



Revisiting the Sensorium: Olfactory Opportunities in Fashion and Textiles

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Introduction and Justification

Fragrance has long been connected to the fashion and apparel industry and has played an integral part in branding, marketing, experiential retailing, textiles, appearance management, consumer behavior, and communication. Fragrance offers sensual, expressive, and symbolic qualities and is one of the components of a multi-sensory aesthetic experience where apparel, the body, and the environment interact (Fiore, 1993, 2010). Like fashion and textiles, fragrance evolves and innovates with the world we live in, and its place in the fashion and apparel industry should be revisited for new opportunities that capitalize on its unique characteristics.

Background & Problem

While all the senses are important to fashion, people are essentially visually oriented (Pybus and Sell, 1999). In “Coming to Our Senses: The 21st Century Tactile”, Cobb and Orzada proposed that this visual dependence has created a “loss of touch” and that “sensory competencies are in real need of a ‘retouch’”. Likewise, the digitalization of our lives and sanitization of our olfactory experiences have created a “loss of smell” while the fragrance industry has continued to innovate and develop. Where can fashion and fragrance meet up again and what are the opportunities for innovation? Below, the “21st Century *Olfactive*” looks to museums and historical preservation, education, health and wellbeing, and imaginative garment creation, as opportunities for new products and experiences.

Future Action

We live in the golden age of fashion exhibitions. Around the world museums create spectacular exhibits showcasing garments from the past and offer interactive learning. Could fragrance be a part of that experience as well, allowing attendees not just a visual and auditory sensation, but perhaps provide olfactory insight into how the world might have smelled during that time and place? We might gain a greater appreciation or understanding of past civilizations and their now extinct aromatic environments. These sensual and expressive qualities are vital to aesthetic experience (Fiore, 1997) and could be next step in museum exhibitions.

Non-western cultures do not put as much of an emphasis on visual information (Classen, 1993). Now, more than ever, educating our fashion students about these differences in cultures and how they communicate is crucial in building empathy and for understanding the aesthetic experience of others. Future fashion industry professionals will find themselves in an ever-evolving and complex, multicultural world, so this “education of the senses” (Cobb and Orzada, 2018) should and can be included in visual merchandising and history and culture courses.

Garments made from textiles that are micro-encapsulated with fragrance or made with scented yarns have been used for their therapeutic properties (Nelson, 2002). Today, Alzheimer's Disease, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and autism are a few of the most pressing issues of well-being and health that we cope with and dress and fragrance can help alleviate and prevent symptoms. One of the first indicators of early onset Alzheimer's is anosmia, or the loss of smell and daily training with scent improves olfaction. Further, treating lost olfactory perception may halt the progression of disease in the limbic system that eventuates into full-blown AD (Reid, Avens, and Walf, 2017). Accessories like necklaces or armbands designed to regularly release a fragrance can act as a aromatic fitbit to exercise one's olfactory muscles.

For children on the autism spectrum, scent can assist in their sensory processing. New aromas encapsulated into textiles and made into toys or blankets can be slowly introduced so as not to disturb their oversensitivity. Repeated exposure to certain smells allow them to "learn" the aroma over time as it can also take longer for an individual with autism to understand what the odor is they are smelling (Furfaro, 2018).

When Virgil Abloh, the creative director at Louis Vuitton and Off-White, was asked what he wanted his new perfume to smell like, he said, "Nothing" (Syme, 2018). This would be a dream fragrance for soldiers with PTSD where odors can trigger olfactory flashbacks (Vermetten and Bremner, 2003). Further, researchers are developing "white smell machines" made to cancel out offending aromas that could prevent recurrent traumatic episodes (Varshney and Varshney, 2016). This is yet another opportunity for accessory or "niche" fragrance designers to create a functional, modern-day "vinaigrette" to house a therapeutic fragrance.

There are expressive and symbolic qualities of fragrance that speak to our imagination and personal experience (Fiore, 2010). Could a garment create its own perfume and how would that manifest itself? All of our garments and textiles have a smell whether it's from perfumes, body odor, textile production, or secondary smells like smoke or mold (Johansen, 2008). Unique characteristics of the textiles themselves, like the pungency of indigo, are also part of this recipe that some find endearing and evocative. We often eliminate these circumstantial scents because they're considered malodorous, toxic, or otherwise undesirable. Nevertheless, there is potential in resetting our perception of smell through design and creativity. Like crafting a new fragrance, a fashion designer can experiment, layer, and combine these textile scent notes to create a product with tactile, visual, and intentional aromatic features.

Conclusion

All five senses are essential to understanding and teaching fashion and apparel today. The sense of smell in particular is underutilized and has enormous creative potential in tandem with fashion and textiles, not just as a lovely perfume bottle, but to solve problems and create beneficial experiences for consumers. Revisiting this relationship opens up opportunities to redefine how consumers and designers see and use fragrance in fashion and textiles, and is a further study this scholar would develop and execute actual products to test.

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