

Magic Romance: on Perfume, Language and the Environment

by Michelle Gargan

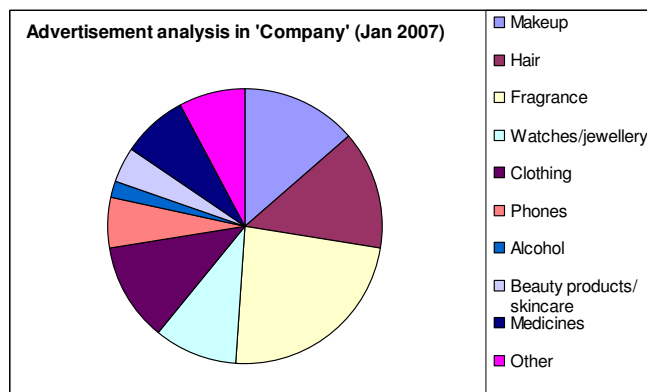
Introduction

As I am writing this report, just before Christmas 2006, a bottle of Chanel No. 5 is selling every 30 seconds around the world. In the month of December, the high street chemist Boots, sells more perfume in this festive period than the rest of the year combined.¹ A key question is this: do we actually *need* to wear perfume?

It is only in recent decades that perfume has been considered an essential for everyday wear; it was once reserved for luxury and special occasions. Since the demand has increased, new ways to produce scents have emerged; synthetic materials now replace what were once raw materials collected from animal and plant sources. In this article I will be investigating how language within the perfume industry is creating the idea that without perfume, women are unattractive and undesirable, creating a demand for a product that both harms the environment and has negative consequences for human health.

To get an idea of the prevalence of perfume advertisements in lifestyle magazines, I analysed editions of three top-selling women's magazines to determine the distribution of advertisements. I found that of all the advertisements within the magazines, perfume dominated over any other product:

Company magazine – Jan 2007



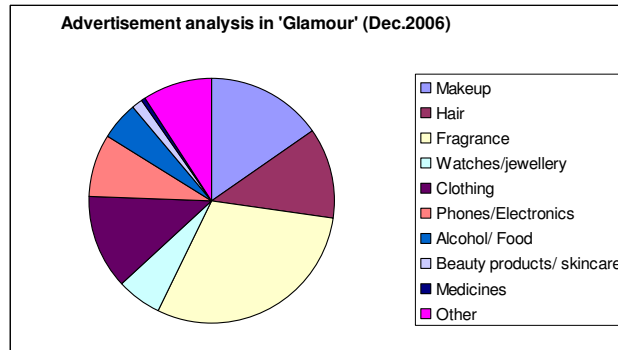
Total pages: 200

Pages dedicated to advertisements: 51

Total of perfume advertisements: 12 = **23.7%** of all advertisements

¹ Karen Bowerman, "Christmas boosts perfume sales", *BBC News online*, 2006, online <www.bbc.co.uk/news> 03/01/07

Glamour magazine – Dec 2006

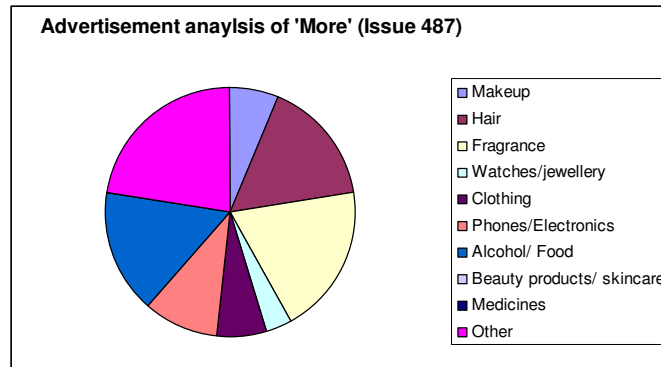


Total pages: 300

Pages dedicated to advertisements: 143

Total of perfume advertisements: 43 = **30.0%** of all advertisements

More magazine –Nov 21st – Dec 4th (Issue 487)



Total pages: 150

Pages dedicated to advertisements: 31

Total of perfume advertisements: 6 = **19.4%** of all advertisements

As this data shows, perfume manufacturers rely heavily on women's magazines to promote their products, and in turn, magazines rely heavily on the advertisers for their income. In this article I will briefly examine how language is used in the magazines to persuade people to buy what could be seen as a toxic, environmentally damaging, and ultimately unnecessary item.

Analysis

The following is a summary of the key words/phrases found in the perfume advertisements:

| | | | |
|-------------------|---------------|------------|----------|
| Hypnotizing | Secret | Bright | Secret |
| Potion | Magic romance | Delicious | Love |
| Celeb's attitude | Cherish | Temptation | Burst |
| Fragrance of love | Intimately | Sexy | Feminine |
| Journey of love | Angel | Lovely | Timeless |
| Your rules | Intensity | Magical | Eternity |
| Delirium | Inspiration | Romance | Darling |

Within this set there are several clearly defined lexical sub-sets. The first relates to love: *fragrance of love, journey of love, magic romance, romance, cherish, darling and love*. A second set relates to attractiveness and sex: *intimately, intensity, inspiration, delicious, temptation, sexy, lovely, feminine*. These words are tapping into fundamental human needs to be sexually attractive and find love, things which are ultimately beyond purchase. The aim of such cleverly chosen words seems to be to make the reader think that buying and wearing this fragrance is a shortcut to satisfying their deepest needs and desires. If, as the advertisements suggest, all it takes to be attractive and find the ideal partner is a quick spray of perfume, then the perfume would have to have an almost magical effect. Indeed, the perfume is explicitly marketed as being magical with another lexical set: *potion, magic (romance), hypnotizing, magical, and secret*. Some advertisements even beyond magic to words with religious connotations: *angel, and eternity*.

Importantly, the advertisements use single adjectives or nouns to subtly implant a message without making claims which could be challenged as untruthful. For example, the advertisements do not say something as obvious as 'if you purchase this perfume you will find romance', instead they use single adjectives such as 'romance' and 'love' to imply the idea.

Another form of magical thinking that advertisements seem to promote is the idea that if the reader wears the same brand of perfume as famous models or celebrities, then somehow they will acquire some of their success or beauty. There has been a recent trend for celebrities to bring out their own ranges of perfume and so far we have seen Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Sarah Jessica Parker, Paris Hilton and Kylie Minogue, to name a few, further enhance their fortunes by adding their name to a perfume. Kylie's new perfume 'Darling' has managed to take 1/5th of all Boots perfume sales over the Christmas period (BBC News online), showing that the some people are desperate to become more like a celebrity.

This idea becomes clearer when analysing the pictures that accompany the adverts in the women's magazines. Readers will already be in a 'buying mood' from looking at the content of the magazine - the thin, attractive and beautiful models that they cannot hope to compete with. The following section analyses the images in three advertisements.

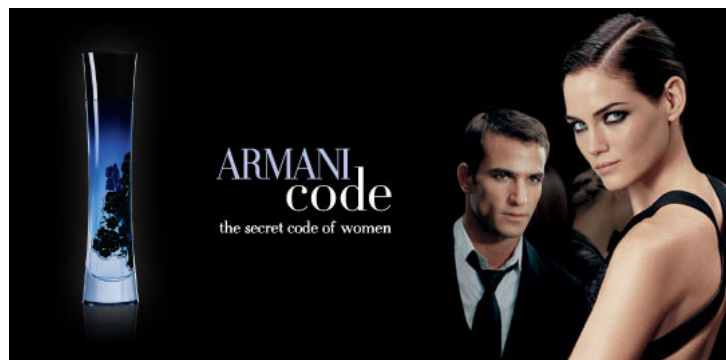
Be Delicious Perfume: (from DKNY website²):



The woman pictured is attractive, thin and has perfect skin and nails. This is partly an ‘offer picture’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) as it offers a scene to the reader to view. There is an eye line vector from the man to the woman, showing his attraction to her, the implication being that if the reader uses the perfume, they too will attract a man. The picture is also a ‘demand picture’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) as the woman is demanding a relationship with the person looking at the advert through eye contact. As this advert is aimed at women, it is as if the woman pictured is looking directly at the female reader and, perhaps, boasting of her ability to attract a man.

The words on the right hand side of the advertisement read ‘take a bite out of life!’, implying that just by using the fragrance, the readers life can be enhanced. Clearly, bite refers to apples, which is central to the ‘be delicious’ name of the perfume. This is an imperative statement, based on the metaphor of woman-is-food, and encourages the reader to think of herself in terms of food in order to be attractive to, and ultimately consumed by, (as the picture suggests), a man. The bottle itself is in the shape of a fruit, associating the perfume, and hence its purchaser, with all the attributes of a natural, wholesome apple. The advertiser seems to be taking what people really want, the freshness of nature, and substituting it with an artificial and potentially toxic substance.

Armani Code (Appearing in Glamour magazine Dec 2006)



²< www.DKNY.com > 29/12/06

In this advertisement, the woman on the right hand side is elegant and slim, paralleling the bottle on the left hand side. Again, there may be some kind of magical thinking involved, where purchase of a thin bottle can somehow confer its properties on the owner. Like the 'Be Delicious' ad, there is an eye-line vector from the man to the woman, showing that she has attracted him, and she is looking out at the reader, demanding a relationship through eye contact. Again, this seems like a relationship of boasting, combined with a knowing look. The phrase 'the secret code of women' implies that the 'secret' to attracting the man is, in fact, in the bottle.

Deep Red (from Glamour magazine Dec 2006):



This advertisement is different from the other two in that no man appears, and camera angle is extremely low, making the subject seem powerful. The woman is shown with her hand on an exaggeratedly thrust out hip, a defiant feminine pose, and her shape is echoed by the bell bottomed shape of the bottle. The posture ties in with the phrase 'your perfume, your rules', suggesting that this is a fragrance which will bring the wearer power, over men. This is not necessarily a feminist statement, however, as the shortness of the tight-fitting dress suggests that this power is through the ability to seduce. The use of the pronoun 'your' in this advertisement shows that the qualities of the woman in the picture are being projected onto the reader - if 'you' can own the perfume then you too can become powerful in a seductive way.

Review of perfumes (from Glamour magazine – December 2006):

As mentioned before, the content of the magazine is intertwined with the advertising. This section discusses a review of perfumes from Glamour Magazine - a single page which contains two columns, 'Heaven Scent' which describes five perfumes, and 'Your Festive Faves' which describes what a typical person who uses the perfumes would enjoy during the festive season.

In this promotion, the writer aims to 'match' the personality of their reader to an appropriate fragrance. The description of the scent on the left corresponds to the activities that the wearer enjoys on the right, for example, someone who likes 'being the first to open your presents' is suited to 'Lacoste touch of pink', a fragrance that can 'create an energetic burst'. In this case, the words give the impression that the person who chooses this particular fragrance is childlike and fun: in contrast,

someone who enjoys 'long, cold walks' is suited to 'Ghost Deep Nights', a fragrance that can convey their 'romantic sensuality'. Some of the 'Festive Faves', on the right-hand side, are focused on materialistic pursuits such as *shopping for vintage finds, opening gifts, presents, champagne, dressing up in gorgeous outfits, and last minute trips away*. Others include non-materialist pursuits such as 'talking late into the night with friends', but all are self centred - there are no perfumes for people who do volunteer work or help others at a time of goodwill.

The description of the fragrances themselves are personified and can sound as if the writer is actually describing a person rather than a perfume. For example, *Touch of Pink* is 'as feminine as you are', some ingredients 'reflect your confident femininity', another 'conveys your romantic sensuality', and 'your passion is captured by apricot'. This flatters the reader by presupposing that they are feminine, confident, and romantically sensuous, but at the same time seems to suggest that these traits can only be unlocked if combined with a perfume which, in some mysterious way, has similar traits. Of course, passion, confidence, and sensuality are human traits rather than properties of a scent. In addition, the fragrances are often placed as the agents of the sentence, as if they are actively involved in transforming the purchaser: 'Bergamot, Sicilian Lemon and melon excite the senses, orange blossom and tuberose lift and strengthen the spirit, and jasmine encourages all those dreams'.

RELATION TO ECOLOGY

'It has been estimated that as much as 50% of the cost of a bottle of perfume can be accounted for by packaging and advertising'³

Advertising has instilled in western cultures, in particular, the need to wear a perfume. The natural body odour of a human being is no longer acceptable; it must be masked by an alluring fragrance. Manufacturing perfume is a huge market; therefore it is easy to assume that there are many costs involved. As the quote above explains, the amount and cost of packaging used to create one bottle of perfume is phenomenal; especially for a product that is not necessarily vital for human life. It is quite ironic that the design of the bottle is, more often than not, as much a selling point as the fragrance itself. The boxes that the perfume bottle is in, often contains plastic, which is difficult to recycle, so much of it ends up in landfill sites. It is also a major problem that fragrance chemicals are not removed by waste water treatment and end up in rivers and streams. 'These materials accumulate in aquatic wildlife and contaminate the food chain. They are an often-overlooked source of pollution. Shellfish and fish have measurable levels of synthetic musk compounds in their tissues.'⁴ Why should these animals be affected because of impossible dreams of self-transformation implanted in the mind by constant advertising?

³ Key Note Report, *Cosmetics and Fragrances, A Market Sector Overview*, 10th Edition, 1994; Ed. Eleanor Hughes in 'Getting Lippy: Cosmetics, toiletries and the environment', WEN, December 2003, online <<http://www.wen.org.uk/cosmetics/resources.htm>> 20/12/06

⁴ Christian G. Daughton, Thomas A. Ternes, *Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products in the Environment: Agents of Subtle Change?*, (Environmental Health Perspectives Volume 107, Supplement 6, December 1999) online <<http://www.fpinva.org/Environment/environment.htm>> 03/01/07

‘The amount of fragrance chemicals used each year is enormous – nearly 1 million kilograms of benzyl acetate, a synthetic “floral” fragrance ingredient, are used in the US each year’.⁵

Producing these enormous amounts of chemicals is not only harmful to the environment, but also harmful to us. The amount of energy used in the factories to produce the benzyl acetate is wasteful; add to this the cost involved in transporting the product, not only the chemicals, but the perfume itself. The perfume has to be transported from the factories to the shops; therefore many harmful carbon dioxide gases are admitted into the atmosphere during this long, continuous process. In addition, there are gases emitted by the transportation vehicles; ‘virtually all the materials used in fragrances are volatile or semi-volatile compounds. These materials play a role in the development of smog.’⁶

It is not only the environment that is being harmed; evidence shows that,

‘Ingredients in fragrances are the most frequent cause of allergies from cosmetics, and have been found to cause one third of all cosmetic allergies’⁷

By purchasing a bottle of fragrance that is unnecessary to general wellbeing, women are increasing the chance of developing a skin allergy; therefore potentially decreasing their general happiness and health. They may also be harming people around them who suffer from respiratory problems, such as asthma, and are sensitive to particular particles in the air. Asthma affects over 155 million people worldwide and a high number of attacks are triggered by fragrance use. One worrying fact is that ‘synthetic musk compounds, such as benzyl acetate, are detected in breast milk’⁸; showing that the damaging effects of the chemicals are not yet truly understood or valued by society. It is however, no secret that perfume is toxic. In a recent BBC News story⁹, about the ship MSC Napoli which ran aground in Devon, the news correspondent said this:

‘Officials say only a small proportion of the cargo is toxic, mainly perfume and battery acid’

Many people watching the news would not have even batted an eyelid about the fact that perfume is mentioned in the same breath as battery acid. This lack of awareness is mainly due to the fact that laws surrounding what chemicals are used in fragrances

⁵ Robert L Bronaugh & Howard I Maibach, *Percutaneous Absorption; Drugs - Cosmetics – Mechanisms – Modelling*, 3rd Edition, (Marcel Decker Inc., New York, US, 1999) in ‘Getting Lippy: Cosmetics, toiletries and the environment’, WEN, December 2003 online <<http://www.wen.org.uk/cosmetics/resources.htm>> 20/12/06

⁶ Betty Bridges, *Fragrance: emerging health and environmental concerns* in ‘Flavour and Fragrance Journal’, p361-371, 2002, online <<http://www.fpinva.org/FragranceReview.htm>> 28/12/06

⁷ Robert L Bronaugh & Howard I Maibach, *Percutaneous Absorption; Drugs - Cosmetics – Mechanisms – Modelling*, 3rd Edition, (Marcel Decker Inc., New York, US, 1999) in ‘Getting Lippy: Cosmetics, toiletries and the environment’, WEN, December 2003 online <<http://www.wen.org.uk/cosmetics/resources.htm>> 20/12/06

⁸ Betty Bridges, *Fragrance: emerging health and environmental concerns* in ‘Flavour and Fragrance Journal’, p361-371, 2002, online <<http://www.fpinva.org/FragranceReview.htm>> 28/12/06

⁹ BBC 6 o’clock News – 22/01/07

are not well established; companies do not have to reveal the ‘secrets’ of their magic scents. This lack of regulation is supported by the EU who support the idea that:

‘Products do not have to reveal individual ingredients in the fragrance portion of the product. The word "perfume" substitutes for a detailed listing of fragrance ingredients. Other than materials specifically prohibited from being used, any material may be used as a fragrance ingredient.’¹⁰

As a counter discourse, the poster below has been produced to support the ‘Campaign for Perfume Free Air’¹¹ to make people more aware of the risks:



Key words in this poster are:

‘share’, ‘harm’, ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘respect’ and ‘right’.

All of the above words give the reader a sense of shared responsibilities to help them to consider others. It is also well presented with key words in colour and large font to emphasise the polite, uniting tone of the overall request. Another counter discourse with the aim to alleviate the use of perfume, to stop ecological destruction, is the WEN (Women’s Environmental Network)¹², whose aim is:

*Educating, empowering and informing women and men who care about the environment.
Campaigning on environment and health issues from a female perspective.*

The use of language in the slogan is simple and straight to the point. The alliterative words ‘educating’, ‘empowering’ and ‘informing’ combine together well to make a bold statement. The website has lots of facts about many environmental issues based around women’s products, as well as reader’s comments, articles and up to date news. It is successful in the way that it provides the facts and then offers alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Through advertising, perfume has become a way to define and build personality; there is a fragrance for every mood, attribute and style. The industry is growing at a rapid rate and is generally self-regulated, causing controversy over what chemicals are actually contained in the perfume itself. Fragrance is seen as a relatively harmless factor in environmental destruction, and maybe it is compared to more prominent

¹⁰Betty Bridges, *Fragrances by design*, online <<http://www.fpinva.org/>> 28/12/06

¹¹Jenny Saville, *Share the Air*, online <<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/perfumefree/>> 03/01/07

¹²Registered charity, online <www.wen.org.uk> 11/12/06

problems, yet it is contributing in a silent way, gradually enhancing its impact every year. Counter discourses are emerging although, at present, little research has been conducted on them. Growing numbers of asthma sufferers, in particular, will eventually trigger more research: the effect of language in advertising may then be considered an important factor in reducing the demand for fragrance. The images portrayed on many of the advertisements are not only encouraging the sale of harmful products, but may also be feeding the growing percentage of women with eating disorders, low self esteem and negative body image. This shows the strong connection between human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the ecosystems which life depends on.

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