

The False Obvious: Gender Myth in Perfume Commercials

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Perfume commercial, as a form of cultural text and practice, is relatively special in contemporary commercial advertising: The commodity qualities of perfume dictate that perfume advertisements must cater to the sexual fantasies of the audience, and therefore inevitably characterize the mainstream, dominant gender norms. At the same time, perfume commercial, as a unique marketing communication method, also unconsciously influences people's values through sensory stimulation and emotional rendering. This article explores the connection between perfume and its commercials, sex, and gender, and discusses the generation of meaning in perfume commercials as texts and deconstructs the gender myth implied from the perspectives of representation and myth analysis, ultimately revealing that behind the gender myth of perfume commercials is but a false manifestation of the ideal self-image of the western white bourgeois heterosexuality.

Keywords: perfume commercial, gender myth, representation

Introduction

As an expression of popular culture, contemporary commercial is rich in cultural connotations. The visual practice of commercial is intended to influence, and in some extreme cases manipulate the cognitive and consumer behavior of the audience. And since the production and interpretation of advertising meaning cannot be separated from the participation of the cultural codes shared by the audience, advertising has become a cultural practice. Gender issues in commercials have received enough academic attention. However, perfume commercial, as a special category of advertisement, has not received much academic attention. In addition, although some scholars have paid attention to the mechanism by which perfume commercials influence the audience's cognition, few have noticed that the myth constructed by these image texts are the "false obvious". The commodity characteristic of perfume itself determines that perfume commercials must cater to the sexual fantasies of consumers, and are therefore encoded by specific gender norms, and thus, more naturally, have a more sophisticated gender imprint than other kinds of advertisements. However, gender itself is a product of culture and does not have natural legitimacy, while the gender myth presented in perfume commercials about specific masculinities/femininities is constructed by a series of symbols, and the mythologies are peddled by concealing their own problematic domains, which have a profound impact on the audience's perception of masculinity/femininity and gender identity in a subtle way.

The "Sexy" Perfumes and Perfume Commercials

Perfume is almost naturally "sexy" and gender-related. First of all, from a physiological point of view, smell

is one of the most important senses for both humans and animals. Though humans have already evolved to a higher degree, body odor is still highly physical and personal, and perfume serves as a way to manage it. And for the same reason, most people use perfume for the purpose of enhancing their sex appeal. And odors, which have no specific attributes, have been artificially divided into male and female ones according to socio-cultural statutes. Secondly, unlike other commodities, the abstract smell itself cannot be visualized by the video text, but needs to be materialized by the viewer's imagination. As mentioned earlier, most consumers use perfume to increase their sex appeal, and perfume advertisements therefore tend to use erotic visions to cater for the consumers' imaginations of perfume scents. These perfume commercials, for example, often present a harder; more overtly manly look is presented through toned skins, white shirts, beards, pectoral and abdominal muscles. And in the choice of female characters, Mulvey again centrally discusses this form of looking in relation to the female as object. "This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 14). Women often serve as the object of an explicitly erotic gaze, which is materialized by perfume commercials. For instance, femininity and its sex appeal are magnified by showing women's bare breasts, legs, collarbones, and other body curves. In the use of clothing, the selection and stylization of white shirts and suits helped to create a strong male "appearance" by coding with clothing. For instance, the tri-dimensional design and cut of suits often emphasizes the broad shoulders of the men. In contrast, women's clothing and accessory choices tend to favor floor-length dresses made of silk, ankle-baring stilettos, and brightly colored lipsticks, which, as visual symbols, constructing women as more sensual figures that need to be sexually conquered. In addition, perfume commercials often use images to make sexually related references. For example, water is often used in perfume commercials due to its fluidity. In perfume commercials, the element of water is frequently depicted through the use of lakes, seawater, rain, sweat, and so on. Often the green lake is considered to convey the heterosexual desire while raging sea water suggests male power, with the rushing of the water and the hitting of rocks symbolizing sexual intercourse. In addition, sweat and rain usually create a wet character image for the subject in perfume commercials. By wetting the hair and clothing of the character, as well as close-ups of the face with droplets of water, the viewer's sexual pleasure can be triggered unconsciously, and the kind of wet body modeling, while stimulating the viewer's visual pleasure, also externalizes the character's inner emotional desires (Yang, 2018). These are all excellent ways to express sexuality in perfume commercials.

Gender Myth: The White, Heterosexual, and Bourgeois Masculinity/Femininity

As analyzed above, perfume commercials inevitably contain gender coding and mainstream gender representations, and thus might influence the audience's perception of gender identity subtly. When people comment on the masculinity/femininity of others, we hardly care to think about what makes the so-called "masculinity" or "femininity" nor the criteria on which people base their judgments. Although the biological differences between men and women are often clear, the masculine/feminine distinction seems to lack natural legitimacy. Therefore, masculinity/femininity has different versions in different cultural contexts and historical periods. The distribution of the fashion industry and discourse in today's world dictates that contemporary perfume commercial is centered around the western world, and that the gender myth constructed by its representational practices is essentially the gender norms of the heteronormative bourgeois whites.

Due to space constraints and the large number of perfume commercials, the content analysis in this paper cannot be exhaustive of all contemporary perfume commercials, and the samples included are based on search engine results. The content analysis and visualization of 45 randomly selected perfume commercials that are

well-known to the audiences focus on the interrelationships between major brand perfume commercials and sexual innuendo, skin color, race, and class. This analysis pays particular attention to how ideal bodies are associated with images of masculinity and femininity, and how these images in turn construct and promote socially desirable gendered bodies, thereby influencing individuals' satisfaction with their own bodies.

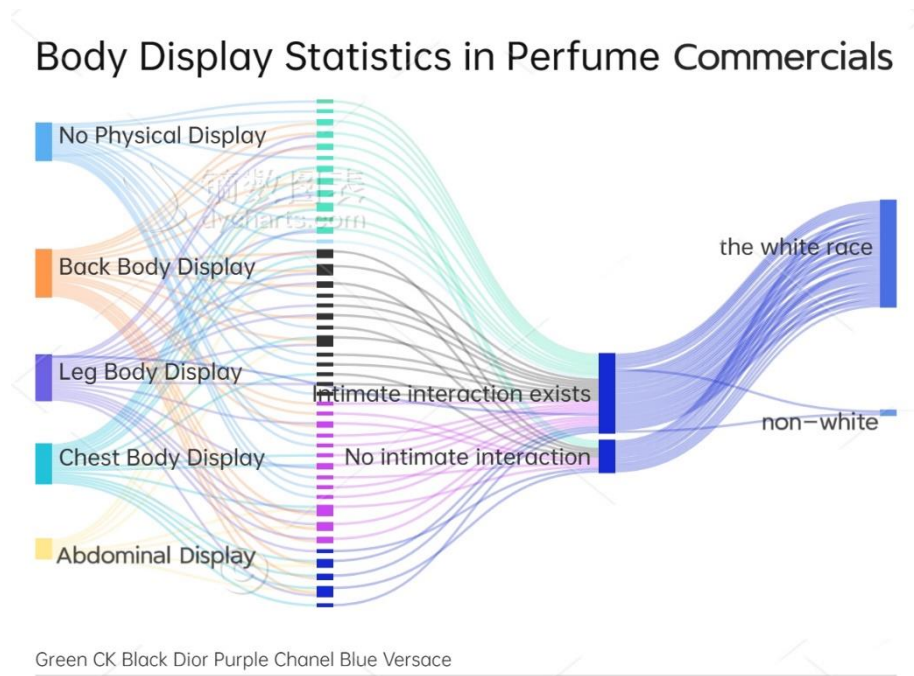


Figure 1. Body display in perfume commercials.

In the Figure 1 above, “body display” refers to the use of body parts in perfume commercials that are considered as erotic or have sexual connotations in most cultures, such as breasts, backs, abs, and thighs; “intimate interactions” include typical sexual interactions such as kissing, hugging, or caressing; and “ethnicity” is divided into two general categories: white and non-white, with non-white referring to yellow, black, and brown people. And green, black, purple, and blue represent major perfume brands such as CK, Dior, Chanel, and Versace, etc.

The visualization of the content reveals that more than 95% of the perfume commercials use actors/actresses who are generally perceived as sexually attractive, mostly celebrities, athletes, or models. Of the 45 randomly selected perfume commercials, 16 (36%) showed no physical nudity, while 29 (64%) showed physical nudity (chest, stomach, back, legs). 33 cases among the samples contain intimate interactions (mostly male-female romantic interactions and close physical contact), and 12 cases contain no intimate interactions but clear sexual implications (and almost 73% of the sample present direct sexual behaviors or physical behaviors with explicit sexual implications). It is quite clear that most perfume commercials are connected with gender, and almost all of them contain emotional interactions between the protagonists, but such interactions are mostly heterosexual; only a few advertisements that show non-heterosexual behavior in a rather ambiguous way. In addition, 43 cases (95%) used white protagonists in contrast with non-white protagonists appeared in two cases (4%). In other words, non-white protagonists were extremely rare (only two cases in the CK One and Versace Man Eau Fraiche advertisements in the sample) in perfume commercials.

Meanwhile, unlike other genres of advertisements, perfume commercials tend to be less localized, using few actors or models from the target market's country and always prefer white models or actors. As Hall points out, "The casting of the models was key to producing the 'conservative Englishness look'. The models both have pale white skin, with lighter hair and softer features than the Italian-American-looking models and the light-black model" (1997, p. 310).

In addition, it is worth noting that almost all of the 45 randomly selected commercials use a modern metropolis as the setting of the narrative, and most of the scenes are relatively gorgeous, showing castles, balls, fireworks, and swimming pools to demonstrate the dignity and superiority of the sophisticated and dreamy Western middle class.

To summary, the perfume commercial deliberately constructs a gender myth by depicting imagined sexual relations involving heterosexual bourgeois white men and women. This practice serves as an inscription of gender norms specifically tailored to the heterosexual bourgeois white demographic. Perfume commercials in fact achieve the same communicative effect as pornography: Audiences are encouraged to emulate on-screen gender norms in order to become "sexy". When such gender mythologies and power structures are widely accepted, their seemingly natural legitimacy is no longer questioned and becomes the "false obvious".

The Implantation of the Obvious: Symbols and Psychology

The gender mythology of perfume commercials consists of more complex symbolic elements and relies on the implication of image symbols. As a highly recognizable brand in the fashion industry, Dior's perfume commercials are very representative. For the sake of analysis and discussion, this paper selects perfume commercials of Miss Dior and J'adore as examples to reveal how perfume commercials influence the audience's cognition and construct the gender identity.

The Obvious Under Representation

In his theory of representation, Stuart Hall states that

Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the "real" world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (1997, p. 17)

And

at the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related "systems of representation". The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc.—and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. (Hall, 1997, p. 19)

By saying "I know its meaning", we typically mean we have a concept or we have conceptualized its meaning in our cognitive system. However, to convey "the concept", we often rely on the second system of representation, also known as language. Taking the commercial for Miss Dior for example, the commercial constructs a specific femininity by interspersing a series of symbolic connotations in the narrative of the image text. At the first level of mental representation, the first scene of the commercial is a black-and-white filter narrative, when the male servant sends flowers to Natalie Portman; the latter corrects the former, claiming that she is still "miss, actually", and at the wedding venue, Portman walked alongside her father, but suddenly decided to call off the wedding; the whole picture of the commercial changes from black-and-white to color, and then the shot turns, with Portman stomping off her high heels, throwing the bouquet away, and taking off the wedding dress that bound her. And

in the sky with falling petals, she ascended a helicopter in search of her ideal love. This narration of the commercial presents us with the image of a young bride who is brave enough to break away from her bondage and pursue herself.

The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between “things”, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call “representation”. (Hall, 1997, p. 19)

The male characters in this advertisement encompass a servant, an abandoned father, a groom, and a helicopter pilot portrayed as an object of desire. These implications place the male figures in a relatively subordinate and position. And that the image-text of the commercial subtly, if not unnoticeably, subverts the male hegemony, highlighting a heterosexual bourgeois white femininity that is “independent, autonomous, and bold”. In this way, a specific femininity is brought to the fore. In this video, through the transition from black-and-white to color images, the high-heeled shoes that symbolize bondage, and the background music, the commercial successfully accomplishes the peddling of the idea through a series of symbolic connotations: Miss Dior, the perfume, will grant you a fabulous femininity and to realize your true selves.

The Obvious Under Myth-Analysis

In the concept of “myth today”, Roland Barthes has pointed out that myth, as a mode of thought, aligns with Saussure’s notions of the signifier and the signified (Zhan, 2017). The signified and the signifier indicate that the meaning of a symbol is structured, while the signifier is a form of expression that can be directly sensed, and the signified is the concept that connects with the form. And the connection between form and concept makes a myth.

Taking the 2018 Dior’s commercial for perfume “J’adore” in 2018 for example, a mythology about femininity is constructed via the narrative structure and content. The myth thus constructed has a dual system: The narration of the commercial starts by showing a dark but luxurious room, in which a dozen of women in gorgeous dress with different postures surround Charlize Theron, who is completely naked in a swimming pool. And by showing their charming body curves, the commercial creates a sexy and elegant female image, which is the first layer of semantic construction of the mythological system. And as the camera closes in on Charlize Theron’s face as she steps out of the golden pool, the next second the camera switches to her in a gorgeous gown dress leading the other women out of the darkened room breaking through the door in a confident stride. The imagery of the Golden Goddess is materialized through Charlize Theron’s physical body, which becomes the object on which millions of female viewers project their own sense of identity. This explains the deeper meaning of the commercial for Dior’s J’adore: It does not only represent sexiness and elegance, but also represents the image of an independent woman who is brave and independent, a more abstract concept that connects with the form, the second layer of the construction of the myth.

In addition, the generation of meaning is subjective in nature, and thus the relationship between the audience and the text is at the core. The psychoanalysis of cinema suggests that in order to participate visually in the process of watching, the audiences often unconsciously relinquish what they already know so as to maintain their trust in the narration provided by the phantasmagoria. For example, audiences are unlikely to question the flawed narration or logic in a commercial. Thus, if what presented by the commercial is condensed from the audiences’ unrealized desires, the visual participation itself is rather realized at the cost of the audiences’ self-division. And

the series of images and symbols in the perfume commercials generated a symbolic connotation, a concept about gender.

Deconstructing the Obvious and Gender Myth in Perfume Commercials

Perfume commercials often construct myths of specific masculinity/femininity with excellent fictional plots and audiovisual spectacles. However, such gender myths are based on the concealment of their own problem domains and the whitewashing of heteronormative ideological demands.

Symptomatic Interpretation: The Problem Domain of Dior's Perfume Commercials

Dior's two perfume commercials sell the female audience a survival guide: It seems that by using Dior's perfume, all the real social conflicts and life's problems will be solved. The image is structured by a combination of presence and absence, in order to avoid the problem domains. A symptom reading of the present and absent content in the Dior perfume commercial makes it easy to find that the commercial intentionally avoids the introduction of the actual function of the perfume, because the perfume does not possess the direct functionality of elevating personal status or creating a better life. Perfume as a hedonistic product intersperses the function of perfume in a series of fictionalized narratives, providing an imaginative solution to the real problems of the female audience by offering a series of visual pleasures. As Winship explains,

We recognise and relish the vocabulary of dreams in which ads deal; we become involved in the fictions they create; but we know full well that those commodities will not elicit the promised fictions. It doesn't matter. Without bothering to buy the product we can vicariously indulge in the good life through the image alone. This is the compensation for the experience you do not and cannot have. (Storey, 2005, p. 154)

It is obvious then that as a closed set of ideological practices, Dior's perfume commercials also have their own problem domains, which contain a series of assumptions, motives, and underlying concepts, among others, and the myths of femininity they peddle are based on imaginative solutions to real social problems. In other words, the "free, independent, and bold" femininity portrayed in the commercials cannot be realized through the commodity it sells, perfume.

Queer Interpretation: The God/Goddess as the Object of Desire

As Simone de Beauvoir sees it, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (Butler, 1990, p. 1). The rigid binary male/female division is designed to satisfy the economic needs of heteronormative ideology and to cast a "natural veil" over heterosexuality. Television, film, and commercials, as forms of mass cultural practice, all reinforce heteronormative ideologies and its gender norms.

For Butler, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p. 33). In other words, the gender identity of individual social members is recognized in the repeated regulations and norms. Advertising, as a practice of popular culture, also represents the dominant heteronormative ideology, and through a series of discursive practices, presents masculinity/femininity to the public in a seemingly natural and legitimate way, and calls on individuals to model and perform. Whether it is the commercial for Dior's J'adore or Miss Dior, the image of the goddess as the "ideal self" is a parody of heteronormative ideological gender norms, from appearance to behavior. The audience, in aspiring to be or own the "she" represented by the commercial goddess, places themselves within the binary opposition structure of heteronormative ideology, thus becoming practitioners of gender norms.

In patriarchal heteronormative societies, “feminists often argue that whomever the narrate may be, the implied audience of most commercial entertainment is male, judging by the way women are portrayed” (Grossberg, Waterlila, Whitney, & Wise, 2006, p. 177). In this way, the perfect “she” figure that millions of female viewers want to become does not stand for female independence and freedom as the advertisement characterizes, but instead in deliberately pleasing men. Taking commercial for “CK Reveal” in 2014 as an example, the commercial presents a man and a woman looking at each other through a transparent French window, and as the woman gradually takes off her clothes to only underwear and flirts by twisting her body, the man is simply gazing at the former. Through the sharp contrast between the man and woman, the dominant position of male is quite obvious, while women are objectified as a pleasure under the “his” gaze. In conclusion, in masking the unnatural legitimacy of the dominant ideology, women are still in a secondary position as objects to be viewed, rather than as “independent and free” as the perfume commercials claim.

Conclusion

Media are undoubtedly a participant in ideological production, and perhaps even one of the most important producers of codes. As Laurence Grossberg et al. said, when the media become representations, when they make claims about the way the world is, they become powerful ideological institutions (2006, p. 198). Perfume commercials construct gender myths into the false obvious, an artificial existence that appears to be natural, through a series of visual codes that emphasize specific visual pleasures. And by reproducing and confirming the dominant gender norms, the perfume commercials function as a constructive force that influences our perceptions of ourselves as well as our gender identities.

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