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Petersson McIntyre, Magdalena

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Perfume Packaging, Seduction and Gender

By Magdalena Petersson McIntyre

Abstract

This article examines gender and cultural sense-making in relation to perfumes and their packaging. Gendered meanings of seduction, choice, consumption and taste are brought to the fore with the use of go-along interviews with consumers in perfume stores. Meeting luxury packages in this feminized environment made the interviewed women speak of bottles as objects to fall in love with and they described packages as the active part in an act of seduction where they were expecting packages to persuade them into consumption. The interviewed men on the other hand portrayed themselves as active choice-makers and stressed that they were always in control and not seduced by packaging. However, while their ways of explaining their relationship with packaging on the surface seems to confirm cultural generalizations in relation to gender and seduction, the article argues that letting oneself be seduced is no less active than seducing. Based on a combination of actor network theories and theories of gender performativity the article points to the agency of packaging for constructions of gender and understands the interviewees as equally animated by the flows of passion which guide their actions.

Keywords*:* Consumption, perfume, seduction, packaging, gender, shop-along, agency.

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Introduction

> We have created a collection that will disrupt gender roles and give the carrier an opportunity to explore new sides of themselves… For a generation who demands the freedom to choose… Multiple personalities have never looked so sexy!
>
> Dolce and Gabbana

Gender is made everywhere, even with the small and inconspicuous everyday goods such as the packages with which we carry consumables home from the store. Packages are often perceived as an unnecessary source of waste, but based on Cochoy (2004, 2007) this article builds on a view of packages as an extension of the contents which has agency. Packages make aspects of the contents visible to us that we cannot perceive by looking, touching, tasting or smelling the product itself, such as nutrients and calories. Perfume packaging, the subject on which the article deliberates, tells us about scent notes, alcohol content and preservatives. With words and pictures which convey luxury and desire they also produce glamorous and sensual meanings. Placed on a store shelf, accompanied with images of attractive men and women and suggestive lighting, bottles and cartons create a luxurious atmosphere which says that it is important to spend money on beautifying oneself and that the consumption of luxury will make you into a desirable and attractive person. Promising love and glamour, packages try to attract our attention in a split second, to convince us that it is this particular fragrance which best represents the person we want to be, and not the competitor's perhaps equal product.

Packaging helps us to choose. By guiding and preceding our choices, packages assist us, and we are given a variety of references that makes us select in the "right" way (Cochoy 2004, 2007). For Cochoy, building on actor network theory, pointing to the actions packages perform works as a way to illustrate the active role that objects have and to emphasize that agency is not only a human trait. Packages do however not only ask us to choose between different products in terms of contents. With the use of visual and textual language perfume packaging invites us to become that stylish Parisian, or that preppy, natural beauty, or that generator of raw sexuality who meet us in advertisements. But there is more than that. By telling us whether the contents are "for her", "for him", perhaps unisex or with no gender at all packages "do" gender and by that not only give scripts for practices of consumption, but, as I will show, take active part in the performativity of gender.

As pointed out by Hine (1997) packaging speaks to the intellect but even more so to the emotions. Package design has, ever since the 1930s, been understood in two distinct ways. On one hand it has been the subject of psychological market research where shopping has been conceptualized as an irrational process and packages as effective mainly as long as they speak to the subconscious. On the other hand, there has been a counter-movement that has called for packaging to enlighten consumers regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of the products

and information about, for example, possible allergic reactions (Hine 1997). The design of perfume packaging is mainly about the former process, to seduce consumers by subconsciously playing on moods and thereby convince them to buy. Content declarations are however mandatory and can even reinforce a gender coded message by listing ingredients like musk or rose. Thus, the two movements are not in clear opposition to each other. Furthermore, both movements are gendered in particular ways. Psychological market research has taken a gender relation between a female consumer (seduced) and a male marketer/shop owner (seducer) for granted. The consumer movements which have resulted in legislation and policies for package design have at large consisted of women activists.

Making Sense of Packages

Analyses of the meaning-making of perfumes have mostly been based on visual or textual interpretations of advertisements (cf. Schoeder 2002; Kjellmer 2009; Hemme 2010; Freeman 2011) or of the role of perfume in literature (Solander 2010). Based on ethnographic interviews in shops, this article studies how consumers interpret and understand the gendered meanings of perfumes and their packaging, particularly with regard to seduction. Thus, the article argues that design objects do not have any definite meanings in themselves, but must be related to the power relations, methods and processes through which they are made sense (Partington 1996). Marketing language is performative; it shapes the way we think about ourselves by presenting, expecting and normalizing choices that we may not have thought of or known, such as choices between the claimed characteristics of the goods as well as what they are supposed to "say" about or do for the user (cf. Cronin 2000). Consumption practices are nevertheless far from direct echoes of what appears in advertisements, movies, in shops and in media. Meaning is not created either by consumers, marketers or packages but should be viewed as a network that emerges in negotiations between these different actors (Cochoy 2004).

Gender Performativity

In the theories of gender performativity by Judith Butler (1990, 1993), gender is seen not as an expression of an inner identity, expressive, but as performative; an effect of gender performance. "Woman" cannot, according to Butler, be understood outside the way it is staged or performed. Gender is not an attribute or essential property of subjects but "a kind of becoming or activity… an incessant and repeated action of some sort (Butler 1990: 112). Gender identity is not the result of physical differences, but of the complex discursive practices in which gender, sexuality and desire is co-produced. Building on speech act theory, Butler sees gender as performative citational practices. These practices reproduce discourse,

but can also work subversively. Gender both enables and disciplines subjects and their performances.

With this, gender is understood as a process, a doing, and through that process we are created and recreated. These doings are repeated over time and become conventions. There are conventions for gestures, movements and styles that make us into men and women, from the clothes we wear, the way we move, the goods we consume or the way we talk about ourselves as he or she. Through these repetitions, we become the men and women that we have learned to orchestrate. These styles do not express a stable identity, they are not cultural expression of identities determined by the body; they are formed by the stylization of the body itself (Butler 1990; Loxley 2007).

It is however not only humans that perform gender and it is not only the human body that is performative. Objects do it too. Re-connecting to the initially presented theories of material agency in actor network theory, consumer goods and their packaging are from this perspective not to be regarded as passive, but as performative. Whereas gender is generally under theorized in actor network theory, I have found it fruitful to combine these ideas with the butlerian theories of gender performativity (see also Barad 2007).

Design conventions for imagery, shapes, cuts, colours, fonts, texts and words make some scents masculine (spicy and musky), others feminine (sweet flowery) and others still unisex (fresh citrusy). Packaging enhances such cultural perceptions of smell, it also constructs them, by combining imagery, text and ingredients, and it can break with them in order to stand out on the market. The ways we understand these designs are also part of the performativity of gender, the interpretations, or cultural meaning-making, of objects in gender terms. The marketing of perfumes and the design of packaging relies on specific conventions for gender by which we are performatively addressed as men and women.

Gender Diversity and Luxury

During the last century the perfume industry has mainly targeted women. Perfume has become a feminized good and the industry has built its meaning-making around seduction and irrational and uncontrollable desires (cf. Kjellmer 2009). In the last decades the market for men's beauty and perfume has however grown immensely. Because of the gendered associations of femininity and seduction the perfume industry has struggled to find ways of marketing fragrance to men. Many attempts to package masculine consumption have been made, some of which have focused on the eroticization of the male body. It has been a trick of the trade to try to package scents "for him" in ways which commodify masculinity without feminizing the user (cf. Breazeale 2000; Scanlon 2000). Men are often depicted in cleansing rituals, in the shower or getting ready to go out and seduce partners. As pointed out by Classen, Synnott and Howes (1994) perfume adverts often show

how fragrance will increase the masculinity of the carrier and make him irresistible to women, as in for example television commercials for Axe deodorant. Men's consumption is associated with rationality and needs; and perfume will make men into more powerful seducers.

Women's perfume marketing on the other hand often shows a sexual relationship between goods and consumers, or the bottle and a woman. During the 1980s women's fragrances began to be advertised with images of women holding and embracing an enlarged bottle (Classen, Synnott & Howes 1994). Today, women are often depicted in bed with a bottle filling in for an absent lover, such as in *Flash* by Jimmy Choo. The relationship between women and their fragrances is represented as one of passion. Names such as *Desire me* by Escada, *Dance with* Givenchy and *J'Adore* by Dior allude to this relationship. Perfume packaging is hence particularly suitable for discussing aspects of seduction and the ways in which seduction builds on specific gendered ideas of activity and passivity.

For Him or for Her

In the mainstream, mass-market for perfume, there are two distinct genders, "for her" and "for him" (or pour homme and pour femme). Most shops have distinct sections, where they keep the products aimed for men and women respectively separate and mark "for him" as a separate department or "shop-in-shop". Nonetheless, women and femininity are represented in many and often contradictory ways. Sexy, romantic, elegant, mysterious, sporty, girly, cosmopolitan, masculine, oriental, these are only some of the many ways of portraying feminine beauty. Men and masculinity also appear in many different versions, even if the variation is far greater for women. When it comes to packaging, a dark bottle performs masculinity, but there are also black, square bottles with fragrances "for her". Round bottles mostly perform femininity, but not always. Elves, pink and glitter package women's scents, but fragrances "for her" can also be sporty and subtly simplistic, such as the bottle for Chanel *No 5* which was originally inspired by a medicine bottle. Words and names which allude to pleasure and temptation mostly appear on women's fragrances, but then again they sometimes show on fragrances aimed at men, and become part of performing masculinity. Most stores are strictly divided into gender, but it is not so everywhere. At observations in duty free and perfume shops, I noticed several stores where it was difficult to see whether the fragrances were aimed to men or women or to all.

Unisex both transgresses and reassures this (if at times blurry) two-sex-model. Although unisex is sometimes presented as a product which is beyond gender, it is simultaneously described as something for both *men* and *women*, thereby working with those categories rather than disrupting them. Even though unisex is not so common, there are some best sellers and unisex has the advantage of being placed in double locations in stores. Sometimes unisex is brought forth as a sales argument in itself for customers who define themselves in terms of lifestyle rather than

in terms of gender, as in CK *One* (cf. Schroeder 2002) and sometimes understated as in so called craft perfumes, such as Byredo or Acqua di Parma, where the absence of gender segmentation helps giving value to the brand or scent by emphasizing the craft of perfumery rather than the image-making. Often, then, the word "unisex" is avoided.

Brands consciously invest images and goods with ambiguous meanings (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003). Imagery taken from gay visual culture is a common feature in perfume advertising, where brands such as Dolce and Gabbana and Jean-Paul Gaultier have associated their products with gay iconography, art and culture, sometimes bordering on the pornographic (Church Gibson 2004). Other brands work on ambiguity, such as Thierry Mugler, who with their scent *Angel* made a fragrance for women without floral ingredients; which usually indicates a masculine scent, and packaged it in a star-shaped blue bottle; which associates to sailors. The meaning making of perfume builds on a double logic in this sense of both asserting "for her" and "for him" and simultaneously refusing these categories by constantly challenging them and building desire around ambiguity (Partington 1996). This "obsession" with gender, sexuality and desire which the perfume world presents also needs to be related to its particular market. First, since perfume has no function in itself its meanings are, as mentioned, built around image-making. This image-making is largely structured around gender, sexuality and desire. Second, perfume is a luxury commodity. Luxury gains its value though excess and of having "the most", "the best" and "the most beautiful" of a particular good or service (Lipovetsky 1994; Twitchell 2002). In the case of perfume the overflow of gender and sexualities signifies not only ambiguity, but also luxury. Important to keep in mind is also that though feminine design features are sometimes applied on men's scents it is far more common that designs and scent notes which associate to masculinity are applied on women's scents. Thus, there is also the logic of giving femininity a higher value by associating its visual expressions with masculinity at stake in these processes.

Still, the world of perfume signals, perhaps more than anything else, diversity, ambiguity and uncertainty with regard to gender and sexuality. Feminine, as well as masculine identities are presented as something that we consumers can select and deselect. As the initial quote which presents the line of fragrances *Anthology* by Dolce and Gabbana says, contemporary consumers are constructed as competent choice makers who pick identities based on their mood of the day. Consequently, perfume packages do not so much say that femininity is represented in one particular way, as with pink flowers, as it says that femininity is represented in many different ways and that the ways in which individuals choose to perform their gender identity varies. Not only is there the, within marketing, well-used strategy to approach customers as "types", such as "the romantic", "the classy woman", "the seductress", "the sporty woman" and "the sexy, mysterious woman" or even the "unisex woman" or the "masculine woman", consumers are in-

creasingly asked to cultivate such personality types within themselves and refine them differently on different occasions. “Types” are now presented as personality traits which reside in each one of us and which can be brought out on occasion with the use of a particular fragrance. And these types sometimes transgress gender segments to further enhance the call to choice.

Partington (1996) analyses the many different representations of women and men that perfume packaging and advertising present as an expression of the inherent instability of gender constructions. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theories on gender (1990), Partington sees the diversity of gender in perfume packaging as an illustration of gender as plural, as something that cannot be fixed. The lack of coherency in representations is an expression of a lack of coherency in cultural genders and a sign that gender is performative, she argues. Though my article draws on Partington and is indebted to her analysis, I find it not only positions itself too close to the marketing messages where masculine and feminine are colours on a palette, open for anyone to pick and choose from, it by this misses out on the normative dimensions of gender representation in perfume packaging. Partington also misses the performativity of choice. The variety of representations of men and women in the perfume world represents a vision of identity as something optional; of the consumer as an individual who chooses goods to express his or her identity. This vision is itself performative. Rather than emphasizing the diversity of gender in the world of perfume I want to stress the inherent contradiction that this diversity builds on. On one hand masculinity and femininity (or unisex) are presented as options for individuals to engage in free-willingly, unattached to by structural constraints. On the other, these options are presented with gender-coded messages, on different shelves, with different sign-posts, shop spaces and with different meanings. In short, men and women are offered to choose the same, but in different locations… well, at least sometimes.

Regarding the ambiguity and diversity of gender representation I have found it fruitful to, instead of interpreting the plurality of gender representations in perfume packaging as an indication of the plurality of cultural genders, to interpret plurality as an example of “slippage” which is a key concept in Butler’s theories. Each repetition of gender offers an opportunity for transformation of meaning. Repetitive performances are not just an exact copy. There is slippage which has to be taken seriously. Each time that gender is performed, it is enacted for the very first time. Each time gender is performed on a package there is slippage of meaning which gives space for change. Perfume packaging both uses and distances itself from a simple two-sex-model. As my article will show gaps also exist between the ways packages perform gender and consumers’ interpretations of the same. Therefore, the perfume world's commitment to gender and sexuality must not only be understood as merely repeating conventions on gender, but that it also actively changes them. In constantly creating new representations of gender, the meanings of what gender is and how it is presented transform.

Shop Along in the Perfume Store

Thus, the mass market of perfume on one hand displays two clear genders, and on the other presents identities as unstable and under constant transformation. These meanings do however not say anything about how consumers understand perfume packaging in relation to gender. Whether a package says "for him", "for her", "unisex" or nothing at all does not automatically mean that consumers interpret them in that way or imply that consumption of perfume follows a simple heterosexual logic. Consumers may use perfumes in order to define, perform or play with sexual identities. Further, messages of genderlessness or ambiguity may not be understood in those ways or be consistent with acts of consumption. Cultural meaning-making does not work as a message from a sender (package) to a receiver (consumer). As mentioned, with reference to Butler, parts of the performativity of gender are processes of language mediated interpretation. This article hence aims at discussing the performativity of packaging with the use of go-along interviews. The purpose is to examine what meanings the representations of gender on packages have for the ways that gender is interpreted by some men and women in Sweden. What do they think that the packages say, and what does it mean to them? What effects do constructions of gender that we meet in the perfume world have?

Methodologically, the article builds on ethnographic go-along (Kusenbach 2003, see also Miller 1998; Bücher & Urry 2009; Arvastsson & Ehn 2009). The fieldwork was part of a larger study where 13 men and women were interviewed about packaging. I asked them to meet me at a place of their choice and ten of them chose a supermarket in a central location. With these ten informants I first walked around the supermarket with a voice recorder in my hand and discussed packaging, and afterwards walked to a perfume or beauty store to continue discussing packaging and after that sat down at a café to discuss further what we had seen. This article builds on the interviews from the perfume stores and the supermarket interviews have at large been left out of it, even though they are at times used as a point of reference in the observations and the analysis.

The informants were all between 18 and 65 years old and most of them with jobs that required some form of academic education. One was still a student; one was "between jobs", another was part time homemaker, part time working in her own business and one had a job within industrial production; another had a secretarial occupation. On the whole there was a slight overrepresentation of people with long academic education but with low incomes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in detail.

Walking with informants is a way of not just observing what they do, but to experience an environment and see things together sometimes for the first time (Bäckman 2009). Thus, we analyzed the meanings of packaging together and performed a visual analysis there and then. I was, as the researcher, not the only one

who analyzed. Visiting the shop environments for the purpose of discussing packaging made it necessary to think about packages in more general ways; reflect upon the packages that were there, how they were placed, made to look appealing and intended to attract consumers. During the sit down interview afterwards, the discussions were often even more general and included packages that we did not see there and then.

Some of the informants guided me through the shops and showed me packages that they found interesting, while during some interviews I took more of the role as guide, asked them what they would normally buy and then to comment on what we saw. Some did their regular purchases in the shops that we went to; others chose the particular sites because of their location. While the supermarket was a familiar place to them all, the beauty store was only for some. Many of the men, especially, seemed "lost" in the perfume store and did not have so much to say, while some of the women (though not all) really enjoyed going around the store, looking at and touching the products and planning future purchases. The fact that I was a woman doing the interviewing also meant that some of the women could talk to me like a friend on a shopping trip while the men were in general more hesitant and unsure of what to say. At least two thirds and in some cases probably up to 90 percent of the goods on display in beauty stores have a woman as intended buyer. All the sales assistants are, with very few exceptions, women. So are the other customers. The design of the stores is worked out with a woman as intended user. Products for men often, though not always, stand out in difference. Given this, entering a store in the company of a male or female interviewee is not the same thing. It is an environment with a particular gender coding which affects the interactions. Depending upon the feminization of the field of beauty and perfume, the interviewed women were in general also more knowledgeable and experienced of this field than the men were. To beautify one's body is in many respects to make it feminine which implies that the workings of this market were in no way unfamiliar to the women, contrary they knew it all too well.

None of the participants were explicitly interested in packaging. Neither had they given any particular amount of thought to packaging in advance. I presented my study by explaining that I wanted to gain insights on cultural meanings of packages and how these matter in everyday life. I also said that I wanted to hear and learn about their own experiences and thoughts on the subject. The informants were often, not surprisingly, more interested in the contents than the packages and I sometimes (quite forcefully) pushed the discussions towards packages.

During the interviews, I asked the interviewees to describe what, in their opinions, characterizes feminine, masculine and unisex packaging respectively. I was not so interested in hearing "truths" about packaging and marketing, but rather how this made sense to them, in order to analyze the cultural interpretations and meanings of packaging. An interview situation is performative in this sense; we analyzed, but also "made" gender through the way we presented ourselves to each

other as well as to how we related ourselves to the gender segments of masculine and feminine packaging that we met in the stores. By talking about packages in terms of gender we also performed gender. The packages, along with the shop environment that they were placed in worked, as a form of trigger for gendered meaning-making. The packages and the atmosphere moved the informants (and me); had agency for how they (we) made sense of the situation.

Gender and the Art of Seduction – Mikael and Katarina

When I and Mikael, a man in his early forties, enter the perfume store he crunches his nose and says that he cannot understand how anyone can stand that smell. "They try to drug you", he says, "to make you buy". Mikael's metaphor is telling. To drug someone is to remove their active choice, take away their rationally informed decision and affect the chain of events with the use of chemical substances. In the context of consumption it relates to seduction.

The beauty chain store which we go to has the section for fragrances "for him" directly as you get into the shop; a display technique aimed at promoting and normalizing this growing market segment. Fragrances "for her" are the last stop along the aisle and in between there are a range of different cosmetic and skincare products. Mikael continues a discussion that we have had in the supermarket earlier about gendered products. He finds it ridiculous how anyone really can fall for these simple marketing techniques, think that men and women need different shower creams and that some men would not buy a white package, such as *Dove's*, only grey ones which say "for him". Packages have no significance for Mikael at all and he could not care less whether there is a picture of a man or a woman on the cover. Mikael exemplifies with different gender stereotypes that he has seen through; such as the mother doing laundry; the active boy and the passive girl; or the associations with men and technology, all common stereotypes on packaging.

Mikael does not particularly like perfume himself, not since he got into his mid-twenties, but still likes a particular fragrance from Yves Saint Laurent and explains that "it has been around forever". As we walk around in the store he points to other bottles that he says his dad used to buy. Even though Mikael does not care about packages he does have clear taste preferences. He likes square bottles, classic design, and not "jokey" ones and not gold. He is particularly hesitant to the more expressive and youthful bottles, such as *1 Million* by Paco Rabanne, *Le Male* by Jean-Paul Gaultier or *Fuel for Life* by Diesel.

When it comes to fragrances Mikael seems less inclined to dismissing gendered marketing messages and does not remark particularly on gender stereotypes. Buying fragrances "for her" for himself does not seem to have occurred to him. Mikael is not very interested in perfumes, hardly ever buys it, and choosing from the women's side would probably either require an experienced consumer with a

strong interest in the scents themselves and/ or one with the deliberate intent to cross over gender segments. Shower cream and washing powder are after all products that he buys on a regular basis. Also the perfume market has worked its meanings to build on mystery, magic and chemistry where the composition of fragrance magically awakens sexual desire in others. Such imagery is perhaps more difficult to see through for someone who is not an experienced perfume consumer.

Entering a department store beauty courtyard and adjacent fragrance room with Katarina, a woman in her mid-forties, is a very different story. Katarina instantly bursts out "oh I love this. Make-up is so much fun even though I know that it doesn't show on me". She is enthused by all the packages and products and, like Mikael, shows me things that she used to have when she was younger. These days I mostly by Lancôme, she says. She doesn't know why but has to stick to one brand. Katarina gets "obsessive" with lipstick, she says. She has bought lots of them over the years; either the ones she likes go out of stock or she happens to buy the wrong nuance. "Oh look", she says, "I have bought lots of these lipsticks because they look like ice-creams. Fruity, gorgeous colours. I could buy one right now". "I really go on how they look", she continues. "I think that is really important. I want it to feel luxurious. Oh look at these, they look gorgeous together". Suddenly she turns:

> Katarina: It also makes me feel awful.
>
> Magdalena: Why is that?
>
> Katarina: Because it is so expensive.
>
> Magdalena: You give in to a desire and regret it afterwards?
>
> Katarina: Earlier I was really bad at… When my son was younger I never bought things for myself. Everything I bought I converted into what I could have bought for him. I could have bought so and so many sweaters. I did that with everything. But now I can spend on myself again.

Katarina feels ambivalent to shopping, she tells me. She thinks that she is "smarter than this" and should not be satisfied by giving in to such temptations. She should know better than to think that consumption makes you happy:

> Katarina: I think it has to do with the way you were brought up too. My mum, she never did this. If she knew that I spend money on this she would really think that I am a complete idiot. She would. You really should see through the myth that consumption makes you happy… but sometimes I say that 'sure you can buy happiness'. Sometimes you can. I do feel happy when I bring something home… When we are finished I think I have to go on a shopping spree.

Packages thus awoke memories in both Katarina and Mikael. Katarina could hear the voice of her mum telling her not to waste/be shallow. Mikael got a glimpse of memory: dad had this. While Mikael's dad became a reference to men's consumption as something which is stable over time, as not-fashion, Katarina's mum had a message of restraint and moderation.

Mikael explained packages as unimportant, as objects whose appeal he did not want to listen too, and most certainly was not seduced by. He wanted to make active choices. He did not like being drugged. He could see through gender stereotypes. To be able to see through gender stereotypes, for Mikael, worked as a way to enact rationality. Stereotype images were, for him, not rational. He saw stereotype images as a translation of the manipulative forces of commerce, which the contents do not correspond with.

Katarina who initially related beauty products to herself and to the improvement of her own body, contrary explained packages as objects which she wanted to guide her. She wanted the products "to sell", to convince her to buy them with the use of techniques of seduction. She described her consumption as out of control. She said that she buys obsessively without knowing why and ends up with the wrong goods which in turn make her buy more. In Katarina's telling, agency was with the packages, products, ad campaigns and desires or passions. She however also thought that temptation should not be given into too easily.

Shopping for Passion: Peter and Anne

Peter, a man in his late forties and Anne, a woman in her early twenties were of the interviewees the two who were the most regular perfume consumers. If Peter enacted a form of masculinity informed by the cultural (and male) figure "the connoisseur" and used facts and knowledge to make sense of his perfume consumption (cf. Belk 1995), Anne went into dialogue with products, brands and campaigns and related them to herself as a person.

Peter had an interest in fashion in general, was careful with what he bought and said that he was "hung up" on scents. He did not care for the perfume chain store that we browsed through and did his shopping in more exclusive stores or on the internet. When I ask about packages and bottles Peter, much like Mikael, says at first that they have no meaning. "It is 100% the contents that count". Bottles have to be functional, he says and that he treasures simplicity and discretion. The glass should be see through and have no visible brand names. Simplicity sends a signal that the contents are "potent", he says. "It makes me curious". Potency refers to the fragrance's ability to perform, to be functional. Simplicity triggers curiosity in Peter, the bottle works, in a way, as a market device which sets a disposition, curiosity, into movement, a disposition which can work as a trigger to buy (Cochoy 2012). Peter's remarks show how conventions which convey masculinity are designed to work to persuade customers to shop. Curiosity is also made sense of in relation to gender. Just the same, it is the bottle that is given agency. The bottle makes Peter act in particular ways. Peter however describes himself as a subject in control who uncovers the secrets of the fragrances; he is not at all seduced. He shows me a bottle that he likes and explains that it was introduced in 1965. Just

like Mikael then Peter brings up "tradition" as meaningful in relation to masculine packaging. The fragrance, *Eau Sauvage* by Dior is manly he says:

> Magdalena: Why is it manly? Facetted glass, that is not really that common on men's scents, is it?
>
> Peter: It is a scent that lasts [over time]. It doesn't need to be told as part of any life-style, if you wear it you will speak for yourself. You don't need to [tell any other story in the marketing]. It signals quality consciousness.
>
> Magdalena: It becomes invisible?
>
> Peter: Well it… it is subtle. It doesn't stink, that's cheap. You sense it… vaguely.

For Peter, who finds packaging unimportant, it is the scent rather than the package that is manly and he actually tries to define a masculine character in the smell and interestingly enough he does not form his characterization in relation to scent notes. Peter's emphasis of the function of the scent and the meaninglessness of packaging can be seen as an enactment of masculinity. The lack of lifestyle advertising, confidence in quality as well as subtlety conveys manliness for Peter and he stresses that you never see ads for this scent; it does not need to be advertised. Like the other interviewed men, Peter does not like being told "who he is" and he explicitly connects the absence of (lifestyle) advertising to manliness. Whatever the packages whisper, Peter does not want to say that he can hear it.

We continue along the "for her" section and Peter is not impressed. The hazy pastel shimmer makes the products drown, he thinks. Everything looks the same and if he was to buy his wife a present he would not know how to choose. The greys and blacks "for him" he finds are more eye-catching which he thinks may have to do with him "being a man".

Like Peter, though reversed, Anne says that men's scents look boring. She is hesitant to men consuming too much beauty care and she tells me that she sees skin care products for men as something strange. "When a guy stands before the mirror and puts on more cream than the girl, that feels weird", she says. While "guys" should consume less beauty products than "girls" to remain masculine, they should according to Anne not go as far as to consume nothing at all. Too much product consumption risks overthrowing gender relations, but the right amount helps bringing out a masculine identity, she finds:

> Anne: A guy who doesn't… who washes himself with [unbranded] and scentless soap and does not use any male deodorant or perfume… a lot of his identify, or attitude disappears I think. It is much easier to be attracted to someone who smells good, even if his looks maybe are not right [that is, is not physically attractive]. It really does a lot. I really think it is important that guys wear it too.

As I and Anne continue along the counters of Clarins and Clinique she explains that she does not like products with red packaging. Red is for older women, she feels, and she is not "drawn to" it. Since she is young, she does not feel that these packages speak to her, pull her to them. Like Katarina, Anne explains that she really goes on packaging and she calls herself a visual person. She explains how

J'Adore by Dior became her favorite perfume. The images and ads looked so great and the model in the pictures is beautiful, she says. When she first saw the ad she decided to love the fragrance, and it is still her favorite. Sometimes fragrances do not smell the way they look and you get disappointed but this was not the case with *J'Adore*. Anne has also made the seasonal launches of Escada's summer fragrances into a tradition. She waits for the launch of the next season and buys it regardless of smell. She knows that it always will be good, but it is exciting to wait for it.

Peter linked visual perception to gender. His choice of words was more distanced and did not involve him as a person. Like Mikael he did not put his interest in scents in terms of being seduced, even though there was no difference per se to Anne's more passionate descriptions of perfume consumption. Whereas Peter presented himself as liking to make informed decisions about perfume consumption, Anne presented her consumption as initiated by the seductive forces of commerce. Peter enacted rationality by saying that packages make no difference. Anne enacted the role of seduced by stressing package more than contents. When Anne spoke of potential male partners what she said was very similar to what she said about bottles and packages. It was someone/something to be seduced "by", not someone to seduce.

The Choice of Simplicity

But what is it like for consumers who do not care so much for fragrances? Who are not under the influence of a passionate interest? What do they pick up on of all the things that the bottles try to say and what guides their actions?

Fredrik, a man in his mid-twenties, and Patrik, a man in his mid-thirties, are both hesitant and unsure about what to think and say about fragrances and their packaging. Fredrik is however quite experienced of skincare products since he, he tells me, has suffered from acne. He talks about the importance of trying many different products to find what suits you. When it comes to fragrance he is "boring" he says. He does not use much, though he likes to have something nice for when he is going out in the evening. His attitude towards the consumption of scent can be described with "I probably should…" that is he feels that he should consume more, but is not really interested. Scenting the body with branded fragrance is given meaning by him in relation to "going out"; part of preparing the body in order to participate in social acts of entertainment or of the seduction of potential partners. He does not buy without "needing" a new one and does not like to spend money on unnecessary packaging. Like for Peter and Mikael it is "the scent that matters". Compared to Anne above, he does not speak of being seduced by women and women with women's fragrances on, or by fragrances worn by women (or on the shelf) for that matter; he speaks of scents as means of his seduction.

Patrik has a similar approach. Knowing what we are in the store to discuss, he points to a bottle that he says "feels masculine".

> Patrik: Rectangular, square-shaped. Nearly twice as tall as wide. It feels masculine.
>
> Magdalena: What makes it feel masculine?
>
> Patrik: The square shape. The blue colour. The silver details that are nice and stylish.

Patrik likes what he calls "simplicity" in package design, something he has in common with all the interviewed men. Some of the women also bring it up. Nina, a woman in her late 40s, likes simplicity too and has on our previous walk through a supermarket described herself as a critical consumer who thinks a lot about what she buys, who is a vegetarian and tries to only buy ecological products, but also that she is "lazy" and wants shopping and cooking to be easy. For her, simplicity signifies moderation.

Although simplicity seems to be a cherished characteristic by both men and women the meaning is a somewhat different. They all tend to treasure simplicity in relation to the market segment they identify with. "Simplicity" in the sense lack of décor is a common way of packaging masculinity. Though "simplicity" is also featured on women's scents it is one of the least visible designs. For Nina, then, simplicity creates a distance to most of the packages which try to lure her, she finds, to buy them, while for Patrik, simplicity puts him on the same level as the most prominent taste ideal for men's packages.

When we enter the perfume store I ask Nina to comment on characteristics of packages "for him" and "for her". She points to colours and shapes but does not seem to find the topic particularly interesting. She is critical to branding, she says and ironizes over lifestyle marketing, so it is not only the men who bring this up. She is not a perfume person, she continues. Perfumes give her headaches. Even still, she says, she likes to treat herself with a nice scent or a luxurious cream every now and then, thereby repeating a frequent way of promoting women's beauty consumption; as a treat. We look at anti-wrinkle creams together and she remarks that there are so many strange words on the packages that you do not understand. There are many brands and many choices; she just does not have energy to learn about them. She does not care. Nina's refusal to choose is somewhat ironic on this market where so much effort has been invested in presenting customers with different choices. For Nina, choice seems like work, an effort not worth spending. Her refusal to choose can also be interpreted as a refusal to engage in the performances of femininity which are displayed on the perfume market; a refusal to listen to the packages and to engage in their game.

Femininity in Excess

Gunnel, a woman in her early sixties, also elaborates on the difficulty in choice brought up by Nina. Like Nina, Gunnel relates choice to herself; she does not

want to invest the required energy in order to learn all you need to be able to consume these things and she is not drawn to them. By not "being drawn to" the goods Gunnel seems to mean that she not only resists their plea to consumption; she does not want to engage in identity work with the images of femininity which the ads present. While Gunnel says that she does like to browse in stores she finds the abundance is too much for her and makes her feel sick at times and illustrates the contradictory predicament of consumer society brought up by many of the interviewed women. It is fun, but it is bad. It is good, but it should not be. Not only is it hard to choose, she find that images and products create expectations and demands on a glamorous appearance and lifestyle that she cannot recognize from her youth. She finds it difficult to identify with the images and with the luxurious lifestyle they promote and she does not think that she should have to. Like Nina, she refuses to be seduced.

When we look at a glass bottle in the shape of a snow globe she is "not fascinated", she says. To Gunnel luxury packages signify wasteful consumption. The packages speak of a femininity that Gunnel cannot identify with; a femininity which builds on glamour, surface, excess and abundance. When I ask her to characterize packages "for him" she says that they are "more robust" and more "square-shaped"; simultaneously by default defining femininity as ephemeral, excessive and round-shaped. Masculinity is not understood in terms of excess and is not presented in that way.

Falling in Love with a Bottle

Susanne, a woman in her early fifties, likes shopping. It is fun to buy and to have stuff such as clothes and chocolates, she says. Her finances do however not allow her to indulge very often; again it is a woman who brings up themes such as indulgence, passions, frivolity, restrain and guilt. Only the interviewed women spoke of their ambivalence to shopping and of the play between submission and control. None of the men said that they bought things they did not want and need. Susanne would shop more if she could, but at the same time she also thought that it is bad to consume and she would like to have a "shopping-free year". Just like Katarina, she found that shopping is bad really but liked it anyway. "I love this", she says, and picks up a package. "It has a figure in the lid, it is extra luxurious. You could by these things just for the packages. You can have it in your handbag and take it up and look at it"

> Susanne: I nearly feel like buying one of these, a lipstick, 265 sek. I will definitively buy one after the interview is over. Oh this scented candle smells divine. Terribly unnecessary, 400 sek, but so much fun! Incredible! Smells lovely and such a nice container. You can keep it when the candle has burnt out. Oh look at this; you get a whole bag with lots of stuff. Little things oh look.

As we walk around the store Susanne continues to be enthused by the products and their packages and bursts out on occasion "Oh Chanel, I used to buy that. Oh I love the smell. It is so fruity" or "Oh I love perfume bottles. I would keep this for a hundred years. You can't use it for anything so I don't know why". She associates to her youth, just like many of the other of the interviewees in their middle ages; she tells me what she used to buy and lets the sight of the bottles and packages wake memories in her of how she used to feel about the fragrances.

> Magdalena: You wouldn't buy it now?
>
> Susanne: I could if I felt that I could afford it, but I wouldn't care as much about the bottle any more. When I was young I could nearly fall in love with a bottle (laughs). I never thought of it then. I still have some bottles that I have kept.

When we get ready to leave the store Susanne remarks that she feels a certain disappointment. At a second glance there was nothing she felt like buying. Some of the perfume bottles looked cheap and not so luxurious. She was expecting to get seduced by the bottles, packages and images, but this did not happen.

Susanne's love for a bottle is interesting to compare with how Victor, a man in his mid-twenties, spoke of a similar feeling. A package that many commented upon was a bestseller, the torso-shaped *Le Male* by Jean-Paul Gaultier. Victor was however one of few who said that he liked it, but unlike Susanne or Katarina who spoke enthusiastically about the gorgeous shapes and colours of packages they liked, Victor said that he likes *Le Male* because they (the company) have managed to "do their thing", that is to follow their brand strategy through. He liked it as a marketing message. He did not speak of the bottle in terms of being seduced by it, or falling in love with it, in fact, he did not even relate it to himself; he put a business perspective on it. Victor specifically pointed out how he resents lifestyle marketing and "hates" when he gets personalized offers in the mail based on other consumer interests that he has and which a marketer has figured out that he should also like. Victor's ways of making meaning in the realms of rational thinking, such as pointing to the marketing principles behind a fragrance rather than relating to himself, his emotions or his own body can be interpreted as a performance of control and masculinity.

Passion and Gender

In this article I have used go-along interviews to explore sense-making processes of gender and perfume packaging. By walking around in stores and looking at and discussing packaging, cultural understandings of seduction, choice, consumption, taste and gender were brought to the fore.

Packages "do" gender in many ways, they make statements about what constitutes femininity and masculinity, they make gender into a liable market segment and they are interpreted by shoppers in gender terms. The women enacted femi-

ninity by placing themselves in a relationship to packaging where they were the seduced part. They seemingly placed agency in the packages and enacted a role of passive femininity, seduced by a (male?) bottle. How should this performance of a seduced woman be understood? Where bottles were even described as objects to fall in love with and where passive forms were used to talk about this attraction?

Women's consumption has historically been associated with irrationality and inabilities to resist temptation and desires. Many scholars have pointed to the great department stores of the 1800s and the contemporary discussions of these as symbols of frivolous, excessive but also dangerous consumption of which women were not in control, but subjected to by the forces of commerce. Seduction played a key role in the relationship between on one hand women and on the other goods and shop owners, as well as the emerging fields of marketing and market research, resulting in a sexual desire for goods and objects (Abelson 1989; Felski 1996; Radner 1995; Nava 1995; Ganetz 2005; Gundle & Castelli 2007).

Whereas there is an understanding of seduction in terms of passive (seduced woman) – active (male seducer), feminist scholars have also reworked this reasoning by pointing to alternative ways of understanding women's concern with consumption. Felski (1995) sees the expansion of consumption as a crucial feminist issue in terms of its "preoccupation with women's pleasure" (64). Woman in the 1800s, herself being an object and tradable good, could only be a desiring subject in relation to other objects, Felski argues and sees this relation as potentially subversive of heterosexual norms, which is why women's desire for goods has caused moral controversies (see also Radner 1995).

Several of the women spoke of goods in terms of attraction and desire which poses perfume consumption as a sphere in which it is culturally acceptable to speak of women's desire and pleasure. Even though the women located agency in packages and marketing, by dwelling in indulgence and luxury they still appeared as active and desiring sexual subjects in relation to these goods and which makes pleasure into an activity suitable for women to engage in. The pleasures associated with consumption were however often accompanied with requirements for restraint and feelings of guilt, thereby exposing cultural ambivalence to women's desire; particularly desire generated outside of heterosexuality.

Some of the men too spoke of the attraction to goods, although this was made with reference to the goods' abilities to perform particular functions. The men enacted masculinity by placing themselves as beings in control of the act of seduction/purchase. Enacting rationality works a way to avoid feminization in this feminized environment. The subtle communication of store design, images and packages acted to make the men explain packages in this way.

By understanding agency as located in the packages, the women were expecting to be seduced, thereby enacting a traditional heterosexual role of a "passive" woman. Agency, the way it is generally understood, is not with the person who is drawn to something but with the one who does the drawing, that is, in this case,

the package. The women did however not only talk about the agency of goods in relation to themselves. Consumer goods were also understood as having agency for the construction of masculinity in male partners.

To be seduced is generally understood as more passive than to seduce which is active. But why? Considering the gendered relations of seduction the definition of "to seduce" as active and "to be seduced" as passive also implies a gendered relation to agency. In forming a theory of passion and agency, Francois Cooren (2010) defines passion as something which leads or drives someone to do what she is doing, because of what animates or moves her. Etymologically passion is related to suffering, emotion, affection, desire and (deep) interest, all forces which, in the view of Cooren, have in common the idea that someone appears to be acted upon, to undergo or be animated by something which can be considered either positive or negative. Etymologically, passion relates to passivity as does action to activity. Agency, according to Cooren, should not be reduced to a performance intentionally accomplished by a human being. Artifacts, predispositions, technologies and architectural elements all do things in our daily lives. Actions cannot, he suggests, be positioned as the ultimate origin of what is happening in a given interaction, because participants are themselves moved or acted upon by specific reasons. Agency is not only a property of humans but also of things and processes such as passions, emotions, statuses, norms, rules and values among many more. For Cooren this means that any action involves passion; our actions are guided by flows coming from different directions and which animate us, make us act.

Even though the women located the agency of seduction in packages it did not mean that they took on a passive role of consumption. To let oneself be seduced by someone else, be that a person or an object, is not, with Cooren's theory, any more passive than seducing since all actions are under the influence of other beings; human or non-human. This means that the passion for fragrances is in no way more passive than the seemingly active approach of questioning stereotypes, of disregarding marketing or of presenting oneself as an actor of active choices. These actions are equally animated by the flows of passion which guide and precede them.

Perfume is a consumer good with no real function; its purpose of concealing bodily odors has long since been replaced with soap, deodorants, shampoos and running water. Realizing this condition, marketers and manufacturers have placed the meanings of fragrances in the realms of seduction; senses, sensuality, emotions, gender and sexuality. However, in spite of the recognition of the potential for expansion that including men in this market brings, manufacturers of perfume have not quite known how to speak to men with the language of seduction.

Traditional connotations between women, perfume and pleasure have meant that women in general have a higher understanding of the language of perfume; the fact that they speak of being attracted and seduced by bottles shows that they

have understood this world; they are supposed to be seduced, that is what the packages say. The women have it figured out just right; perfume is all about desire, it does not fulfill any needs. On this market it is rational to understand consumption in terms of pleasure, irrational to understand perfume in terms of needs.

What about those women who refused to be seduced? Their accounts work as an illustration of gender constructions as ongoing and performative. Gender conventions are never exhaustive and do not fix the actions or the processes of interpretation of all human subjects. Those women's refusal also illustrates that the actions of individual men and women are not fully determined by the meanings communicated by the market, but created through ongoing negotiations between people, processes and objects.

Perfume is a market that has mainly targeted women, a condition which has changed during the past two decades and which causes disruption in the representations of seduction. Whichever way this market continues to represent seduction and gender remains to be seen and points to, as maintained by Partington (1996), the need for gender researchers to engage in the pleasures of consumption.

Magdalena Petersson McIntyre is Associate Professor in Ethnology and researcher at the Centre for Consumer Science, University of Gothenburg. Her research interests are within gender and work, fashion and consumption. She is currently working with three research projects; one on commercial objects designed with a gender perspective; one on aesthetic labour in retailing and one on digital consumption. E-mail: magdalena.petersson-mcintyre@cfk.gu.se

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