

---

## Unveiling Masculinity: A Critical Analysis of Gender Representation in Men's Fragrance Advertisements

**Danny Susanto**

Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia  
Email: danny8332@gmail.com

---

### ABSTRACT

#### KEYWORDS

masculinity, fragrance advertisements, gender stereotypes, social semiotics, gender equality

The aim of this study is to examine how male sexuality is visually portrayed in advertisements for men's perfume and to investigate the notions of masculinity, gender, and sexuality depicted therein. Through a visual text analysis approach rooted in social semiotic theory with literature study, the study examines 27 advertisements predominantly from Western countries (Specifically France and Italy), analyzing elements such as visual composition, gendered representations, and societal implications. The analysis of the sampled images reveals stereotypical representations of male and female sexuality, conveyed through the use of sexuality and gender concepts. For male consumers, exposure to these representations may lead to the internalization of these ideals, influencing their self-image and behavior. These representations not only maintain existing power differentials but also hinder progress towards gender equality and challenging societal norms.

---

### INTRODUCTION

Cultural Studies emerged in universities in England and the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, amalgamating sociology, literary theory, film theory, and cultural anthropology to examine various cultural phenomena in contemporary industrial societies (Back et al., 2012; Baldwin & McCracken, 2014; Best & Kellner, 2020; Elliott, 2013; Murray, 2012). Cultural Studies researchers typically focus on the interplay between ideology, race, social class, technology, and gender (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Galamba & Matthews, 2021; Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013; Leurs, 2017; O'Donnell, 2020). Additionally, Cultural Studies interrogates the meanings and activities inherent in daily life, encompassing human behaviors such as television viewing habits, dining preferences, and newspaper reading routines (De Solier, 2013; Heath & Bryant, 2013; Ryan, 2018).

Gender issues, central within Cultural Studies, constitute a sociological and anthropological analytical category referring to a set of norms and social conventions regarding human sexual behavior. Therefore, gender studies explore the social construction of gender differences within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Gender studies address injustices against women and encompass emerging research areas such as masculinity and sexual diversity (including studies on homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, transgenderism, etc.) (Enke, 2012; Nadal et al., 2016; Richardson & Monro, 2017).

This study focuses on masculinity issues within the context of gender studies. Edley and Wetherell (1995) argue that masculinity is not a singular, uniform identity unaffected by factors such as race, class, and culture. Instead, they suggest that masculinity encompasses diverse identities, which may contradict one another. This topic is chosen because, unlike discussions on feminism, masculinity remains relatively underexplored.

The research utilizes a selection of advertisements for men's perfume featuring male-only models and mixed-gender settings. The aim is to examine how male sexuality is visually portrayed in advertisements for men's perfume and to investigate the notions of masculinity,

gender, and sexuality depicted therein. Perfume advertisements are chosen as the research material due to the close association between perfume and sexuality. The examined advertisements are predominantly from Western countries, thereby representing Western sexuality and masculinity.

Based on the foregoing exposition, the research inquiries shall be formulated as follows:

- 1) To what extent do contemporary men's fragrance advertisements reflect and perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes within Western societies?
- 2) What are the societal implications of the predominant representations of masculinity in men's fragrance advertisements, and how do these depictions shape consumers' perceptions of gender and sexuality?

The paper underscores the need for media literacy and critical analysis to challenge and redefine gender stereotypes in advertising, fostering more inclusive and equitable attitudes towards gender and sexuality. By interrogating and deconstructing gendered representations, society can strive towards a more just and harmonious future.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Through a visual text analysis approach rooted in social semiotic theory with literature study, the study examines 27 advertisements predominantly from Western countries (Specifically France and Italy), analyzing elements such as visual composition, gendered representations, and societal implications.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the actions depicted in the advertisements predominantly portrays sexuality and eroticism. The completed analyzed Images of the advertisements can be found in the appendix. For advertisements featuring only male models, this is evident in images 1, 2, and 3.

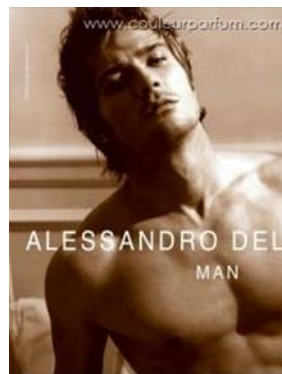


Figure 1. Image 1

Meanwhile, for advertisements featuring both male and female models, elements of sexuality and eroticism are apparent in almost all sample images (images 19-27).



**Figure 2.** Image 19

In advertisements featuring only male models, sexuality and eroticism are depicted through bare-chested models (images 1-3) or even fully nude, albeit artistically obscured, as seen in image 4 .



**Figure 3.** Image 2



**Figure 4.** Image 4

Conversely, erotic elements in advertisements featuring both male and female models together are observed in scenes of intimacy present in almost all samples except image 24. The level of eroticism depicted varies, ranging from subtle and faint (image 23) to moderate (image 25) or highly erotic (image 22) .



**Figure 5.** Image 23



**Figure 6.** Image 25



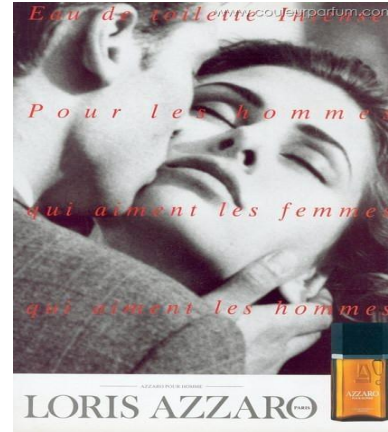
**Figure 7.** Image 22

Furthermore, in images featuring both male and female models in a single advertisement, it is evident that women and men are portrayed as equally active. However, men's inherent

nature and opportunities differ from those of women (Holland et al., 1993). Broadly speaking, women are depicted as more passive in sexual contexts. It appears that men take the initiative, as seen in images 19, 20, and 22, with men often depicted in dominant positions, such as being on top, as in image 20 .

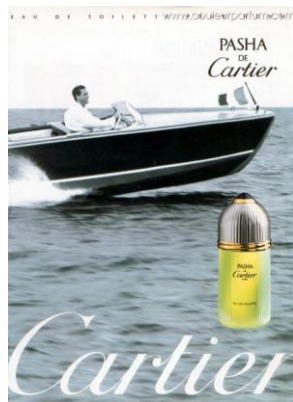


**Figure 8.** Image 19



**Figure 9.** Image 20

Additionally, in advertisements featuring only male images, men are shown engaging in activities that highlight physical strength, as seen in images 7 and 13, contrasting with women who are depicted as merely passive or seated, as in image 25. Women are also more frequently depicted as passive compared to men.



**Figure 10.** Image 7



**Figure 11.** Image 25

The objects of men's and women's actions also differ, with women more often being the objects of action or attention than men (Holland et al., 1993). The objects of women's actions appear non-threatening, such as carrying flowers (image 23), while male models' actions involve more daring and risk-taking, such as riding a motorboat (image 7) or being in a sports car (image 13).



Figure 12. Image 23

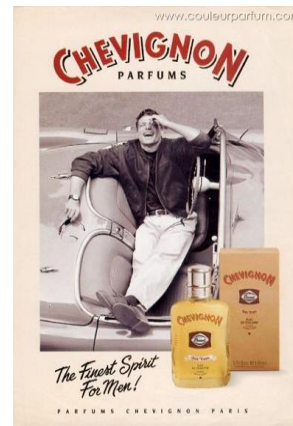


Figure 13. Image 13

Sports equipment and backgrounds, as well as sports metaphors, are used to depict competition among men and as signs of their heterosexuality (e.g., images 7 and 13). Cars and motorboats symbolize possibilities and simultaneously serve as symbols of cultural masculinity and sexual prowess in Western industrial society. White roses symbolize purity and honesty in women.

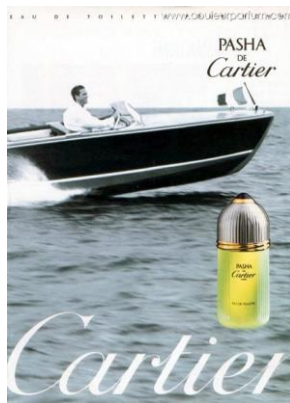


Figure 15. Image 7



Figure 14. Image 13

From the analysis of the setting, the advertised perfume, and the actions depicted in the images, it is evident that the setting supports an erotic atmosphere. The background setting is related to the level of sexuality and eroticism intended to be conveyed. Bright-colored backgrounds indicate low levels of sexuality and eroticism, while dimly lit backgrounds or orange backgrounds resembling fire suggest high levels of sexuality and eroticism. The setting also indicates that men and women are represented as having control over sexuality in different spaces. Women are depicted in control of sexual activities at home or in residential settings, while men are shown as dominating sexual encounters outside the home. Men outside the home are portrayed as sexually aggressive, but within the home setting, they become "tamed" and relinquish control to women, although women also ultimately surrender their control in social settings to men.

In terms of the appearance of the models and the roles they represent, women with long, unkempt hair symbolize sexually unrestrained women, while those with neatly styled medium-length hair represent dominated and sexually restrained women. Men with unkempt hair signify sexual control over the opposite sex. Therefore, it can be generally stated that unkemptness symbolizes sexual dominance, while neatness symbolizes restrained sexuality.

In general, the sampled images display minimal nudity, with only one instance of nudity, which serves as an indicator that sexual activity is either planned or imminent. The exposure

of a woman's skin serves as an indication of her readiness for sexual intercourse. For instance, women in some images exhibit significant skin exposure due to the minimal clothing worn, while in others, their skin is more covered.

Masculinity is typically represented through images portraying various identities. The dichotomy between the "gladiator" and "sweet" type of men depicted illustrates two extremes of masculinity. Some images represent strong and robust men, while on the other extreme, images portray a "sweet" type of man (Kimmel & Messner, 1995). The dominant representation observed in the sample is hegemonic masculinity and conventional sexual prowess. Men are depicted as competing in terms of their masculinity and sexual prowess. The representation of women in the sample images portrays messages of heterosexuality towards the opposite sex and their willingness to accept the opposite sex.

The activities depicted in the images focus on the diverse appearances of men, the selection of symbolic attributes, the roles performed by men, and the composition of the images, all of which portray men as individuals with various masculine identities. The actions and roles of men and women indicate their respective roles. Some of the roles assigned to men include being a gladiator, protector, competitor, romantic partner, emotional figure, and sweet man, among others. Although the dichotomy between the gladiator and sweet man is not entirely clear, it highlights two extremes of masculinity.

In conclusion, the analysis of the sampled images reveals stereotypical representations of male and female sexuality, conveyed through the use of sexuality and gender concepts (Kimmel & Messner, 1995). Men are predominantly depicted as assertive and sexually potent individuals, while women are often portrayed as passive recipients of male attention. These representations perpetuate traditional gender norms and roles, reinforcing the dominance of certain attributes associated with masculinity and femininity.

Consumer perceptions of gender and sexuality are influenced by the representations they encounter in advertisements. In the case of men's fragrance advertisements analyzed in this study, the depictions of masculinity as assertive, sexually potent, and dominant, and femininity as passive recipients of male attention, can impact how consumers perceive their own gender identities and roles.

For male consumers, exposure to these representations may reinforce traditional ideals of masculinity, leading them to aspire to the traits and behaviors depicted in the advertisements. This can affect their self-image and behavior, potentially influencing their attitudes towards women, relationships, and sexuality. Male consumers might feel pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity portrayed in the advertisements, leading to feelings of inadequacy if they do not align with these ideals.

On the other hand, female consumers may internalize the gender roles depicted in the advertisements, perceiving themselves as objects of male desire and validation. This can contribute to the perpetuation of traditional gender dynamics, where women are expected to fulfill passive, submissive roles in heterosexual relationships. Female consumers might also develop unrealistic expectations of men based on the representations of masculinity in the advertisements, potentially affecting their perceptions of attraction and romantic partners.

Furthermore, these advertisements may contribute to the normalization of certain behaviors and attitudes related to gender and sexuality, reinforcing societal norms and expectations (Holland et al., 1993). For example, the portrayal of men as sexually aggressive and dominant, and women as passive and submissive, may reinforce stereotypes about male sexual entitlement and female compliance.

In summary, the representations of masculinity in men's fragrance advertisements have societal implications that extend to shaping consumers' perceptions of gender and sexuality. By perpetuating traditional gender roles and stereotypes, these advertisements influence how individuals perceive themselves and others, contributing to the maintenance of existing power

dynamics and social norms surrounding gender and sexuality . Therefore, a critical analysis of these representations is essential for understanding their broader impact on society and informing discussions about gender equality and representation in media.

## CONCLUSION

Men's perfume advertisements reveal deeply ingrained stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing traditional gender roles in Western societies. Men are often depicted as assertive and sexually potent, while women are often submissive. These representations shape consumers' perceptions of gender and sexuality, influencing their self-image and behavior. They also reinforce traditional gender norms, emphasizing men's dominance in sexual encounters and women's passive acceptance of male advances. This perpetuates power differentials and hinders progress towards gender equality. Therefore, there is a need for media literacy and critical analysis of gender representations in advertising to challenge and redefine traditional gender norms.

## REFERENCES

- Back, L., Bennett, A., Edles, L. D., Gibson, M., Inglis, D., Jacobs, R., & Woodward, I. (2012). *Cultural sociology: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Baldwin, E., & McCracken, S. (2014). *Introducing cultural studies*. Routledge.
- Best, S., & Kellner, D. (2020). *The postmodern adventure: Science technology and cultural studies at the third millennium*. Routledge.
- De Solier, I. (2013). *Food and the self: Consumption, production and material culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1995). *Men in Perspective: Practice, Power and Identity*. Prentice Hall/Harvester Webster.
- Elliott, A. (2013). *Routledge handbook of social and cultural theory*. Routledge.
- Enke, F. (2012). *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender and gender studies*. Temple University Press.
- Few-Demo, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2020). Gender, Feminist, and Intersectional Perspectives on Families: A Decade in Review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12638>
- Galamba, A., & Matthews, B. (2021). Science education against the rise of fascist and authoritarian movements: towards the development of a pedagogy for democracy. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-020-10002-y>
- Heath, R. L., & Bryant, J. (2013). *Human communication theory and research: Concepts, contexts, and challenges*. Routledge.
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Saha, A. (2013). Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Production. *Popular Communication*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2013.810068>
- Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., & Sharpe, S. (1993). *Wimp or Gladiator: Contradictions in Acquiring Masculine Sexuality*. Tufnell Press.
- Kimmel, M., & Messner, M. (1995). *Men's Lives* (3rd ed.). Allyn and Bacon.
- Leurs, K. (2017). Feminist data studies: Using digital methods for ethical, reflexive and situated socio-cultural research. *Feminist Review*, 115(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0043-1>
- Murray, S. (2012). *The adaptation industry: The cultural economy of contemporary literary adaptation*. Routledge.
- Nadal, K. L., Whitman, C. N., Davis, L. S., Erazo, T., & Davidoff, K. C. (2016). Microaggressions Toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Genderqueer

- People: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Sex Research*, 53(4–5).  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1142495>
- O'Donnell, V. (2020). Cultural studies theory: The production and consumption of meaning. In *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*.
- Richardson, D., & Monro, S. (2017). *Sexuality, equality and diversity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ryan, M. E. (2018). *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinarity*. Routledge.

Copyright holders:  
Danny Susanto (2024)

First publication right:  
Devotion - Journal of Research and Community Service



This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)