

Colour and scent

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FOREWORD

We would like to present our research on the relationship between colour, the sense of smell and the communication of scent in advertising. Focusing on this topic is in line with the latest trends of cognitive sciences which derive knowledge from material experience, giving more importance to the body and its sensations, (E. Fiorani 2000), reflections which are finding widespread application even application in advertising.

Today advertising is using strategies linked to what is known as “sensory marketing”, which currently represents the most advanced area of persuasive selling techniques, in which the emotional aspect becomes the determining factor. In this way advertisers try to combat the boring monotony and the repetitiveness of proposals, stimulating the consumer’s imagination with a combination of word, image, colour, sound and smell, using multiple means and ways of stimulating and involving the senses in a hedonistic polysensory form of consumption. (Luzzatto, Pompas, 2001).

Bearing in mind these considerations we tried to find the answers to a number of questions: how does perfume advertising behave, given that it has to overcome the impossibility of describing a fragrance, and above all how does it behave in the press where it cannot use sound or movement? Is it possible to communicate in any meaningful way the sensation of the scent of a perfume – volatile, immaterial, without form or body – together with the concept and style of the Company, perhaps leveraging off colour? How does print advertising manage to evoke visual and olfactory synaesthetics with an image and at the same time be so successful at imprinting it in our memories? Our paper aims to show how colour plays an important role in communication strategy in three phases:

- A quality-quantity survey, on a homogeneous sample of 172 people, which identified the constant association between colour and the idea created by a scent.
- An analysis of the use of colours in advertising campaigns (Autumn/Winter 04-05) for perfumes for women made by some of the most representative Italian Fashion Houses, which focused on the dominant colour of the image, of its bottle and of its packaging.
- Verifying the correspondence between the image evoked by the colour, the olfactory qualities of the product and the mission of the Fashion House.

2. LINGUISTIC COINCIDENCES

We have observed that the close relationship between colour and perfume is also demonstrated by the fact that both use a similar language: in fact just as colour does not possess its own precise terminology but has to resort to invented cromonyms or alphanumeric symbols (R. Cardona, 1985) in order to be described, so also does olfactory perception defy objective description in communication in terms of a shared vocabulary (M. Schleidt, 1980; A. Le Guérér, 1998). Also the variety and complexity of smells does not figure in the field of semantics and is often forced to fall back on natural terms of reference or on other sensorial registers: we talk about scents being warm, dark, light, sharp, strident, vibrant etc. (J. S. Jellinek, 1988). Strassman writes (1992) that colours, perfumes and sounds have always sought for laws of composition that are in harmony and in common, as language itself confirms when it defines colours in terms of “timbre”, perfume fragrances as “notes” and musical sounds as “colour”.

3. SENSORY SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Smell and sight, perfume and colour, share certain characteristics and are distinguished by others. The olfactory system, like that of colour, relates to the right side of the brain in a perceptive-emotional situation that provokes instantaneous reactions (M. Schleidt, 1988). They both belong to the world of biology and culture: they express individual personality, are associated with emotional states, they provoke instinctive attraction or instant repulsion, they are instruments used for knowing, they express the inclination to get together and are subject to the norms of behaviour and communication. In both, the perception of a complex smell and the perception of colour a “nose” or a

colourist is able to distinguish between the various components, while the consumer perceives only the final result, in its visual or olfactory context. Just as a shade of colour is the result of a mix of different tones, so in order to make a perfume various perfumed oils are mixed together so as to obtain a harmony of scents that cancel out the aromas and the properties of the individual scented substances, in order to create a specific fragrance (G. H. Dodd, 1988). However while colour induces an immediate elaboration of the present, because it becomes linked to the environmental context in its spatial-temporal manifestation, scent for the intensity of its ephemeral duration, the memory of which lasts for ever, has above all a strong evocative capacity and gives rise to an olfactory memory that becomes part of our past (Strassmann, 1992).

4. COLOUR OF SUBSTANCES, COLOUR OF FRAGRANCES

The raw materials used in the formulation of perfumes recall the colours that denote them: sandalwood, cinnamon and willow bark call up warm woody tones of brown; jasmine rose and almond remind us of the sweet qualities of their petals; mint, thyme and basil are as fresh as the green of their leaves and as balsamic as the atmosphere of the woods. Is there then interference between the sweet-smelling substance, its colour and the figurative representation of the same?

5. RESEARCH

I scent bouquets that the Fashion Houses have created by their expert perfumiers, are communicated visually to the public through the bottle, the packaging and the advertising campaign. In all these components colour also plays a primary role in the definition of the style and in evoking the qualities of the scent. In the research "Colour Communication" conducted in the year 2003–2004 by the students of the course for "Fashion Colour Consultants" (created and designed by us) on the use of colour in press advertising, one of the results that emerged was the desire of the Companies involved to make the message a prevalently sensual and erotic one, placing greater emphasis of the emotional quality of the message rather than on the intrinsic qualities of the product. In the subsequent survey, "Colour-Fragrances", carried out in 2004-2005, we aimed to identify the correlation between a single colour and a type of fragrance, checking statistically the sensory associations that certain colours arouse, in order to devise a type of communication able to strengthen the organoleptic indications, through a correct use of colour. We then decided on the methodology to adopt, excluding the sniff-test immediately because the sensory association takes place by the consumer observing an image with no smell.

In order to colour the design to go round the edge of an empty transparent perfume bottle we gave out 8 coloured pencils (so that at the visual and lexical level the colours were identified as representative of the corresponding vast areas of colour: yellows, pinks, oranges, etc.): yellow, pink, orange, red, mauve, blue, green, brown. We then gave 8 definitions of perfumes each accompanied by a qualifying adjective (because for example the perfume "floral" is both "sweet" and "fresh", changing its olfactory quality.): 1) sweetly floral; 2) delicately cool; 3) sensually oriental; 4) intensely spicy; 5) sparkling citrus; 6) corroborant balsamic; 7) voluptuously erotic; 8) hypnotically poisonous.

The participants then coloured the bottles as they liked, associating the colours with the fragrances. It emerged that sometimes the colour chosen referred to the adjective describing the fragrance, for example "sweet" rather than "floral" (pink 69.8 %), compared with "delicately cool" where the quality of coolness prevailed (blue 62.8%). Other times the choice was a symbolic one, as for the two fragrances indicated with advertising terminology which do not correspond to classifications of scents, "voluptuously erotic" (red 57.6%) and "hypnotically poisonous" (mauve 52.9%). In some cases the choices was a figurative one, i.e. referring to the colour of the sweet-smelling substances that it was assumed that the scent mixture was based on (such as types of wood, resins, hot spices and citrus fruits) as in "intensely spicy" (brown 43.6), "sparkling citrus" (yellow 55.2 % and orange 34.3 %), "corroborant balsamic" (green 67.4 %). Lastly three colours competed for the definition of "sensually oriental" (orange 27.3 %, mauve 26.7 %, red 25 %), colours that we might also refer to as "ethnic-geographical".

6. THE PRESS ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

The research continued with the analysis of perfume communication of the most representative Italian Fashion Houses, which were examined in their three components: the dominant colour of the *advertising campaign*; the dominant colour of the *bottle*; the dominant colour of the *packaging*. The result was that colours are used in different ways: for giving information, for aesthetic and for synaesthetic purposes, with one or the other components prevailing and that the sensorial

potential of colours were not being fully exploited. In this context the term “synaesthesia” is used in its meaning as a rhetorical figure of communication, able to link two or more sensory systems, to emphasize their contamination and their similarities in terms of sensitivity, in order to activate the consumer’s emotional-sensory threshold (Luzzatto, Pompas, 2001). Synaesthesia reflecting a subjective sensation, which is not the same for everybody, but which is however based on stereotypes which give it a shared value.

We selected and examined certain perfumes and the respective advertising campaigns carried out by: Armani, Bulgari, Roberto Cavalli, Dolce and Gabbana, Etro, Ferré, Moschino, Prada, Trussardi and Versace, the conclusions of which are given (while in the previous press advertising campaign it was played out in lapis lazuli blue, this time it is in tones of navy blue-mauve, more oriental and less light and airy)

Armani: “*Sensi, white notes*” is a slightly pinkish white, cool and bright, which reflects the minimalist and refined image of the Fashion House. The advertising campaign shows a female body lying down and arching her back, wrapped in a light ivory-white veil with in the foreground the bottle of perfume. White is dominant in all its nuances, with a prevalence of warm pink shades. The bottle is made of sanded glass with a velvety feel. The writing and the stopper are in gilt. The packaging is ivory with the writing in gold. This image exalts white, which is also in the name of the product, to evoke lightness and delicateness. The olfactory image evoked as a result of the pinkish and bright quality of the white, is that of delicate and sweet flowers which is at least in part consistent with the scent, which is a “fresh floral”.

Bulgari: “*Blu notte*” is targeted at an upper middle-class public with traditional tastes. The image shows two testimonials looking at the bottles of perfume, in the versions “*Pour femme*” and “*Pour homme*”. The brand and the claims are white. The image is a night-time one (while in the previous press advertising campaign it was played out in lapis lazuli blue, this time it is in tones of navy blue-mauve, more oriental and less light and airy), wrapped in a very dark mauve-navy: from the two bottles of perfume a warmer mauve light is issuing and this is reflected on the two faces. The bottles “*Pour femme*” is rounded; that the “*Pour homme*” is larger and square, with bright mauve glass and silver stoppers. The packaging is dark blue with the writing in silver. The different shades and intensities of mauve dominate the advertisement, suggesting a hedonistic and mysterious atmosphere and create the sensory expectation on an oriental fragrance, which is both voluptuous and sensual, not dissimilar from the real one, described as “intense and spicy floral”.

Roberto Cavalli: “*Roberto Cavalli Profumo*” is aimed at the image of the “Rock Jet Set”, and combines notes of hippy exuberance with an in-your-face demonstration of wealth and a joyous and conspicuous sensuality. The image shows a woman lying on dry hot sand of a sinful sulphur-yellow colour with a python writhing over her body. On the right the bottle stands out, like a tapering column of glass with a printed silver design which reveals the delicate pink colour of the fragrance; the atomizer is of a more intense pink, wrapped in a snakelike spiral. The packaging has a texture like a silver snakeskin, intense pink and white. The sulphur-yellow colour is an original interpretation of sin, as well being a reminder of the dry and hot desert, and creates the expectation of a strong citrus fragrance, far from the “fresh, floral and woody” bouquet of the actual perfume.

Dolce e Gabbana: the name “*Sicily*” evokes the concept of the Fashion House, the ennoblement of the hot Mediterranean values of the Italian island, the memory of tradition combined with the contemporary, luxury and transgression. The image shows the actress Monica Bellucci with an expression of suffering and passion in black and white, and the bottle in yellow; the claim is in gold. The bottle is severe, with a shiny black stopper and its lower profile in gold, through which the intense yellow of the perfume can be seen, like a condensed version of heat and sunshine. The packaging is matt black, reminiscent of the volcanic rock of Sicily, with the writing in gold.

The sensory expectation evoked especially by the colour yellow is a warm and citrus perfume of the lands of the South, which corresponds to the bouquet “sweet citrus”.

Etro: “*Musk*” (Unisex Eau de Toilette) is targeted at a young, joyous and foot-loose public. It presents the ethnic-tribal image of a face, partly covered with a headdress with furry feathers made of green and mauve leather. The bottle, which reminds us of the “Absolut Wodka” bottle, is white matt with a round label and a decorated overhanging golden stopper. The packaging shows the cashmere design that is the icon of the Maison: olive green, violet and ivory for the basic version, mauve for the de luxe version, carmine red for the export version. The dominant colours - mauve, sharp green,

fuchsia and cold pink - evoke a strong energizing image in which the milk-white of the product refers to the alcoholic drink and does not evoke an olfactory sensation. The fragrance is suggested by the colours as a whole, which according to our research coincides with the bouquet: “balsamic oriental”.

Gianfranco Ferré: “*Lui*” and “*Lei*” are scented waters aimed at a young target, new for this Fashion House. The advertising shows two young people in a playful attitude viewed through the two bottles of perfume which are streamlined, technological three-dimensional rectangles, with the atomizers covered with transparent plexiglass. The packaging is light blue for “*Lui*” and pink for “*Lei*”, with black writing. The only colours present are the light blue and pink of the perfumes and these evoke a fresh and delicate fragrance for “*Lui*” and a sweet floral one for “*Lei*”; while in actual fact the first one is “woody, spicy and aromatic” and the second one is a “sweet sparkling floral”.

Moschino: “*Moschino Couture!*” is targeted at a lively, ironical and non-conformist public. It shows the clear contrasting image of a modern Snow-White, seductive and artful, who is holding the bottle: her black hair covers her eyes and highlights her lips which are flame-red as are her nails; her naked body is white as snow and her pose is statuesque. The background is white, empty and starry, with the claim in black. The transparent bottle is coloured by the clear yellow of the fragrance the writing in black stands out. The stopper is in the form of a heart (the icon of the Designer) and is in gold, with a red velvet ribbon wrapped around it and held by an amusing gold button seal. The packaging is shiny white, with a little red heart in the centre on which the gilt writing is superimposed. The dominant colours are graphical, clear and well-defined and a little bit Pop and create sensory expectations of a sparkling, fresh and pungent fragrance, while in fact the bouquet is “mossy floral”.

Prada: “*Parfum*” is designed for a sophisticated and cultured public which appreciates a mix of tradition and innovation typical of the Fashion House. It shows a young woman turning towards the observer, illuminated by diffused lighting. In the centre the claim is in very light grey on the lower part of the bottle. The bottle has a square asymmetrical form, it is in clear glass which takes the amber colour of the fragrance; the steel atomizer is complete with a little plum-coloured squeeze pump; the brand name is in iridescent silver. The packaging is different in the different versions – with or without atomizer, *deluxe* and refillable – and alternates the three colours of powder pink, champagne and plum. In the photo suffused, pearl tones, grey and pale lilac are dominant: a traditional and sophisticated range that creates sensory expectations of a delicate slightly oriental perfume, confirmed by the “persistent oriental” bouquet, of an intensity that only the plum-coloured packaging suggests.

Trussardi: “*Trussardi Jeans*” is aimed at a young target. It shows the image in black and white of the faces of a couple of teenagers. The coloured horizontal bottle of perfume has the claim “Trussardi jeans, the new fragrance for women”, in white with the word “jeans” in orange reminds us of the stitching on the seams of the jeans; the atomizer and the fragrance are bluish. On the packaging the blue intensifies into a deep dark blue, against which there are blurred signs reminiscent of the light of neon bulbs, which gives the connotation of an underground environment by night, modern and fast. Clear, cold denim blue is the dominant colour of this advertisement, which gives the olfactory sensation of a delicate freshness, while the bouquet is actually a “sweet floral”.

Versace: “*Versace Cristal Noir*” is aimed at the lovers of “Rock and Royalty”, ostentatious luxury, voluptuous and glittery. They have chosen the image of a languid and sensual woman, wrapped in a champagne coloured evening dress and lying diagonally between young men who are touching her lasciviously; at the bottom there is the claim in white lettering and the coloured bottle. The bottle is in mauve glass with shades of purple, topped by an important faceted stopper in a colder darker mauve which reminds us of amethyst, while the writing is in gold. The packaging is shiny black with the writing in gold and is in the form of a precious stone. The dark mauve gives it a hypnotic attraction: the atmosphere is vaguely dark with its dark tones crossed obliquely by a pearly pallor, on the body and in the dress of the woman. The sensory expectations aroused are based on the licentious eroticism of a strong, intense, warm, sweet and mysterious fragrance and, according to our research, dangerously “poisonous”, which corresponds to the bouquet “oriental floral”.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude: the results of the research “Colour-Fragrances” show that colour can have the privilege of giving substance to the unstable, volatile and indefinable dimension of olfactory sensation and can become, in advertising perfumes, a complex metaphor able to evoke not only the concept of the Fashion House but also the fragrance itself.