit messages during one's interactions (Matsumoto et al., 2016, xx–xxi). Biological, learning, and cultural factors influence these channels, such as facial expressions and gestures (Matsumoto et al., 2016, xx–xxi).

It is relevant to mention the influence of both biological and cultural factors, particularly in the context of the research conducted by Haviland-Jones, where traditional concepts such as signs, signals, and symbols are used to grasp the role of olfaction in nonverbal communication. This paragraph will explain the difference between these three channels of metacommunication. As for signs, they are employed in the actual moment of communication. It has been suggested that personal body odour can function as such a one (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 363). For instance, people often use the phrase 'I can smell fear' (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 367). The emerging literature on fear concerning human chemosignals (pheromones) suggests that they carry emotional messages (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 366). Pheromones will be discussed in the following chapter in more detail. The next element is signals, which are sometimes referred to as altered signs. The term "signal" is used to classify olfactory cues that can suggest an experience different from the actual one, although it may not be entirely dissimilar. For instance, stores use artificial scents to alter the olfactory perception of their respective environment, as mentioned above. Another illustration is the practice among Asian women, wherein they improve the fragrance of their body odour by consuming specific foods known for their positive effects. This is also a modified sign and, thus, a signal (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 363). The latter phenomenon, connected to food consumption, will be elaborated on in the following chapter, too. The role of smell in symbolic communication combines sensory, linguistic, and cognitive studies (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 364). Various investigations illustrated the potential significance of olfactory symbols in influencing behaviour and attitude (Haviland-Jones, Wilson, and Freyberg 2016, 376). For instance, a study suggested that pleasant, clean smells could influence one's actions, which are associated with cleansing behaviours. However, it is debatable whether this association is learned, manufactured, and promoted, or if it has naturally evolved from plants with antibacterial properties, which are used in products in order to provide a fresh scent – in other words, it may have an evolutionary explanation (Haviland-Jones et al., 2016, 377).

Whether conscious or unconscious, socially learned, or inherent, one can effectively utilise this knowledge to make a positive impression on others. Attempting to impress somebody, one deploys one's inner qualities, such as intelligence. They seek out connections with positive experiences or individuals to present a more positive image of themselves, which is then

followed by trying to charm the target. Physical appearance is secondary. Physical appearance comprehends both clothing choices and personal grooming style. The latter has received less attention despite the substantial size of the hygiene and beauty industry. It is suggested by researchers (Baron 1988, 92) that scent can genuinely impact how others perceive individuals, furthermore, perfume plays a significant role in the context of social interactions.

Learning the creation of positive impressions falls within the scope of impression management. As Paul Rosenfeld discusses, impression management has gained increasing recognition among researchers as a valuable framework for understanding a wide array of complex occurrences, behaviours, or dynamics within organisations. People are portrayed as actors attempting to manage or alter others' perceptions of themselves to prevent negative evaluations, which have both positive and negative aspects. It is worth studying impression management as it would create the foundation for more straightforward interactions as well as a method to resolve potential communication challenges among individuals coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, on the more negative side, impression management is said to be a manipulative and dishonest tool regarding practical aspects (Rosenfeld et al., 2015, 1–2). First impressions count everywhere; therefore, job interviews are often closely examined to boost the chances of success. Some people might question their honesty and consistency, but it is still valuable to gather helpful strategies for such moments. The phrase 'dress for success' nicely captures the notion that combined strategies can likely pave the way to a successful career (Baron 1988, 96).

In a study conducted by Baron in 1983 male and female participants played the role of a personnel manager and conducted interviews with another person, who was secretly a collaborator of the researcher applying for an entry-level management position. The interviews entailed asking the applicant simple questions from cards, and the accomplice had prepared pre-planned and non-controversial responses. After the interview, the participants rated the applicant on various criteria including job-related and personal characteristics, appearance, and effectiveness as interviewers. To investigate the impact of scent on ratings, which were made on a seven-point scale, the accomplices had either applied perfume or cologne behind each ear or had not used any grooming products. The scents used were chosen based on the findings of a pilot study, where the most attractive scents, 'Brut' and 'Jontu,' had been selected for the male and female accomplices, respectively (Baron 1988, 96–7). The result indicated that males perceived themselves as less effective interviewers when applicants were wearing scents because it negatively affected their ability to rate candidates. Female interviewers, however, did not show a similar pattern and were not significantly influenced by the applicants' smell. The findings suggest that the interaction between scent and the sex of the participants may be attributed to

differences in how males and females handle irrelevant or non-essential aspects of an applicant's grooming or appearance. In a different study that Baron conducted in 1986, with a similar setup, Baron added a further aspect, namely, that the participants were exposed to a high level of non-verbal cues from the accomplice, such as facial (smiling) and spatial (bending towards) ones, while the remaining participants encountered a low level of such cues. Baron concluded that it is not necessarily beneficial to use perfumes as a tool of impression management. It is also referred to as 'too much of a good thing,' implying that individuals employing various impression management tactics may inadvertently lower their rating in the eyes of those evaluating them (Baron 1988, 99). In conclusion, the sense of smell has an impact on our interactions.

However, without sufficient knowledge about its effects, its deliberate application may be self-defeating. -If that be the case, one might ask, why use them at all? Well, because, as said above, it may have positive outcomes too. In this case, it might be worth looking at one particular aspect of Baron's study closely. The selection of perfume was based on students' preferences, which is unlikely to be appropriate for a work environment. Considering the numerous perfumes on the market, with their numbers constantly increasing, there might have been a more suitable fragrance for an interview setting (Fiore 1992, 158). Fiore conducted a study where ninety female undergraduates were part of an experiment exploring how the composition of three fragrances affected their impressions of the personality traits of their potential wearers. There were clear connections between the characteristics of the fragrance and the personality traits attributed to the person wearing it. When fragrances had similar aesthetic qualities, people tended to associate similar personality traits with the wearer. Individuals who chose oriental or chypre fragrances were seen as having higher levels of traits related to being traditionally masculine compared to those who wore dissimilar floral fragrances. Moreover, those wearing chypre fragrances were also perceived as more assertive, sophisticated, and aggressive than those wearing floral ones. This suggests that a deliberate application of a particular type of fragrance shall determine how one is perceived by others (Fiore 1992, 157).

This result not only points out the impact of fragrance in forming impressions but also highlights the significance of the arrangement of fragrances regardless of gender, in a more nuanced and expressive way. Since olfaction has already been placed within the scope of communication, the aforementioned studies by Baron indicate the lack of awareness of a conscious usage of fragrances. If applied artfully, perfumes may become a means of subtle manipulation. The concepts of signs, signals, and symbols in how we communicate through smell show that scent is a complex non-verbal cue. This highlights how important smell is in how we interact and communicate with each other. These three elements are strongly intervened with biological as well as cultural factors, which will be elaborated in the following chapter.

2. Fragrance Perception: Natural or Social

To grasp the role of olfaction in one's life, both biological aspects and acquired practices within a given culture should be taken into consideration. Biological constraints should be mentioned first; in my understanding, these can also be called the universal or general understandings of olfaction. However, these general understandings have their boundaries, after which one's personal experiences come into play, which one unavoidably comes across during his/her lifetime. Firstly, olfaction and its unique role within the brain is going to be mentioned and then the significance of body odour is going to be discussed with particular attention to pheromones, as they play a vital role in conveying messages.

Not only is the mechanism of how we perceive scents complicated but also how we produce them. While body odour may differ between genders, dietary selections can aid in controlling the scent discharged by the body. Therefore, in that light, perfume serves as a complement to our skin rather than simply masking odours. The distinctive ability of odours to evoke emotions, which was mentioned earlier, as well as to boost memory, is quite remarkable since, unlike our other senses, smell bypasses the thalamus and goes straight to the limbic system in the brain, which is tied to emotions and memory. This direct link makes smell a strong influencer of mood, learning, and social interactions, making smell a powerful tool in shaping our experiences and reactions (Sullivan et al. 2015, 1). This biological information is perfectly reflected in Dawn Goldworm's speech, who is a globally recognized olfactory expert and a creative mind behind successful fragrances, shedding new light on the sense of smell and the power of fragrances. She argues that our emotions and behaviours can be influenced without a single touch or word, which most of us are unaware of. She further added that the sense of smell is the strongest one out of all the 5 senses and is primary until the age of ten. It works strongly together with our emotions. When we encounter an odour, we automatically associate it with an emotion, and it remains engraved in our memory. This is why a specific scent can trigger precise memories. For instance, for a newborn child, the mother's scent provides a sense of security. Therefore, when it comes to separation, a piece of fabric with the mother's scent would facilitate the weaning process. Fragrances have the power to enhance our experiences significantly. Our opinions about scents are not merely subjective, they are shaped by our living environment during the first 10 years of our lives and influenced by our culture as well as the generation we belong to. Furthermore, preferences can vary from region to region and country to country (Dawn Goldworm 2019). Her argument highlights an important aspect: culture can play an important role in shaping our sense of smell. To further elaborate on this idea, in a

study by Artin (2022, 2062) focusing on odour preferences, data was collected from nine diverse populations, the findings of which suggest that the pleasantness of odours mostly works autonomously from cultural factors. On the other hand, facial attractiveness is influenced by cultural factors in 50% of the cases, showing a significantly greater impact compared to the 6% influence by odours. While showing only a limited impact of culture, odour pleasantness seems to vary according to one's perception (Artin 2022, 2064). This information corresponds to the phrase expressed by the Irish novelist Margaret Wolfe Hungerford in 1878, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder", underlining the idea that what one person considers beautiful, another may not (Artin 2022, 2061). The results of these findings show that, regardless of a collective quality of olfaction, cultural environment and, more importantly, personal preferences are the main influencing factors in the perception of scent.

Another crucial aspect worthwhile to note regarding olfaction is pheromones. Released into the environment from the body, pheromones, referred to as chemical messengers, influence specific physiological or behavioural processes at both conscious and unconscious levels within the same species, whether animals or human beings. Manufacturers are able to produce these pheromones artificially, and perfumers frequently use such synthetic versions thereof (Grammer et al. 2005, 136–7). Gaining insight into the significance of pheromones is important to help our understanding of their role in various species. However, it is more difficult to determine the term 'human pheromones' than it seems. Pheromones may suggest implicitly that there is a coder, who sends signals and communicates through pheromones, and there is a decoder who receives them and reacts to them in a certain way. What is challenging in olfactory communication is that this information has to go through the air, while interacting with the environment. Furthermore, predicting the effects and functions becomes difficult due to various contextual factors that can influence olfactory communication during both the encoding and decoding stages. The closest appropriate description may be that pheromones are substances with informative qualities. These qualities may not be present in everyone, and they might rely on a distinct combination of scents for various individuals (de Groot 2017, 309–310). This definition reinforces the idea that some aspects of the sense of smell are not inherent but acquired.

By placing the human body in focus, its odour can be influenced by both internal and external factors. It varies with age; for instance, the smell of an infant is often considered one of the most delightful scents for a parent to breathe in. The mere presence of a baby's body odour can activate brain areas associated with reward (Croy et al. 2017, 81). However, significant changes occur during puberty, and when one shifts from middle age to being elderly (Kippenberger et al. 2012, 2). Both males and females have their distinct odours that play a role

in sending signals. Olfaction as an influencing factor was marginalised in the understanding of selecting potential mates. Visual and verbal stimuli take precedence; however, it has recently been suggested that olfaction also plays an important role in the more intimate stage of selecting a potential partner. This process occurs both consciously and unconsciously due to the aforementioned fact that the sense of smell is closely connected to our limbic system, which is responsible for our emotions and memories (Grammer et al. 2005, 136). For women, their body odour becomes particularly captivating during their fertile days, signalling their readiness for potential connections. However, the use of contraception can disrupt this cycle of attraction (Chróst et al. 2021, 3687). Likewise, in men, for instance, the underarm secretions possess an intriguing as well as stimulating quality. Interestingly, it has an impact on men's emotional state, effectively easing tension and promoting relaxation (Kippenberger et al. 2012, 3). Health-related information is held by odour as well. The practice of detecting someone's illnesses through the sense of smell has a long history dating back to ancient times, and it continues to be used by medical experts today (Olsson et al. 2014, 1). However, it is not limited to professionals, anyone can detect when someone is sick simply by their natural body odour. This natural defence system helps us avoid sick people and this system is also referred to as the innate immune response, which helps protect our health (Olsson et al. 2014, 6). These examples show that there is indeed a collective foundation of olfactive perception shared among all individuals otherwise, these functions would not be universally present.

An individual's body odour is also significantly affected by the foods they consume, which is an external influencing factor. It has been proposed that food is the main influencer of one personal odour. Various dietary choices result in distinct body odours, which can vary both individually and across different cultures. For instance, consuming red meat or garlic could potentially influence the underarm body odour. Surprisingly, contrary to common belief, the consumption of garlic positively impacts male body odour (Fialová 2017, 32–33). Individuals following a non-meat diet were perceived to emit more pleasing, attractive, and serene odours compared to those who are eating meat. Consequently, individuals who incorporate more vegetables into their diets often have a more pleasant body odour. There is a list of food types, which affect either positively or negatively body odour. As it was mentioned before, in contemporary Asian cultures it is a common practice for women to consume specific products that influence their body odour, creating a distinct scent. The intention is to emit a sweeter odour, which can be a signal of happiness (Matsumoto, et al. 2016, 363). A common stereotype is that "Indians smell like curry," often perceived negatively. This arises from their consumption of specific spices. In response to this assumption, an Indian blog writer explained that she started to use perfume, potentially to mask the associated odour, furthermore,

she reasons that the lingering curry scent is only from her clothing (Narayanan 2017). However, as it was suggested above, the consumption of these spices internally can influence one's body odour. Not only does this phenomenon introduce a stereotype, which is worth studying in connection with other common beliefs related to different cultures in the context of the sense of smell, such as the belief that Arab people prefer strong scents, etc., but also in this instance, this phenomenon raises the question whether it's possible to mask body odour. It is necessary to mention the reaction of the perfume on the skin. In the work of Behan (Behan et al. 1996, 246) it has been suggested that skin is not a passive surface; it interacts with perfume, notably slowing its evaporation compared to a neutral surface. The impact on each perfume component varies. While chances for chemical changes on the skin are limited, the study shows specific transformations occur. A study examined whether perfume and body odour blend or if perfume simply masks the skin. As a result, perfume not only interacts with individual body odours but can also have both positive and negative effects on some individuals. This explains why giving perfume as a gift might be risky, as perfume reacts differently on everyone's skin, therefore, the outcome is likely to vary on everyone's skin. Furthermore, it was suggested that perfume works as a complementary device to our skin, emphasising that it is not a camouflage but rather a tool that evolves on the skin (Havlíček and Roberts 2013, 191).

These findings introduced that a comprehensive understanding of smell requires not only biological but cultural considerations as well. Furthermore, this section underlies my understanding that olfaction has a far more faceted structure meaning that it is not just about how we perceive different kinds of smells, but also about how many factors influence our body odour. Even though certain olfactive qualities are commonly shared, and each sex and age group have their specific attributes, preferences vary on a more sophisticated level, introducing feelings and emotions, cultural background, food consumption as well as personal experiences. These factors show the complex layers, on which we influence others either intentionally or unintentionally. The following chapter will discuss how certain products are associated with specific genders. Following that, we will explore how perfumes are still categorized into either feminine or masculine categories, disregarding the complexity of olfaction, discussed earlier.

3. Gendering Habits – Comparative perspectives regarding food, alcohol, and perfume consumption

Men and women tend to have different eating and drinking habits, as well as perfume preferences, influenced by societal norms. These norms are projected into our habits, and as gender stereotypes change, these habits do so as well. In this study, these matters will be examined through the lens of a gender-sensitive approach, which focuses on the impact of social and cultural factors that contribute to the differences between women and men. In this context, gender is viewed as a description of various social and cultural influences, while sex is constrained to biological qualities. Gender has the ability to address other influencing factors. (Lindqvist 2013b, 221).

Beginning this study with an examination of alcohol is highly beneficial, as it provides a multifaceted explanation. The "position of alcohol as a symbol of gender roles" not only offers insights into societal attitudes towards alcohol but also provides information on the evolving position of gender (Holmila et al. 2005, 1766). Gender differences in drinking have been studied from various aspects. Biologists, historians, psychologists, and social science researchers have contributed significantly to this field to understand the drinking habits of men and women. Biologically speaking, alcohol has different implications for women's and men's bodies. The primary difference between men's and women's bodies concerning alcohol is that women typically have a higher proportion of body fat and less water than men. Consequently, when they consume the same quantity of alcohol relative to an individual's body weight, in the same timeframe, women tend to reach higher blood alcohol levels than men (Holmila et al. 2005, 1764). Psychologists, in their studies, investigated why people feel the need, reasons, and motivations for drinking alcohol. Research showed that men tended to focus on the hedonistic advantages of drinking, while women leaned towards perceiving its functional benefits. Social studies highlight gender differences in drinking control, noting that men tend to express their control. Conversely, women exhibit a more internalised drinking control mechanism, making them less prone to engage in heavy drinking, unlike men (Holmila et al. 2005, 1765). According to a study (Landrine et al. 1988) which was conducted in California in the 80s, the typical image of femininity is that women engage in alcohol consumption rarely, usually during special events or to strengthen social relationships. Their preferred selection of alcoholic beverages mainly revolves around wine. Additionally, since industrialisation, it has not been accepted by society for women to get drunk. In contrast, beer is the preferred choice for men in the United States, and the consumption of wine is not generally associated with masculinity. Even though

they do socialise during drinking, they can do it with strangers mostly for the sake of getting drunk. The quicker and the more they drink the more masculine they are considered to be (Landrine et al. 1988, 704). Despite these differences present in our societies, there is a trend of growing integration where the drinking habits of men and women merge. One possible reason is that women are now working outside of the house, and they have adopted what are often referred to as 'male values.' Additionally, they enjoy more freedom as consumers. Furthermore, as they continue to lead a double life, which means that they are working both at home and in the workplace, women experience high levels of stress. As a result, alcohol becomes a quick solution to relieve this stress (Holmila, et al. 2005, 1766). It can be concluded that alcohol usage reflects societal changes related to gender. It is evident that while biological factors contribute to drinking habits due to their varying impacts on one's body, certain cultural norms across different societies have a more prominent influence in shaping these habits.

When it comes to food, similarly to perfumes, it can be used to create a certain impression. The extreme concept of food consumption is that men eat meat and women eat salad. Meat is the symbol of masculinity. Nicoletta Cavazza's insights provide the vantage point for the present investigation. She concludes that alcohol usage mirrors the societal changes related to gender. When it comes to food, similarly to perfumes, it can be used to create a certain impression. The extreme concept of food consumption is that men eat meat and women eat salad. Meat is the symbol of masculinity. This association is attributed to the physically demanding actions such as the supply and processing of meat, which are often carried out by men. In contrast, vegetables, dairy products, fish, fruits, and sweets are considered to be feminine meals. The choice of food and its amount on a date can be used as a tool for impression management (Cavazza, et al. 2015, 266–8). Women were observed to consume fewer calories when dining with men as opposed to dining with other women, while men's eating behaviour remained unaffected by the gender of their dining partner. This observation points out that the influence of social norms on women's food intake is much stronger. The impact of these norms on individuals' eating behaviours may vary based on specific circumstances and cultural factors, as they play a significant role in shaping how individuals perceive and navigate food choices in different settings (Cavazza, et al. 2015, 267). These observations not only illustrate how gender plays a powerful role in shaping our habits but also expand one's knowledge of how impression management works, and how it can be used on various occasions. The questioning of the

historical and contemporary associations between meat consumption and masculinity can be traced back to those periods when traditional masculinity faced threats. More recently, there has been a revival of the discourse around meat as a symbol of masculinity. Popular culture platforms, mostly stemming from the fast-food industry, have played a role in this narrative, repeatedly suggesting that meat consumption is a marker of authentic masculinity and that it can help restore masculinity. This trend is evident in numerous television advertisements by companies like Domino's Pizza, Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonald's, and General Motors, all of which have embraced this theme and stressed that "real men" consume larger quantities of meat (Rothgerber 2013, 364).

Another factor that can be considered is the use of spices. Typically, consuming spicy food is more associated with masculinity. Consequently, while men often consume spicy dishes to conform to societal expectations, women may do so for personal enjoyment, since it is not expected from them. Additionally, another notion comes into play here, concerning personality traits. Individuals who are more prone to aggression, strength, and courage tend to lean towards spicier foods (Byrnes and Hayes 2015, 18). In conclusion, specific ingredients not only influence one's body odour but can also be associated with the idea that a particular characteristic feature is linked to a specific type of ingredient.

The following chapter will explore what kind of characteristic features are commonly connected with fragrance ingredients on the market. But first, it is necessary to explain the categories and the ingredients. Laura Donna examines in her study (2009, 31) Michael Edwards' fragrance guidance, in which 5730 perfumes were analysed (3,463 women's, 1,717 men's, and 550 unisex) and they were categorised by gender in 14 categories. The categories were created by Edwards and they include floral, soft floral, floral oriental, soft oriental, oriental, woody oriental, woods, mossy woods, dry woods, aromatic/fougère, citrus, water/marine, green, and fruity. Women's fragrances tended to feature floral notes more prominently, accounting for 41.8%, while men's fragrances leaned towards aromatic/fougère notes, comprising 33.3%. Woody/oriental notes were associated with a more masculine appeal, representing 21.0% of the fragrances. The frequency of the "fresh" category was notably higher in men's fragrances at 92.6%, compared to 52.1% in women's fragrances. Similarly, water/marine scents were perceived as more masculine, representing 5% in men's fragrances and a minimal 1% in women's fragrances. The citrus category demonstrated the highest majority as a unisex classification at 30.4%, significantly surpassing the rates observed within this category for men (8%) and women (4.2%). Laura Donna, a fragrance coach, conducted a study on the field of odours and questioned these above-discussed categories, she argues that

the Edwards' system generally conveys a masculine orientation on a global scale (Donna 2009, 30–1). Laura Donna also describes her love for chypre fragrances like Ma Griffe by Carven, Y by Yves Saint Laurent, and Femme by Rochas, even though the chypre category leans towards the masculine category. From her perspective, she can certify that women can enjoy oakmoss too. And so, she argues whether the obsession for certain ingredients is in the genes, or perhaps it is just a result of some memories from the past, therefore, questioning the scientific idea of associating gender with scents. According to Paul Jellinek, cultures like Islamic and Pacific ones do not even bother distinguishing between scents for men and women (Donna 2009, 32).

Societal norms strongly dictate gender-specific behaviours and preferences, such as eating, drinking, and perfume choices. While biological factors play a role, cultural norms have a more significant influence. Furthermore, there are societal ideas about which scents are traditionally considered more masculine or feminine, and these perceptions influence the ingredients chosen for perfumes marketed to different genders, but some question the scientific basis of gendered scent preferences. Overall, the chapter highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how societal norms shape individual behaviours and preferences. While the two latter classifications are frequently sorted into either feminine or masculine divisions, fragrances also offer the opportunity to enhance practices associated with either masculinity or femininity. This allows the wearer to achieve the desired impression. The following chapter will delve into how perfume adverts shape our current understanding of perfumes in connection with gender.

4. Perfumes in advertisements

Fragrance advertisement has a unique position since it heavily relies on visuals due to the abstract nature of scents. Gender stereotypes often dictate how fragrances are portrayed, reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Despite attempts to challenge these norms, advertisements still promote unrealistic expectations regarding body image and societal roles. However, as gender norms evolve, there's a growing need for fragrance marketing to embrace inclusivity and authenticity. In Western societies vision and hearing receive greater attention in academic discourses, so in everyday life, the sense of smell is often considered the least valuable sense (Green 2021, 223–4). Consequently, the terminology used to describe fragrances is quite poor. Furthermore, the sense of smell is characterised as elusive; therefore, naming each scent is challenging, often requiring comparison or metaphors (Tuna Et al. 2012, 95–6).

Smells are commonly categorised as "good" or "bad". This illustrates the lack of a specialised olfactory vocabulary, even though humans can detect over a trillion different odours (Green 2021, 223–4). Therefore, when it comes to the advertisement of perfumes visual elements are applied. In some cases, advertisements can create high expectations. For instance, a study which explores how fragrance ads use visuals to shape product expectations and their connection to subsequent evaluations indicates that trying the actual perfume might reveal that the advertisement was merely a visual exaggeration or so-called “visual puffery” (Toncar and Fetscherin 2012, 66). Additionally, it has been suggested that fragrances are strongly connected to self-evaluation. Desired qualities are in a tight relationship with fragrances, therefore, when one purchases a fragrance, they not only buy the product but also the image behind it (Toncar and Fetscherin 2012, 65–6). In advertising, fragrances are typically categorised by gender; they can be either feminine, masculine, or, in rare instances, unisex. In this sense, gender is not something inherent, instead, it is used to describe the various aspects that make up the concept of gender, which is influenced by both social and cultural factors. It has been suggested that both women and men use perfumes to enhance or express their gender-related qualities. A study was conducted to challenge assumptions regarding the gender-specific classification of perfumes, the belief in differing odour preferences between women and men for their partners, and the assumption of distinct perfume preferences between women and men for personal use (Lindqvist 2012, 197–8). The results show that fragrances are frequently linked to gender; however, when one smells them, it is shown that these two categories overlap each other rather than having two separate categories of feminine and masculine scents. It is more about one's personal preferences (Lindqvist 2012, 203). This conclusion aligns with the suggestion for the

introduction of more unisex perfumes, as it challenges the traditional notion of strictly gendered fragrance categories. These categories are often stereotyped. Stereotypes concerning gender encompass characteristic features and manners of men and women, including occupational status, personality traits, physical appearance or behaviour. These stereotypes are unable to grab the true diversity of identities across various cultures. Instead, fragrance stereotypes narrow identities down into a binary conceptualization of masculine and feminine.

It is necessary to study the impact of advertising not only because it reflects how individuals perceive themselves and others in their cultural surroundings but also because it raises awareness of the responsibilities of marketing professionals (Åkestam et al. 2021, 65). Throughout history, the cosmetics industry, where perfumes belong, has held a strong appeal, with individuals seeking to enhance their attractiveness and boost self-confidence through cosmetic use. Therefore, this industry puts consumers in a very vulnerable position. This vulnerability arises from the buyers' low self-confidence, making consumers purchase more to meet global expectations (Anarat 2022, 17). Adverts employ these gender-based stereotypes. For instance, in a Paco Rabanne Invictus advertisement, a shirtless male body is depicted with muscular tones to represent physical power. The main figure in the advertisement, Nick Youngquest, who is an athlete and a model, demonstrates a culturally constructed ideal male form. He desires to be the centre of everyone's desires (Ruiz 2015, 92). This sort of depiction can negatively influence men's body image and women's expectations about male body image.

The collected advertisements in this study illustrate diverse characteristics, however, one of the main aspects that needs to be considered beforehand is time. Given the accelerating pace of our world, even a small time gap of a few years can bring about significant changes. Despite this influencing factor, the following advertisements can illustrate how fragrance ads are connected to gender attitudes and how this is reflected in the ingredients themselves. One of the most influential and widely recognized fragrant products is Old Spice, where men are often portrayed as excessively masculine. These ads from 2010 convey messages such as "Don't smell like sunsets and baby powder. Smell like jet fighters and punching," or "We're not saying this body wash will make your man smell like a romantic millionaire jet fighter pilot, but we are insinuating it" (Old Spice 2010). However, in the latest adverts from 2023, advertisers employ more refined language. For example, "Ladies, you still know best. Your man just feels like he knows best because of Gentleman's Blend Body Wash (Old Spice 2023). Instead of depicting a fighter, they use the word gentleman, which is more sophisticated. Moreover, the video thoughtfully acknowledges women as well. Additionally, the visual elements are less aggressive. These elements can convey a more attainable and realistic portrayal of a man. One interesting thing to mention regarding this brand is that Old Spice was initially created as a

women's fragrance in 1937, however, as it was not very successful, therefore, marketers shifted their focus to men in 1938, quickly becoming a popular grooming brand with the classic scent we know today (Guest Writer Series 2023). Old Spice's journey from a women's fragrance to a global leader in men's grooming shows its adaptability and enduring success in the evolving market. In examining the representation of gender in fragrance advertising, we can contrast two examples from the Armani brand: the Armani Code Parfum for men, launched in 2022, and the Armani Code for Women, introduced in 2006. The Armani Code Parfum, marketed as a reinterpretation of the original Armani Code fragrance, is described as having aromatic top notes such as bergamot and bergamot leaf, combined with the middle so-called heart notes, which are infused with orris butter, iris aldehyde, and clary sage, leading to a powerfully masculine base featuring tonka bean and cedar, creating a new, powerful yet sensitive olfactory signature ("Armani Code Parfum Giorgio Armani for Men" 2022). Its promotional campaign features the famous actor Regé-Jean Page, presenting a modern and progressive depiction of masculinity. The advertisement encourages men to break free from societal norms and pursue their desires (Armani beauty 2022). This idea resonates with the general masculine stereotypes. In contrast, the Armani Code for Women, released in 2006, is marketed as a floral fragrance. It features top notes of Italian orange, jasmine, and bitter orange, middle notes of jasmine, orange blossom, and ginger, and base notes of honey, vanilla, and sandalwood ('Armani Code for Women' 2006). Its advertisement from 2006 seductively portrays a woman, maintaining stereotypes and objectifying her as a sexually pleasing character (Armani 2012). Both fragrances share common elements in their compositions, such as citrusy top notes and floral middle notes. Despite these similarities, the advertisements reflect the cultural values and ideals surrounding femininity and masculinity at their respective times of release. To further explore the evolution of gender representation in fragrance advertising, it is essential to consider a more recent example. In 2023, Armani launched the fragrance 'SÌ,' symbolizing the decision-making journey of women, which combines both logical reasoning and emotional sentiments. This campaign, featuring the Giorgio Armani Global Beauty Ambassador Cate Blanchett, celebrates empowerment, freedom, and the promotion of contemporary femininity by embracing the concept of 'yes' as a symbol of choice and empowerment (Armani beauty 2023). This perspective demonstrates positive progress in attitudes towards women, however, it still causes damage for those who find it hard to match these expectations. Through these advertisements, an image is consistently linked with a fragrance, thereby establishing a norm, which is often stereotypical. Despite the seemingly ever-changing nature of gender norms, it is worthwhile to redirect our focus away from these ideas, as they cannot be universally implemented in everyone's life. Instead, attention can be directed towards elements that are universally shared

across the world, surpassing gender. The unique nature of fragrance advertising is worth further exploration, which will be discussed later.

5. Method

During qualitative research it is emphasized that researchers should cultivate self-awareness, attempting to distance themselves from their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences during their research, while also maintaining a balance between personal perspectives and broader, universal concerns. Furthermore, it is important to clarify whether the interviewer belongs to the group being studied and whether they've shared experiences with the participants (Dodgson 2019, 1). The participants of the interviews are perfumers from Europe. They are working with niche perfumes, a subcategory of the perfume industry, however, its proper definition will be elaborated later. I chose them because, in their marketing work, they do not use the binary gender concept, instead, they introduce other elements connected to perfumes.

As a researcher, I position myself within the field of communication studies, and I developed an academic understanding of the perfume industry from this angle, but I have a deeper understanding of the consumer aspect of the industry due to my experience in customer service. The niche perfume store, where I gained experience, required extended knowledge of their products since the creators of the perfumes themselves focused on the quality of the product rather than the marketing. Consequently, they expected us to have a profound knowledge of their goods. Before each interview, I needed to make a short introduction about why I am interested in this field and my previous experiences. This introduction is important because it encourages a deeper conversation as it indicates that I already understand basic terms, eliminating the need for explanations. This paves the way for a more engaging and meaningful discussion, focusing on more complex aspects of the topic. In qualitative research, the idea of researchers being completely objective has been challenged, since they're not neutral observers but are part of what they study. They bring their personal histories and perspectives into their work, influencing how they see things (Denzin 2017, 12). However, I am aware that during the interview, it is important not to express personal experiences and beliefs in order not to influence their answers. For instance, avoiding asking questions that imply my opinions.

I used semi-structured interviews since it gives more freedom to the interviewee and more flexibility to the researcher (Horton et al. 2004, 340). Semi-structured questions are intentionally broad to allow interviewees to introduce previously unexplored aspects relevant to my case. Additionally, given the strong link between the sense of smell and emotions, particularly in this context, it is crucial to incorporate emotional elements that can arise during

a semi-structured questionnaire. My flexibility is key because constructing interviews solely based on my previous reviews may not always be relevant to the perfumers' work. Therefore, I had to stay open to refining questions either during or after each interview to ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Often, a qualitative researcher is described as a bricoleur, in other words, a 'handyman.' The explanation is that a researcher should not only be capable of using multiple methodologies but also, if necessary, be able to create new tools, and adjust the methods to the needs of the study: the choice of method is always based on the research subject (Denzin et al. 2003, 3).

The focus of my study is the conceptualization of unisex perfumes by the perfumers themselves. However, during the interviews, I included topics revolving around impression management, marketing, and both biological and cultural factors. This approach allows the interviewees to share a deeper understanding of how they view perfumes and their role in non-verbal communication. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Before each interview, I informed the interviewee in an email and also at the beginning of the session that it would be recorded. These recordings are solely used for my thesis. Afterwards, I transcribed and analysed each interview, comparing each interpretation provided by the perfumers initially with my literature review to determine whether it complements the existing material or presents contradictions. When I noticed inconsistencies, I included further studies to expand the understanding of the phenomenon.

6. Designer vs Niche

As was discussed in the “Perfumes in advertisement” section, in the fragrance industry, perfumes are commonly marketed with a gender-specific approach, often categorized as either feminine or masculine. Unisex perfumes, on the other hand, rely on various elements, which are not relevant from the perspective of gender. During the interviews, when discussing perfumes, we primarily talk about niche perfumes. If not, we refer to designer perfumes. The definition of niche perfumes is not fully established, nor is that of designer perfumes. Many definitions are floating around the internet. For instance, the website of Electimuss, which is a London-based niche brand, discusses that designer fragrances are used to symbolize status. However, the designer fragrance market changed significantly, becoming more commercialized and reliant on celebrities and mass market strategies, resulting in a loss of individuality and originality. This loss led to the creation of niche perfumes. The rise of niche fragrances challenges the traditional commercial approach of designer fragrances, offering a more diverse range of scents and encouraging individual expression (Electimuss London, n.d.). As niche is a central category in this research, and it is not completely agreed upon by the industrial actors, it was important to understand the views of the interviewees on this matter. Their conceptualizations also differ from one another, though centred upon creativity and individuality.

“Niche for me is the artist, who is a perfumer, developing the perfume. If I create a perfume, I switch off completely and I'm in my world like an artist would paint.” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

In that light, a perfumer is an artist who creates an artwork while cutting themselves off from the outside world.

“My qualification for the niche and part of the niche who are working with imagination and creation. It is to bring people happiness, it's a beautiful thing you can put on. You can dream and imagine all other things, that's the difference.” (Respondent B 2024.02.08.)

Additionally, a niche perfume creator is a highly creative individual who enriches the lives of others.

“For me, it's more for free thinkers. For perfumers and for consumers who are not so stuck in conformity, they dare to be a bit different to dare to express their personality like to express their taste. For the perfumers to express their creativity and create something that is beautiful and amazing and not always beautiful sometimes it can be kind of nasty but it is creative, it's fun it is, more your experience you do not have to please everybody. I think this is niche perfumery. It's not meant for the masses. It's meant for the individuals, which is so much fun for the perfumers as well because then you can use your creativity to your maximum.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

This description aligns with the idea that a fragrance can be used as a means of expression. Furthermore, instead of serving the needs of the consumer society, where it is common to create something that is largely more accepted, it allows the creators to use their imagination so that it can be more personal, placing individuality and uniqueness in focus. This is how it becomes a more artistic form of creation.

“When I make a perfume, it takes me one to two years to perfect it. So, you cannot make thousands. I also make perfume for small niche brands, which are mostly focused on natural ingredients, so for me niche is about naturals.” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

Another important aspect of niche perfumes is that they tend to contain more natural ingredients since they are not produced in large quantities, resulting in much higher quality.

“I use a lot of naturals in my perfumes, so they really develop differently on everybody's skin and it's fantastic.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

Natural ingredients can evolve differently on everyone's skin giving this unpredictable nature to fragrances. However, the aforementioned qualities do not apply in all instances since the niche perfume world is also an ever-evolving market.

“But there are several levels of niche. It goes from a very highly marketed brand to smaller independent perfumery...” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

A key distinction lies in the marketing budget, where many niche brands, even bigger ones, tend to engage in less promotional activity.

“I believe that commercial perfumes often closely monitor niche brands, studying their movements and innovations. They have recognized the demand for uniqueness, which seems to be a defining characteristic of this industry.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

Besides this, designer brands are attempting to adapt to the latest trends, although it is probably more difficult to produce niche-like products on the mass market. Not only do they lack certain natural ingredients in large quantities, but it also sounds rather paradoxical to create something unique for the masses.

“I think the borders are diminishing ... Kind of like that you already see that in a lot of niche perfumeries, they all have the expensive brands and then stores that try to focus more on indie brands for example.” (Respondent D 2024.02.27.)

If there is no definite border between designer and niche perfumes, and even within a category, there are subcategories, then what makes them in a way separated is that each has its own philosophy. Niche perfumes emphasize individuality and creativity, while designer fragrances have become more commercialized. Furthermore, what is important to note is that while designer fragrances deal mostly with the extension of stereotypical femininity and masculinity

through scents, niche brands are in search of different paths constantly to grasp the diversity of human beings and allow the expression of such diversity for their consumers.

7. Investigating Olfactory Impression Management

Using fragrance as a means of expression not only has the power to make a good impression on others but also to boost one's confidence from within. Thus, it can be advantageous not only to the external world but also to our internal well-being. This power, lying within the usage of fragrance, is not merely fictional but rather poorly understood and therefore, often an undervalued concept. The latter proposition is reflected in many philosophers' general understanding of olfaction itself. Beata Hoffman summarized some of the most prominent discussions of olfaction from philosophers. For instance, both Plato and Kant argued for the low importance of the sense of smell in cognition, with Plato prioritizing vision and Kant specifically ranking olfaction as excessively subjective and lowest among the senses. Hirschfeld suggested that only touch was more primitive than smell. Freud, in a letter, described olfactory sensitivity as outdated and considered it a threat to society. Many other philosophers argued that smell held little significance in cognition compared to sight and hearing. However, not everyone had such an adverse evaluation of the sense of smell. Although Aristotle also regarded the sense of smell as the least significant sense, he was still interested in it, therefore, some consider him the forerunner of the science of olfaction. Nietzsche highlighted the unique psychological aspects of the sense of smell, suggesting its potential for evoking memories and helping therapeutic progress in psychoanalytic approaches. Today olfactory research engages specialists from diverse scientific fields, including chemistry, biology, neurophysiology, genetics, and psychiatry (Hoffmann 2013, 5–8). And so, since the sense of smell is receiving more attention from scientists, their findings could be useful for understanding fragrances in the field of impression management. Connecting the academic findings with the practicality of the perfume creators one can have a deeper understanding of the complexity of olfaction. Thinking about fragrance as a means of expression, an instrument for boosting self-confidence, and a tool for impression management is not unknown, especially for those who work with fragrances. It is interesting to see how deliberately using fragrance plays out in a workplace setting.

“If I go to a meeting, also depending on the meeting, who am I meeting do I want to make a nice impression or do I want to make a fierce impression? I choose for all meetings. I do not think a lot of people think about this, they only think yeah, I'm going to wear this and I'm going to put my makeup on like this or I'm going to put this tie on, but you can make such a bigger impression if you use the scent to control.”
(Respondent A, 2024.02.22.)

When one aims to make the best out of their presence, maintaining a neat appearance, including makeup, clothing, and perhaps hair, is the most common practice to consider. However, olfactory information is also conveyed during these interactions, which has the potential to significantly influence others. Surprisingly, it is often the last aspect that one considers if it is considered at all.

“I do not think that there is a scent for a certain event, but I guess society disagrees with me. It's all in the eye of the beholder and how you pull it off... I think a perfume that does not connect with the wearer emotionally at all I think that's kind of weird. I think I would not feel myself.” (Respondent D, 2024.02.27.)

Although, it is difficult to predict others' reactions to a certain scent in different settings, therefore, the focus should be on how one connects with a fragrance and how it makes them feel.

“I look the same, but you know I'm wearing, and it was a particular perfume that every time I wear you know people would come. ...so, I was like wow this is super interesting.” (Respondent D 2024.02.27.)

This phenomenon is discussed by Spence, suggesting that even though researchers mostly focus on how scents influence others, it's also likely that they affect the way we perceive ourselves in terms of relaxation, self-confidence, and mood. In a study, researchers found that by changing a man's body odour, they could also change how confident he felt and how attractive he thought he appeared to women (Spence 2021, 20–22). If someone feels comfortable with a perfume, connects with it emotionally, and so it evokes a certain mood for them, the perfume may influence their attitude and actions and even how others see them. In fact, Charles Spence explores how the sense of smell interacts with other sensory modalities, in that case, vision, to shape impressions of people. His findings suggest that unpleasant smells were rated as having a bigger impact on the judgement of others' external appearance than pleasant fragrances when compared to a neutral scent (Spence 2021, 7). On the contrary, recent research discusses the opposite. It explores how different fragrances affect people's perceptions, in that case, attractiveness, confidence, femininity, and brain responses when looking at their own and others' faces. According to that study, it had been proven several times how the cross-modal impact of fragrance characteristics influences perceptions of facial attractiveness, youthfulness, and self-esteem. It is suggested that pleasant fragrances tend to increase perceived attractiveness linearly, which means that the more pleasant a fragrance the more attractive is one perceived. Furthermore, gender-related associations with specific fragrances can also affect how fragrances affect one's appeal. In one case it was noticed that a pleasant caramel aroma, which was considered to be feminine, increased the attractiveness of female faces, while a masculine liquorice scent heightened the attractiveness of male faces. This implies that the alignment between a fragrance and gender can shape its cross-modal effects on people's perceptions of

others (Davies-Owen et al. 2024, 2). Whether this unpleasant or pleasant smell is simply one's body odour or comes from a fragrance, it is important to mention that what one finds pleasant the other one may not. Therefore, it cannot be guaranteed that a caramel aroma will be perceived as attractive and feminine for everyone. Since the phrase came up again "it is all in the eye of the beholder". In the world of choosing perfumes, there is a constant question of whether we choose a perfume for ourselves or to impress others. Whichever way we choose, what matters at the end of that is how a scent makes us feel. It's about feeling confident and comfortable in our skin. After all, we never know how someone will react to a particular scent. The following excerpts shed light on both possibilities from the perspective of perfumers.

I often had meetings with older men in the banking industry and I would put on more like male centric scents sometimes you know I want to make a bigger impression in the room I would put on more woody scents and a bit tougher and sometimes I wanted to trick them a little bit so I would use more feminine scent because then I wanted to make them think that I was like innocent and you know. I trick with that and even when I meet new people like what impression I want to make on that person do I want to make a strong impression do I want to make a kind impression, so I choose very wisely every day when I put on perfume not only my own perfume but other perfumes to see what kind of impression I make on my surroundings. (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

In that case, the wearer aims to impress their environment by consciously choosing a perfume that has gender-related associations; however, in this instance, the wearer was not limited to wearing a fragrance that corresponds to their gender. Instead, the focus was on the impression they aimed to convey.

"If I feel positive, I will wear bright colours. If I feel a bit random, I might wear darker colours. So, it's the same. I think you pick a perfume based on how you feel because of your body. Throughout the months or throughout the year whether you are a male or female or you know it does not matter, if it's raining you might want something more positive. So, if your event takes place on a day when it's raining and grey, maybe you're going to put something vibrant and energetic and zesty so that you know it cuts this depressive weather for you." (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

In that case, the wearer was not interested in the impression the perfume would make on others but rather the effect on oneself. Furthermore, what was suggested by Fiore (1992) to organise fragrances on the aesthetic level is visible in that example, but the wearer has its own understanding, rather than resorting to an already constructed category. As Baron (1988) suggested a perfume can be too much of a good thing using fragrance as an impression management tool, but clearly, he left out the opportunity for wearers to choose a scent for themselves. It is not only necessary to organize fragrances on the aesthetic level but also worth letting people develop their own interpretations regarding a fragrance. Unisex perfumes, in that sense, can help to eliminate societal expectations, allowing individuals to connect with the

perfume. Wearers can choose scents that align with their desired image or mood, enhancing their ability to manage impressions effectively. A gender-neutral scent provides individuals with more flexibility in managing their image, whether it is to make an impression on others or to express themselves authentically.

8. Perceptions of Gendered Commercial Categories Among Niche Perfumers

As suggested previously, a perfumer is an artist who creates fragrances either for themselves or for consumers. To understand the widely acknowledged binary concept of perfumes, it is worth examining the opposing perspective — how niche perfumers perceive certain aspects during creation without being limited to creating exclusively for either men or women. Even if the commercially gendered categories work in certain cases, when it comes to practice, various factors could override these categories. If a perfume is either feminine or masculine, then the question arises what makes a fragrance fit into one of these categories? One can assume that the composition consists of ingredients that are associated with gender; however, it is not clear on what basis these ingredients fall into either feminine or masculine categories.

“I think some have culturally been made more masculine and feminine in a way, but I do not think that applies. I think it is more a bit of habit than an ingredient.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

Cultural perceptions of scents can vary widely across different societies, shaping individuals' attitudes and preferences towards fragrances. This idea is also reflected in other perfumers' responses.

“The ingredient itself, definitely not, like culturally and stylistically, you can definitely render them more towards feminine and more towards masculine, but even that is super arbitrary at the end of the day. I mean it is what people are used to. So, if you see a guy wearing a skirt you go like - what guy wearing a skirt?! - but if he was Scottish, it is fine; if he was Muslim, it is also fine; if he was a priest, it is also fine. So, the notion that guys cannot wear skirts, it is kind of like what kind of skirt and in what context? So, there is no real reason, you know. It is not like laws of nature, I am not arguing against gravity or something like that, everything else is just super arbitrary, and if we were, you know, raised in a different way, we probably would not have a problem like this. Rose is also a very nice example because, in Middle Eastern countries, roses are considered a masculine scent; in the West, roses are for pretty girls. Most of it is just marketing and tradition, I guess.” (Respondent D 2024.02.27.)

This respondent also argues that gendered categorization is subjective, lacks clear reasoning and seems to be based on culturally constructed preferences. Also, highlights that these categories are indeed commercially constructed and based on general assumptions. The

problem is not only that gendered perfume categories are too general, but also, that they affect people in a way that their preferences are culturally narrowed down. Unisex fragrances challenge this practice, and this will be the subject of the next chapter.

“This is a mystery. It is like why a skirt is more feminine than masculine. In some countries men wear dress, in France men do not wear dress, we would be shocked. But it is very cultural...” (Respondent E 2024.03.20.)

As wearing a skirt was brought into account twice already it would be interesting to compare a garment to a fragrance ingredient, such as rose. Wearing a skirt or a dress in the Western world is not a general practice for men, although, in certain contexts, it is present. On the contrary, in the Middle East, for example, it is more common to wear a dress, the so-called dishdashas for men. Similarly, wearing rose perfume in Western countries is a widespread practice for women but in the Middle East, it is mostly done so by men. So, the question arises, why is it necessary to use these commercially gendered categories regarding perfumes?

“I think you choose what you want to be, what you want to wear. It does not matter if you are a man or woman or anywhere in between on the spectrum, I do not care. It's like if you find something you love, and it suits you then you find your scent but then I think also there's a category of perfumes and scents like if you're a 16-year-old girl and you really want to express your femininity because at that age maybe you want to. Then you can wear a super floral super girly perfume, which hardly a boy of that age would wear if he wanted to be really masculine and tough guy when he's 16. Then you have these masculine perfumes for these 16-year-old boys that are like “Yeah”. Because they are so afraid of not fitting in they just want to super express their sexuality and their manhood or their femininity at a certain age. But I think as people mature, I hope this is going to change as well.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

Commercially gendered fragrance, in that sense, might be a helpful tool for one to be accepted within a community. Whilst a floral fragrance can enhance someone's femininity and woody can enhance masculinity, these generalizations work only to some extent, since these categorizations only work within a certain community and do not apply in every culture. Not to mention that as one ages, the expression of personal preferences becomes more common, and so these commercially gendered categories are losing ground. Additionally, a study on commercial gender categorizations found that participants lacked awareness. Instead of distinct entities, feminine and masculine categories blend, forming a continuum. This suggests that gender is not just about being male or female; it is more like a range of expressions that overlap. So, instead of rigidly dividing people into two categories, this perspective acknowledges that everyone's experience of gender is unique and can vary widely (Lindqvist 2013a, 42). Most of the selected perfumes used during the study were perceived as "unisex." Meaning that 9 out of 12 perfumes were not associated with femininity or masculinity – in essence, they were not perceived as "gendered" (Lindqvist 2013a, 43).

“I mean recently I ordered a sample of a wood ingredient from Southeast Asia... It is a very masculine. I do not think I could work with it because you can feel the testosterone you know. It is too masculine. Of course, the lighter ones and some woods are in my view not masculine nor feminine they are both. Sandalwood for me goes with everything. Some ingredients are too floral I would say for a man or too light or too feminine.” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

This answer also shows that, for instance, the woody category itself is extremely faceted, from the heavy to the lighter ones. So, it again brings difficulties in categorising even within categories, if it is necessary at all. The possibility of choosing commercially gendered fragrances can serve a purpose in everyday social interactions. However, it is shown that these commercial categories are too narrow and do not give space for people’s personal preferences.

“Olfactory therapy is the effect of scents, and perfumes on the mind and how it can heal you as well. I can tell you the reason why I got interested. It is very simple because sometimes I was spraying my perfumes to some people, and they were like -- oh my God, it takes me back to that moment or they were starting to cry -- and I say well what was triggering such strong memories? I had a client who was very ill and she said -- whenever I was finishing my chemotherapy and I was tired and so she could not you know get up and so she said I would smell your perfume and it was putting me in a tranquil uh state of mind but at the same time it was allowing my mind to go somewhere else to go places -- I only use Naturals combine between perfume it has to smell nice aroma therapy you know but more olfactory therapy, perfume therapy you know for the mind. I work always on feelings with a vision of trying to put positive vibes through my perfumes.” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

For instance, in that case, a perfume was used in a context, where a commercially gendered perfume would have been a barrier. Using niche fragrance during an “olfactory therapy” is getting more popular. Aromatherapy and scent therapy, though commonly used interchangeably, have distinct approaches. Aromatherapy, oriented towards medicine, employs essential oils for physical and mental well-being, targeting diseases and symptoms like stress or depression. In contrast, scent therapy focuses on individual well-being, allowing users to select from various olfactory methods to enhance self-attractiveness, mindfulness, and self-confidence. While their goals often overlap, scent therapy typically does not view itself as an independent treatment method like aromatherapy does. Moreover, scent therapy does not necessarily need professional guidance, unlike aromatherapy, which relies on plants with established effects. In scent therapy, individuals are encouraged to choose what works best for them (Mensing 2023, 49–50). As shown in the example above an individual went through chemotherapy, and in the meantime, a perfume helped her to escape from the challenges of the present moment. While aromatherapy suggests that certain ingredients possess predetermined qualities, making them easy to categorize, scent therapy relies on personal preferences, making it difficult to predict the implications of each fragrance. What is also difficult to predict is how a perfume evolves on one’s skin.

“I use a lot of naturals in my perfumes, so they develop differently on everybody's skin and it is fantastic. I mean two people can wear the same perfume I mean you can smell that it is that perfume, but they smell very different. On some, they become very woody and on some they become very floral or rosy or sweet or vanillish or powdery. So, it really depends on the wearer. I think your skin enhances the perfumes and the ingredients they develop so differently on everybody as you know, and so it is interesting to see.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

It can be drawn that the scent of a perfume changes based on each person's unique body chemistry. So, even if a perfume is designed to smell a certain way, it ends up smelling different on everyone. So, the chemistry of the skin is important, and as it was discussed earlier, the odour of the skin can be influenced by both internal and external factors. Since niche perfumers do not produce in large quantities they can use more natural ingredients. Natural ingredients, such as rose oil, require extensive work to produce and contain numerous components, making them expensive and difficult to replicate accurately. So synthetic alternatives struggle to fully replicate the biological function of natural scents, potentially affecting their appeal and effectiveness in signalling (Milinski 2003, 334). The use of natural ingredients in fragrances is continually evolving, making it challenging as well as exciting for creators to predict how they will perform on the skin. The question is whether it is dependent on the biological gender of the wearer as well.

“They say that the skin of men and women is different. Of course, but take 10 different men and 10 women and you also still find a difference so I think if you're a big company and you're about to produce a couple of million bottles you might want to make sure that it's kind of like average but if you are a smaller niche company like mine you know you just accept the fact that maybe the perfume will smell great on some people and not so great on somebody else.” (Respondent D 2024.02.27.)

Due to the large quantity, mass market production requires consistency. Therefore, they cannot experiment probably with natural ingredients that much. However, in the niche market, it is not expected from creators, since they do not serve the masses. On the other hand, research suggests that gender associations and preferences of perfumes applied on human skin do not depend on the gender of the wearer, participants of the study failed to identify the gender of individuals wearing the perfumes, and the gender of the wearer did not affect how the perfumes were perceived. Although slight perceptual differences were noted between perfumes applied on human skin and those in bottles, this trend remained consistent regardless of whether the wearer was male or female (Lindqvist 2013, 45).

“I am thinking I am going to make it masculine and then when I do the test okay it turns out that it is very masculine, but women love it. That is how I found that well there is no gender really and then one day when I made my rose and violet perfume, I had both men's and women's types of skin, and it turns out a lot of males liked it. On women, it was rosy, on the male it was spicy.” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

The statement suggests that the idea of creating perfumes with specific gender associations often does not work in practice. The perfumer initially intended a scent to be masculine but found that both men and women enjoyed it. This experience led to the realization that gender distinctions in perfumes may not be significant. Additionally, the example of a rose and violet perfume showed that individuals of different genders perceived the scent differently on their skin. These findings picture how niche perfumes, which employ mostly natural ingredients, can overcome barriers such as feminine and masculine categories because it is hard to predict how it is going to work on one's skin due to their complexity, and how it makes one feel.

9. Fragrance Advertisement: Embracing Personal Identity Beyond Traditional Marketing Strategies

While luxury brands dominate the perfume industry, niche perfume creators offer alternative perspectives, emphasizing personal expression and psychological elements in scent creation as well as in advertisement. As the number of available perfumes continues to grow, education becomes crucial in helping consumers navigate their choices and understand the emotional impact of fragrances. The world of perfume advertisements holds fascination because, unlike creams or other beauty products, they do not focus on the composition of the product. Instead, they illustrate a concept built around it, often unrelated to the product. Furthermore, these constructed concepts frequently highlight societal trends that generalise gender roles for women and men. In our world media plays a crucial role beyond mere entertainment, comfort, and information provision. It serves to convey societal norms, beliefs, and values that connect individuals to their communities. Advertising stands out as a powerful tool for implementing these features (Aydin 2018, 44). Advertisements greatly affect consumers because those in authority decide the content available in media. As a result, people have to choose from the options presented to them (Aydin 2018, 45). Luxury designer brands largely dominate the perfume industry. Perfume serves as an introduction to a brand's identity while also generating substantial profits, allowing consumers to metaphorically "buy into the dream" (Aydin 2018, 39). Perfume advertisements prioritize creating an illusion through imagery and fantasies rather than focusing on product details. These adverts rely heavily on aesthetics, depicting beautiful people and environments, and they convey the idea that using the product can help you achieve a desired lifestyle. For instance, customers like to buy perfumes associated with celebrities as they offer a chance to have a glimpse into a celebrity's life (Aydin 2018, 54–5). Niche perfume creators, on the contrary, do not rely on marketing that much, but even if they do so, they have a different approach to it. In fragrance advertising femininity and masculinity are often connected

with perfume, so the wearer can enhance the desired image. However, this interconnection is often too general just to enhance the number of sales.

“I think first they should stop this for men and women. This is marketing. Let's make a male version and let's make a female version because then we have two sources of revenue instead of one, whereas one would probably be for both. I think that this is marketing hype, and it is going to go. We are not in a society now where you have such a differentiation. We are trying to get to an equal level...” (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

This response also reflects the idea that marketing has the power to make a product attractive without the person even trying the scent, consequently, eliminating the chance or the need to establish personal preferences. So, marketers have the power to establish gender norms, with which the crowd will then seek to identify. And so those who invest more money in advertising will be at the forefront of the minds of many. In that case, marketing not only enhances product attractiveness but also changes societal perceptions and roles, as evident in the changing portrayal of women in perfume advertisements from the 1950s onwards. Perfume advertisements reflect the evolving role of women in Western societies, transitioning from emphasizing femininity and elegance in the 1950s to portraying women as objects of pleasure for men. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a shift towards depicting women as natural and sensuous beings in adverts. Over the following two decades, advertisements began to portray women in images of self-fulfilment, marking a change in societal perceptions of women's roles (Aydin 2018, 59). In that case, adverts reflected women's roles, and it shows a positive development, however, what does not change is that a certain character is highlighted, which is advertised worldwide. “If you use this perfume, you will become like this too.” These trends constantly change, but the essence of these adverts remains the same, there is only one ideal woman or man. While I'm primarily interested in the concept of gendered perfume adverts, perfume advertisements present additional challenges.

“For example, it's not only gender it's also you know racial, it's age so then if I put a bottle with a girl then people already have decided, it's for me, it's not for me because they identify or they do not. So, you really need to be aware of that and basically, you know show all kinds of people all the time with the perfumes so that people still understand that this could be for you as well. I'm not going to say this is for everyone because it's never for everyone, but it could be for you as well.” (Respondent D 2024.02.27.)

So, not only sexism but racism and ageism should also be taken into consideration during the creation of fragrance adverts. To prevent the chance of making such differentiations, it is suggested to use diverse elements, in other words, hooks in an advert so more people would be able to identify with a perfume. Diverse elements that are shared across nations are also going to face challenges.

“In their commercials, there are very beautiful, here in Europe at least, there are a lot of rose gardens and luxurious castles in the countryside and blah blah blah things like that, beautiful it's very beautiful but I think that in other countries they might change that in a way. If you go to the Middle East for example maybe that's not the way you should promote the perfume, a woman in a small dress jumps around in the fields because it's not. Even in Asia, it's a different culture as well, how do you present that there? I think niche brands are different in a way because they're more focused on perfumes as well.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

A product advertisement may work in certain countries while not in others. For instance, Middle Eastern advertising is advised to avoid controversial elements like alcohol, gambling, and nudity, as well as provocative portrayals of women (Turnbull 2016, 9). However, this can be circumvented by emphasising other elements that are universally present across cultures.

“If you want to make something appropriate for all cultures and countries, I think it has to be heartfelt and soulful of the brand. And then that's the brand that you're enhancing or promoting rather than a lifestyle. I mean because a lot of big brands when they launch something become lifestyle brands. You want to promote a sort of lifestyle thing and that's so different in every country that you go to and different cultures but if you promote the brand and sort of focus on the ingredients or focus on the feelings because feelings and emotions are the same wherever you go in the world. People are sad or happy or cheerful or not and I think maybe that's one way to achieve that is to use emotions rather than lifestyle. If you want to go on a global sort of Market that's a universal thing.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

Rather than promoting a specific lifestyle, focusing on the brand itself and its values can be more effective. Many big brands seek to become lifestyle brands, but this can be challenging given the vast differences in lifestyles across countries and cultures. By emphasizing ingredients or resorting to universal emotions, such as happiness or sadness, a brand can resonate with others more deeply on a global scale. In the niche perfume world, there are many examples of how it is possible to create something that can be appealing to people from various backgrounds.

“I'm making my line of perfumes based on Carl Jung's archetypes, so I use that a lot...So, I use a lot of psychology in creating. I think a lot about impression, the person wearing this is going to their environment and who they choose to be and what they choose to express in their personalities. I think that's really important for me. It's super important because I want to make perfumes that everybody can use.” (Respondent A 2024.02.22.)

For instance, Carl Jung's archetypes and the incorporation of psychology in perfume creation are one creative aspect of self-expression, and not only is it independent of gender but also of age and race. Furthermore, there is a vast amount of knowledge about olfaction in psychology. Therefore, connecting these two elements on a consumer level could be beneficial.

“He asked me to pick a happy place, and that's why I picked a place in Thailand. We went twice with a man, once when we were young and at the time we went was nobody was there, it was like a jungle. We

had chai tea, coconut and spices. So, these are all the ingredients that I wanted to put in this perfume.”
(Respondent E 2024.03.20.)

Olfaction is connected to emotions, learning, and memories. If a perfume consists of certain ingredients from an environment, it can evoke memories of places. It can resonate with those who have already been there and also with those who wish to go there. Furthermore, in that case, the concept created around the perfume is linked without any fictive concept.

I think when what I've noticed people love stories. Storyline has become very important, so I think when you talk about your background, how you got there, what inspires you, and what you like about a specific ingredient. I educate people that it is a slow process, it's when it's a passion, you do not mind. (Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

It is also possible to tell different stories with fragrances. Just like a story built up, a perfume can be complex and telling. An additional element that can also be implemented in advertisements is educational content so that people can make better decisions.

“I mean you know like 3,500 new perfumes appear every year. It's very difficult for anybody to choose, so we go back to education. What we find now is that there are more and more companies and perfume shops who are looking to train fragrance assistants to help the public choose because you have so many choices.”
(Respondent C 2024.02.23.)

The growing number of perfumes causes difficulties for customers. Therefore, it's essential not only to recognise the emotional impact of fragrances but also to educate individuals on how olfaction can positively or even negatively influence them, and this knowledge again is irrespective of gender, age, or race. Creating unisex perfumes allows niche perfumers to break free from the constraints of gender-specific marketing and societal expectations. This approach benefits both consumers and the perfume industry. Unisex perfumes promote equality and diversity, challenging outdated notions of masculinity and femininity. They also encourage creativity and innovation within the industry, inspiring perfumers to explore new scent combinations and push the boundaries of traditional fragrance categorisation. By offering fragrances that transcend gender, niche perfumers allow consumers to connect with scents on a deeper, more personal level, enhancing their overall olfactory experience. Moreover, unisex perfumes provide individuals with a sense of empowerment and self-expression that can enhance their impression management skills.

Conclusion

In the literature review, I introduced perspectives that challenge the notion of gendered perfumes. Since it was proven that it is possible to communicate with scents, in the field of impression management perfumes can influence social interactions. It was suggested that it negatively affects interactions; however, the current widely known binary organization of perfumes is not effective in many cases, creating the need for a different sort of organization. When analysing biological and cultural aspects, it has been demonstrated that personal preferences can outweigh these two aspects. However, it became evident through other examples, for instance, alcohol consumption, that personal preferences are frequently shaped by societal norms. Moreover, it was demonstrated that these norms are often reflected in advertisements. As Judith Butler suggests, gender is not just something inside us; it is created by how we act in society. This challenges the idea that there is a fixed truth about gender. Instead, it is a way society controls how we behave (Butler 1988, 528). Applying this perspective to fragrances can contribute to the understanding of society's construction of gender. While biological factors may influence scent perception, research suggests that gender preferences are influenced by various factors, challenging the simplistic binary division. Perfumers in the niche market have a very different approach to fragrance classification. Perfumers portrayed perfumes as a communication tool that has the power to influence others. Additionally, various studies suggest that perfumes affect not only others but more importantly, how we present ourselves. Niche perfumers, who commonly work with natural ingredients, acknowledge that the result of a perfume on the skin and the emotions it evokes in the wearer are largely unpredictable. Therefore, in practice, it is much more complex to create a perfume that is considered feminine or masculine according to cultural norms. Cultural influences, societal expectations and marketing strategies are those social forces that created the narrow understanding that fragrances are binary; however, as shown in this study, fragrances are extremely multifaceted. Niche perfumers circumvent the tradition of gender binaries, and by creating unisex perfumes, they open up the possibility of unique self-expression through fragrances, and thus paving the way for gender diversity in scent-based impression management skills.

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Attachment - Interview Questions

In my thesis, I chose not to include the full transcripts of the interviews with niche perfumers. Our discussions were personal and intimate, and out of respect for their trust and confidentiality, I shared only key insights instead of sharing the full transcripts. This decision ensures clarity while honouring the integrity of their contributions to my research.

1. To what extent/how does someone's smell/scent/body odour affect what you think of them when you first meet?
2. What do you think about the idea of consciously choosing, if there is such a thing at all, a fragrance to make a good first impression?
3. How does perfume/body odour change a situation/person/place?
Would you like to share a personal experience?
4. Since it is proven that our sense of smell is closely connected to our emotions and memory, what aspects do you consider during creation? (In order to harness its power.)
5. During your work personal preferences, cultural preferences or gendered preferences come first?
Do you consider cultural factors? (Target audience)
Do you consider context?
Do you consider gender?
Are you aiming for comfort, nostalgia, excitement, relaxation, or something else?
6. What do you find superior/more important and why:

A scent that is connected to your emotions or a scent which is suitable for a given event? Why? Why is it more important?
7. Additionally, can you recall any specific scents from your own culture that hold particular significance or evoke strong emotions?
8. What do you think about the idea that some ingredients are more masculine and some are more feminine?
9. What are those elements that can overwrite this idea? How else would you categorize ingredients?
10. Since your perfumes are unisex, during creation did you do trials on male and female skin as well?
11. According to your personal experience and knowledge, how does the skin change a perfume?

12. Can you make a perfume lean towards a feminine or masculine category?
13. How do you detach your work from the general idea of male and female perfumes?
14. How do you connect your products with the consumers?
15. What elements would you suggest that can make fragrances universally (irrelevant of gender) appealing?
16. What makes a perfume unisex?
17. Other than gender, what element would you consider connecting to fragrances to bring more meaning to them in advertising?
18. Between the perfume, and the creator and the consumer how would you create, if at all you want to, a bridge/connection?
19. Before we finish it, how would you define the niche category?