

Clemson University

The Exploitation of Female Bodies in The Fragrance Industry

Skyler Rafferty
Women's Gender & Sexuality
Professor Cooper
3 May 2022

Sexual exploitation is defined as “the practice by which a person achieves sexual gratification, financial gain, or advancement through the abuse or exploitation of a person’s sexuality by abrogating that person’s human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical or mental well-being.” (Hughes 36.) In the modern-day world of advertising, the sexualized female figure has been used to sell products. In particular, many brands have been called out for being over erotic, such as popular brand - Dolce & Gabbana, who released a controversial ad in 2007 of a woman being held down and a group of well-dressed men watching it happen. The depiction of this advertisement clearly shows no correlation to the fragrance being sold but takes away the dignity of women who saw this advertisement. The history of advertising has utilized extremely sexual imagery to sell products and or services. In this essay, I will be looking at three advertisements and comparing it to theorists from our class and outside sources to conclude the portrayal of women in the fragrance industries’ advertisements. Fragrance companies take the risk and have been known to continually push the boundaries by exploiting the female body in their advertisements. With much exposure of suggestive advertisements throughout time and the exposé of women, society has become normalized to perceive the offense of women admissible.

Female stereotypes in the fragrance industries’ advertisements create a manner and image that views women as nothing but sexual objects. This leads to the undervalue of women as a group. In class, we read Jamaica Kincaid’s *Girl*, which exemplifies themes of serving men, body image issues, and future violence. These themes are prevalent in today’s society when looking at the fragrance industry’s advertisements. Throughout the reading, the girl is told that to be feminine often results to embrace modesty while having good manners over honesty. The girl learns that women must be cautious not to show too much of her body or to talk to the wrong

boys. In *Girl*, there are clear warnings about becoming a slut and obtaining this horrible public reputation. This fear of shame of becoming a “slut” rather than letting the girl express her sexuality shows how young girls are conditioned by society. Two quotes stuck out to me while reading: first, “This is how you set a table for tea, this is how you set a table for dinner”, second “This is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so they don’t have a crease”, (Kincaid 320). Both these responsibilities of the girl are evidently seen as women’s roles and that when you become a woman you are expected to know how to please a man. All communities since the beginning of time are accustomed to the idea that women are inferior to men, so why is that? Another reading done in class was Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. The main argument in Beauvoir’s book is that women have generally always been oppressed by men, and have always been related to an object, or the other. “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir 4), further explaining the idea of women as inessential beings. Simone de Beauvoir explains that womanhood is intrinsically tied to femininity while sex is not the same as gender. “The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history” (Beauvoir 5), says Beauvoir when describing the bond of oppression women are faced with. Women remains the victim of what was shaped by nature and society and the future for women can be opened with no set destiny. Simone de Beauvoir continues by saying the woman is used for three functions as the wife, the mother, and the entertainer. These roles take the freedom, choice, and desire from women and bound them to the concept of female dependence. Coming back to Kincaid, the girl is taught from a young age that body image is important and vital for living following the societal norms. “This is how to behave in the presence of a man” (Kincaid 321). This further shows how a woman should be placed perfectly in society. Girls learn at a very early age to spend time and money striving to achieve the perfect look and feeling ashamed when failure

structs. Fragrance ads sell more than just the product, they sell images and concepts of a life to be desired which is why the industry has gotten away with the theme of sexual exploitation for so long. The fragrance industry creates a story of erotic longings that their audience wishes to have.

Advertisements for the fragrance industry have typically always been about sex, desire, and scent. Fragrance has a deep connection to our skins, people naturally spray the scent across their necks, chests, wrists and sometimes even behind the ear. These spots are often associated with points of seduction, so sex is naturally everywhere when it comes to the fragrance industry, and it does in fact show. Fragrance is known to be a huge factor and creates a voluntarily bond to sex. The fragrance industry is estimated to be worth nearly ninety-two billion dollars by the year 2024, with about eight hundred million dollars of that going towards marketing and advertisements each year on billboards, magazines, commercials and samples. Millions of dollars each year are used to create the most objectifying advertisements selling their products and what most people think of as soft pornography. “Sex and advertising go hand in hand together” (Reichert 20) says Reichert in his *Erotic History of Advertising*, explaining that the two are a powerful combination. Advertising is the most productive and extensive forms of communication in the world as it bombards almost every individual’s home through magazines, television commercials, online sources, the radio, and most obvious the mail. Not only fragrance, but many other industries purposely link their products with sex because of humans’ biology, “we can’t help but be drawn to it.” (Reichert 22). In today’s advertising environment, creating long lasting impressions and engaging the attention of customers is not an easy task, so the sexual content is what draws consumers in. Almost all perfume and cologne ads create a sexual

fantasy that entails a man and women in a sexual manner, further suggesting the correlation of sex and scent while linking the products to romance but all the while dehumanizing women and making the model and women seeing the advert as less empowered.



Figure 1: Tom Ford's Black Orchid Perfume Ad

Although it has been successful for the industry of fragrance to push the boundaries of the misrepresentation women as their marketing strategies, society has noticed and wants a change for the future of women in advertising. Despite the gains

of the women's movement,

advertising images have only gotten worse as time progresses. For example, in Tom Ford's Black Orchid campaign promoting the new perfume for women, this was the advertisement published in 2015 which sparked controversy as the billboard was put up in London. Disturbed parties complained that the advert was so sexually explicit, degrading, and too provocative for the young to be seeing on a busy street corner. Fortunately, the United Kingdom has advertising standards so the advertisement should have been taken down, but the EASA ruled that the models pose was in fact "sensual and sexually suggestive, but that is not sexually explicit". The advertisement was to stay, and the decision was made by male chairman, Guy Parker, the chairman of the European advertising standards alliance. This advertisement has barely any connection with the Tom Ford perfume. The perfume bottle is out of focus as viewers can see the model is the main emphasis. Furthermore, this advertisement suggests how women should look

and what the ideal feminine beauty should look like. The beauty shown in the advert is completely unachievable and unrealistic even for the model, as the power of editing and photoshop. The normalization of objectifying women in advertisements effects women's self-esteem but also allows for an environment of violence to formulate. The advertising industry is so negligent in their obligations because of the glorification of violence against women. In figure 2, we see American rapper P. Diddy, starring in an advertisement for his fragrance brand. Immediately the ad was banned by the Advertising Standards Authority for being too sexually explicit for the audiences it could have been seen by, but the video version commercial ad was still released, and controversy arose. In the advert seen below, the model is being pushed up



against a wall with her eyes closed, and her right arm sticking up to push the rapper away. Rapper P. Diddy is depicted behind her, kissing her neck, and holding onto her tightly. Again, the actions seen in this advertisement seem to have no correlation with the product the company is trying to sell. The phrase in the middle of the ad ironically says, "Life without passion in unforgivable", but the depiction looks more as if nonconsensual sex is more unforgivable than this so-called passion.

Figure 2: P. Diddy's Unforgivable Fragrance

The rapper and the Ester Lauder Global Brand president, John Desmey, at the time stated that when women wear Unforgivable, they will have a slice of the Sean Combs (P. Diddy). This negative distorted advertisement eroticizes violence while letting people who view it deem it as

the norm in society. This advert goes on to further exemplify toxic masculinity in relation to violence. Boys and young men who see these advertisements objectifying women so frequently may think it is typical and can be very capable of acting the same way too. Advertisements in all industries like to make the man be in an elevated and higher positions than women who are portrayed as something just to be gazed upon. In *Girl*, “This is how to bully a man, this is how a man bullies you” (Kincaid 321), further describing how the relationships between women and men (rendering to the mother) are illustrated by tension and control. The P. Diddy ad shows a strong tie to this quote due to the way the women and him are positioned and photographed. “There is by now fairly convincing evidence that exposure to sexual violence through media is linked to greater tolerance, or even approval of violence” (Wood 38), the advertisement for this fragrance is outright disturbing. Young girls, boys, women and men seeing this advert have now connected and accepted that the violence displayed is a part of ‘normal’ relationships and is natural in the idea of romance and sex. The most shocking is that nearly eighty percent of men who have admitted to acts that meet the serious definition of rape did not actually believe they have committed rape. This is because of the normalization of violence against women in today’s society regardless of which industry is producing these advertisements, the exploitation and subordination of women still exists.

The early days of fragrance advertising was a messy time and place for male-female gender role distinction within advertisements. “All industry experts predicted that as sex roles evolved, with women entering the workforce and pushing for equality, sexual appeals casting the woman as a sex object would decrease” (Reichert 256). In this time period, there were mass amounts of women obtaining their degree, and going to work, discarding the ‘housewife’ role forever. Luckily in 1979, it was reported that only twenty eight percent of fragrances based their marketing strategies on sex, but it was still present in many ads during this time. Continuing, nothing has changed since the beginning of fragrance advertisements time. In the beginning of the 21st century, the theme of sexual attraction and the fragrances alleged ability to “draw people closer, to turn them on, or even to enhance the odds of sexual outcomes” (Reichert 272), was aimed at an even younger target market. The strategy was to sell the scents and push for a life of



Figure 3: Macy's Perfume Ad 2006

desire and lust to a younger market so they would be ‘hooked’. These fragrance advertisements suggest the way relationships among people to reinforce societal structures and keep the hierarchy between males and females. In Figure 3, an audience can see a young family. This advertisement represents more than that though as it displays clear gender roles with the much random quote in the middle reading “First Class Seat”, and the happening that the woman is paired with a newborn child suggesting

the woman’s role as caretaker and mother. In this ad, the husband can be seen carrying the child on his shoulders, driving for a center of attention to prove that men can take on a woman’s roles also. Additionally, another point of this advert is that way the woman is dressed; her shoulders

are exposed, and she is wearing a white camisole, while the man is covered up, but the way he is glaring down at her chest further continues the point that women are just objects of desire for men's viewing and sexual pleasure. Macy's Ad does not stop there, as its "aimed at women to stress looking good and doing things to please others... how to be me, only better..." (Wood 35), the women pictured as the mother of this family is beautiful and young with curly long hair, and a wrinkle-less face. But in reality, what if a woman did not look entirely like the picture-perfect mother in this perfume and cologne advert? Constantly, there is a clear emphasize of the pleasing of others, especially men. The message is encouraging the idea with a threat that if a woman fails to look good, her man might and can leave.

In conclusion, fragrance advertisements since the beginning of time have made it a selling point to exploit and take away the power and dignity of women across the world. Most importantly, is the fact that sell does in fact sell fragrances. Fragrance advertising was founded on the acts of sex and seduction and is still known as today as one of the most erotic beauty industries. According to many marketing strategists for the fragrance industry, perfume and cologne have a positive correlation with the sexuality of its consumers, making it admissible to create violent and objectifying advertisements of women, in hopes to sell their product. The fragrance industry is a competitive trade so staying in the public eye may be considered a hard task, but the ultra-sexualizing and pressure to be the picture-perfect women does not fit into today's society anymore. Advertisements for the fragrance industry must be transformed because the mistreatment and abuse of women has nothing and had never had anything to do with the actual scent of the said fragrance.

Works Cited

- D. M. Hughes, "The Internet and sex industries: partners in global sexual exploitation," in *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 35-42, Spring 2000, doi: 10.1109/44.828562.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex Introduction* .
<https://www.sjsu.edu/people/cynthia.rostankowski/courses/HUM2BS14/s0/The-Second-Sex-Introduction.pdf>.
- Croydon, Emma. "The Sexualisation of Fragrance Advertisement." *THE SEXUALISATION OF FRAGRANCE ADVERTISEMENT*, Blogger, 4 June 2019,
<http://emmacroydon.blogspot.com/2019/01/the-sexualisation-of-fragrance.html>.
- Kilbourne, Jean. *Media Education Foundation*. <https://www.mediaed.org/discussion-guides/Killing-Us-Softly-4-Discussion-Guide.pdf>.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. "Girl." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 19 June 1978,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1978/06/26/girl>.
- Reichert, Tom. *The Erotic History of Advertising*. Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Shikongo, Ester. *Sexualisation of the Feminine in Perfume Advertisements in Vogue and Her Magazines from December 2017- December 2018: A Semiotic and Poststructural Feminist Approach*. 2020.
- Wood, Julia. *Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender*.
<https://www1.udel.edu/comm245/readings/GenderedMedia.pdf>.