Names as language and capital

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A Gender-based Study of Product Names in the Cosmetic Sector

Antonia Montes Fernández

Abstract
This paper aims to include into the study of commercial names the perspective of gender. Through product names of fragrances and cosmetic articles gender-specific attitudes and values are examined. It can be assumed that the names for beauty products contribute to the construction of concepts of femininity and masculinity, as global advertising campaigns propagate different appeals according to beauty standards for women and men.

Introduction
Since the 1990s - with the rise of the metrosexual man - beauty products no longer belong exclusively to the domain of female coquetry. Big cosmetic enterprises like L’Oréal, Biotherm or Lancôme have drawn their attention to the male consumer type and launched numerous fragrances and products for skin care, as men’s physical appearance and grooming has become a decisive factor for their professional and personal success. (Salzman/Matathia/O’Reilly 2005, Kreinkamp 2007).

Beauty standards, based on sexual attractiveness and seduction transmitted by fragrances', and the promise of skin care products in reaching a healthy and young appearance avoiding aging signs and proclaiming eternal youth, are propagated in the similar way for women and for men by international advertising campaigns.

Over sixty new fragrance brands are launched each year, according to Amy-Chinn (2001:168), and the cosmetic sector is very productive in creating new product names. Names of fragrances and cosmetic articles have a considerable semantic loading and they transmit a range of values with regard to gender roles, although these are changing according to Markham/Cangelosi (1999), especially with the introduction to the market of unisex and same-name fragrances.

This article aims to examine how attitudes and values concerning beauty through product names are shaped differently for women and men. By applying a qualitative approach, a corpus of product names for fragrances and cosmetic articles for men and women is analyzed in order to explore the dissimilarities in the way they appeal to beauty values for both genders. A gender-based study of product names might be revealing, since fragrance names underline differences in male and female attitudes and hence reinforce concepts of femininity and masculinity. They also express the struggle of seductive conquest between the genders.

2. Global cosmetic brands

A few multinationals, the most powerful are L’Oréal, Procter & Gamble, and Louis Vuitton hold the most famous fragrance and cosmetic brands. L’Oréal holds brands like Biotherm, Lancôme, but also brands like Helena Rubinstein, Ralph Lauren or Giorgio Armani. Procter & Gamble holds fragrance brands like Gucci, Boss or Dolce & Gabanna. Louis Vuitton holds the French brands Dior, Givenchy, Guerlain,
The brand value of these companies is huge. According to the ranking list of the best global brands, Louis Vuitton, 16th on the ranking of the best global brands, has a brand value of $21,120,000. Similar, L’Oréal a brand value of $7,748,000 with a growth of 3% compared to the previous year. These enormous brand values are the best evidence that the cosmetic industry is an important player in the global economy. To give an impression, these brand values exceed the Gross Domestic Product of countries like Iceland, Bolivia or Ghana.

Through these global brands, promoted within international advertising campaigns throughout various countries, preserving the same strategic principles - positioning and promotion worldwide - certain values are expressed that go far beyond the product, and that appeal to feelings and emotions, such as for example, happiness, prestige, beauty, success, etc. Marketing experts believe that these associated, symbolic values constitute universal appeals desired by a majority of people independently of their cultural origin. Consequently, global brands create a unified world in which consumers are fascinated by the message and the lifestyle they disseminate:

*The majority of consumers avidly desire, and therefore try to acquire and display, goods and services that are valued for non-utilitarian reasons such as status seeking, enzy provocation and novelty seeking” (Usunier 2000: 145)*

A global consumer culture has emerged based on mainly Anglo-American values. This can easily be proved by analyzing the origin of the 100 most successful global brands. On the diagram can be observed that 51 of them are from the United States, far behind are German (10), French (8) or Japanese (7), etc. brands.

Logically, a cultural appropriation takes place, where millions of consumers all over the world buy American global brands, that refer not only to specific cultural values and mentalities but also shape decisively the values of a global modern culture, where Anglo-American values and lifestyle dominate.

### 3. Product names for Fragrances

By many, fragrances are considered to be an affordable piece of luxury. Besides, by consumers they are regarded as an expression of personality. Fragrances have been aimed, at the first place, to satisfy women’s desire to smell good. The massive appearance of male fragrances and perfumes is a relatively new trend as some decades ago it was exclusively reserved to women to use aromatic toiletries.

Fragrance names, without a doubt, speak the language of seduction, evoking a world of magic, love and eroticism. They also express the struggle of seductive conquest between the genders. Although Markham/Cangelosi (1999: 400) state a change in the women’s purchase attitude of fragrances, as they do not buy fragrances any more for the sake of sexual allure. Values like self-indulgence, smartness and conforming to a particular image have become important factors for the purchase of a fragrance. Unisex and same-name fragrance brands are designed for use by both sexes. These brands are intended to appeal younger people who reject traditional gender roles and lifestyles. As these authors (1999: 401) point
out, younger women are expected to reject the ‘you need a man appeal’, the main purchase reason in the past.

Being traditionally a gift from men to women, it was with the launch of Estee Lauder’s Youth Dew in 1952 that women were encouraged to regard perfume as an accessible luxury, they might buy for themselves (Amy-Chinn, 2001: 168). Still 40 per cent of female fragrances are bought by men as presents. In my opinion, men choose often the fragrance based on the semantic load of the fragrance names.

Perfume marketers know that men need to be guided and reassured on brand choice. And research has indicated that men claim to be almost twice as likely as women to make their purchase decision on the basis of image and advertising. (Amy-Chinn, 2001: 169)

The discussion of the results presented in the coming sections are based on a corpus of 120 fragrance names, revealing different appeals in the naming strategies for female and male fragrances.

3.1 Female fragrance names
Names like Femme, Elle, Boss Essence du Femme, Boss Woman, Aquaroom, represent the feminine soul. It can be reinforced by an intensifier, for example in names like Individuelle Femme, Elle intense; a clear and defined concept of femininity is expressed. A name like Diva transforms the woman wearing the fragrance into a goddess.

Women are portrayed as adorable and lovable in names like Beautiful, Angel innocent, Magnifique, Fragile, Innocent, Pretty. Fragrance names can also emphasize feminine attitudes: Lacoste Elegance, Allure, Glamorous, Boss Intense Shimmer. In other names the female spirit is compared to the gentleness of flowers or fruits: Sunflowers, rose the one, Narcisse, Boss Orange.

Fragrance names also refer to mythological figures: Lolita Lempicka of which the flacon is an apple. In this case two myths are transmitted. The first one is the Lolita myth, about the girly, but at the same time, sensual and provocative woman and the second one is the biblical myth of the forbidden apple of temptation. In fact, the biblical myth is quite present in the naming of fragrances: Eden, beyond Paradise. Also, the good and the bad evil in heaven and on earth can be found: Ange ou Démon.

Quite a lot of names stress the tendency women have for dreaming and romanticism: L’Air du Temps, Miracle, Mirage forever, Pleasures, Poème, Romance, Sentiments, Chance, Parfum des Maravilles, Premier Jour, Sensations, L’Instant Magique. Some names highlight the noble feelings women have towards love: Amor, Prada Tendre, Promesse, Tender Touch. There are also names that express important values in love and life: Liberté, Eternity, Truth. Some fragrance names emphasize the female personality with an erotic touch: Sensuous, Magnifique. The name be delicious is an advice to support a more sensual aspect of the female personality. Incredible me is a name that encloses a requirement towards female personality and the liberation of all social and moral ties.

Women are presented as passionate by names expressing the fascination a woman creates over a man: Ralph Hot, Very Irresistible, Sexy, Provocative Woman. Fragrance names also refer to feelings that come within reach of erotic passion: Mystère Rochas, Euphoria, Magnetism, Attraction, Désir. Some names transmit the sensations, even despair, the conquest of the other sex might provoke: Addict, Envy, Contradiction, Hypnose, Opium, Secret Obsession, Midnight Poison.

There are names that enclose an unambiguous message for the opposite sex, the fragrances with such a name acquire the voice of the woman wearing it: Desire me expresses undoubtedly the sexual impact a woman wants to have on a man. The name Wanted is an ellipsis of ‘I want you’ or ‘I am wanted by you’. In a similar sense, the fragrance name The One clearly states that the woman wearing this fragrance wants to convey the message either ‘you are the one for me’ or, expressed in the same way, I am the one for you. In the new spot (2009), one of the last sentences is “you know when it is the one”. The ‘it’ does not necessarily refer to a man, it can also refer to a circumstance in life. The ‘it’ turns the fragrance name the one in ambiguous.
Female nudity causes arousal, but the response of men and women is different. Whereas men are energized by female nudity, women react tense and fatigued (Latour, 1990: 78).

Bearing in mind that men display a strong positive attitude to a naked female body toward the ad and the brand (Latour/Henthorne, 1993: 26), some fragrances choose a name with that characteristic: Nu, Youth Dew Amber Nude.

It can be observed that many of the fragrance names, praise the feminine soul and personality on the one hand, and make reference to the opposed but complementing dialogue constructed between men and women on the other. They even relate the (fatal) erotic and sexual attraction between men and women.

3.2 Male fragrance names
Names for male fragrances, instead, do not emphasize this sort of female and male rivalry; in fact, they do not refer to women hardly. Male fragrances stress masculinity and typical male characters like strongness and virility, on the one hand, and the preferences and tastes men possess and like on the other.

Many of the 75 names of male fragrances analyzed, have the same name as their female correspondent with the indication ‘men’ in English or ‘homme’ in French: Acqua di Gio pour homme, Allure homme, Light Blue pour homme, Gucci pour Homme, Miracle Homme, Lui Roehas; Diamonds for men, Contradiction for men, Escape for men, Eternity for men, Obsession for Men, Truth for men, The One for men. The marketing intention could lie in the fact that many women buy fragrances for their husbands and lovers. By doing so, they project their own desires and longings on the male fragrance. However, some combinations are very unlikely, like “Angel for men” or “Lolita Lempicka for men”, as they refer to a female image.

Pure masculinity is reinforced by names like Pour Monsieur, L’Nuit de l’homme, Gentleman, Pour un Homme de Caron, A men, Now Men. Masculine attributes can be found in Only the Brave, Eau Sauvage. Masculine egoism and the masculine desire to be a bad boy generate names like: Platinum Egoiste, le Male, Fleur du Male.

There are some names related to sports: Allure Homme Sport, Dior Homme Sport, Polo. Also names with reference to ‘movement’ or ‘energy’ are popular: Higher Energy, Boss in Motion Hugo Energize, Adventure, Polo Explorer. At the end of the competition waits the ‘Trophée’. Men are portrayed not only as sportsmen but also as players in fragrance names like: Cool Play, 1 Million, Style in Play. There are just a few names that stress the more passionate part of male personality: Dunhill Pursuit, Crave.

Colors, in general, are popular names for fragrances. While female fragrances employ light colors like Boss Orange, Light Blue, White Elle, into the blue, Touch of Pink, we also find the color red as symbol for passion: Deep Red, Red Delicious. For male fragrances the outstanding color is black symbolizing the mystery of the night: Black Code, Dunhill Black, Black XS, Silver Black.

An interesting case is formed by the fragrances named after a city. Whereas names referring to ‘industrious’ cities like London (Dunhill London) and Tokyo (Tokyo by Kenzo) represent in a way the masculine personality, it seems that references to ‘romantic’ cities like Paris, Love in Paris, Roma reinforce the female essence. The cited cities evoke certain associations. Although London and Tokyo could be as a romantic city as Paris, these cities are more likely to be associated with business and finance in particular. Based on this observation, one can also predict that e.g. Chicago or New York would be a good name for a men’s fragrance. New Orleans and Amsterdam (sin cities) would probably do well for unisex fragrances.

Male fragrances have names from the Latin and Greek mythology or just invented names that sound Greek: Antaeus, Kouros, Xeryus Rouge. It seems that names in the two classical languages posses something masculine. Instead, female fragrances choose seductive female names in the French language: LouLou, AnaisAnais. Also fragrance names referring to flowers are quite popular for female fragrances, especially for summer fragrances like Flower, Narcisse, Rock’n Roses.
4. Product names for Anti-Aging care

In the previous section gender differences in the naming of fragrances have been examined. Another interesting field for a gender-based analysis are the names of cosmetics, especially those of anti-aging products. This study is based on a corpus of 110 product names for female and 80 product names for male anti-aging skin care.

It is obvious that men and women perceive and experience the process of aging in a different way. For men, society considers it as a process of physically getting mature and more interesting. For women, however, it means losing their youthful appearance and their physical attraction. In a society where youth is a factor of status and success, female aging is considered a drawback. The cosmetic industry promises through different techniques, procedures and miracle substances a sort of ‘cheating the system’. Put differently, aging is portrayed like a negative state in a woman’s life that can be prevented by the cosmetic industry. For women, the anti-aging cosmetic care is differentiated in stages named First signs treatment, Wrinkle corrections, firmness correction and finally super restorative care. Cosmetic companies advice women ideally to begin with the anti-aging treatments as early as their late 20s. Practically, women are threatened by aging and its negative consequences their whole adult life.

Cosmetic names for female anti-aging products consist of two parts: the name of the cosmetic line - companies develop different treatments under the same name (day and night cream, cream for the eyes, Serum, etc.) - and a more informative appendix that informs about the effects of the products: wrinkle restoring, intensive recovery, ultra firming, wrinkle correction, etc. This results in names like, for example, Rénergie Refill Yeux Intense Reinforcing Anti-Wrinkle Eye Cream, Resilience Lift Extreme Ultra Firming Cream.

The male anti-aging products are not divided into such categories. Comparing the product names for the two sexes, the message they transmit is totally different. Female product names for anti-aging care convey, in general, a feeling of fear. The loss of youthful beauty, a natural process like getting wrinkles under the eyes, around the mouth and on other parts of the face is regarded as a threat since it does not conform to the established beauty standards.

Analyzing female product names for anti-aging care, what strikes most is that the miraculous outcomes of the treatments are mostly expressed by names preceded by a superlative adjective:

advanced: Advanced Night Repair; extra: Extra-Firming, Advanced Extra Firming; high: High Definition, High Resolution; multi: Multi-Active, Multi-Perfection; perfect: Future Perfect, Perfectionist, Multi-Perfection; super: Super Restorative, Superdefense, Super Rescue; total: Capture Totale; ultra: Ultra Correction

Many products propose a lifting of the skin, that is why the word ‘lift’ can be found in the names: Repairwear lift, Rénergie Morpholift. Names containing ‘age’ express a resistance but also a certain resignation against aging: Age Fitness Power, Revelation Age-Resisting, Sublimage. As the promise of ‘youth’ is not very credible, only a few names relate to it: Youth surge, Genefique Youth. Quite a lot of names contain the prefix ‘re-’, that suggests bringing a negative state into a more satisfying one: Repairwear Lift, Reminerale Intensive, Rénergie Refill (in which Rénergie is an invented word).

Numerically, there are much less cosmetic products for anti-aging aimed for men than for women. As has been mentioned above the aging process is sold differently to men than to women. In general, product names for men’s skin care are much more euphemistic than the names for female anti-aging products. First of all, aging is not considered as a negative state but as a transitional one, being referred as ‘fatigue’: Anti-Fatigue, Fatigue Fighter. In all moments, the use of the product offers a positive sensation for the male skin: Revitalizing, Rehydrating Moisturiser, Night Recovery Lotion. The maximum comfort is the most important quality of a male cosmetic product: Maximum Hydrator, Max Comfort, Extreme Comfort.
Max Moisturiser. Health is also an important factor to bear in mind: Healthy Look Moisturiser, Vita Lift. Action, control and force, highly masculine attributes, are employed to combat the expression lines, as men do not have wrinkles: Force Supreme, Multi Action, Line Control. Other names regard the process of aging as a fight a man has to win and is going to win: Age Fight, Age Rescue, Age Defense Hydrator.

5. Conclusion

In the present article I have examined the product names for fragrances and cosmetic products for anti-aging skin care from a gender perspective. The differences in appealing both sexes reveal how gender-specific attitudes and values are transmitted by product names. Female addressed product names clearly imply a reference to the opposite sex by stressing the attraction a woman feels towards a man and the desire to please him. Aging is considered a threat to the endeavor of being beautiful and being regarded attractive. Female names for anti-aging skin care transmit fear. Male addressed products by the beauty-industry emphasize male characteristics as strength and bravery. Aging is never considered a negative process.

Notes

1 Although Markham/Cangelosi (1999: 400) in their article “An international study of unisex and ‘same-name’ fragrance brands” state that women do not buy fragrance any more for the sake of sexual allure. Values like self-indulgence, smartness and conforming to a particular image have become important factors for the purchase of a fragrance.


3 Although men did use aftershave, but it has not been commercialized in the way it is now. Besides, it had not the impact in the daily care as it has nowadays.

4 It must be pointed out that fragrance names appear more evocative together with an image and a slogan in an advertisement as analyzed separately from these persuasive elements.

5 The corpus is not very extensive as we just included product names that express gender attitudes. Fragrance names based on the name of the designer, as Dolce & Gabbana, Jean Paul Gaultier, Carolina Herrera, etc. have been left out, since they do not transmit a gender attitude. They pass on the excellent reputation of the designer to the fragrance. On the other hand, they can also be considered as signature brands.

6 In the new spot (2009), featuring Scarlett Johansson, looking at the mirror to herself, she says: “I am looking / I don’t know what I’m looking for / maybe everything, maybe nothing / but I know when I find it / you know when it is the one / that’s the one - Dolce & Gabbanna the one.

References


