The psychology of fragrance selection

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10.1 IS SELECTION OF A PERFUME A MATTER OF CHANCE?

Previous research has led to several theories about the physical and psychological factors which influence selection of a particular perfume. One view holds that choice of perfume is non-rational and cannot be explained in psychological terms. Another group represents the viewpoint that external characteristics, such as the colour of a person's hair or eyes, determine choice of perfume (Jellinek, 1951). Last but not least, a new viewpoint based on rich classical literature (Corbin, 1984) focuses on the relationship between a person's personality and his or her choice of fragrances (Müller, 1984). This approach appears to be steadily gaining ground. The correlation between personality and fragrance was initially a supposition, but the latest research in the psycho-physiological area supports this idea (Klages and Klages, 1967; Koelega, 1970; Hacke, 1975; Van Toller, 1978; Dodd and Van Toller, 1983; Mensing, 1983; Steiner, 1986).

The physiological basis of the senses and, in particular, human odour memory are of particular interest. Smell is the only sense which has direct contact with the brain. A few decades ago the functional meaning of the limbic system was unknown and the system was described as the 'rhinencephalon'—the 'smell brain'. Today, however, we know that the limbic system serves as the central circuit for emotion, mood, motivation and sexual behaviour. It can be stimulated directly through the sense of smell (see Fig. 8.3 for a diagram of the limbic circuits). Furthermore, the limbic system also plays a significant role in selecting and transmitting information between our short- and long-term memories. Selection from and transmission to these two memories is performed via corresponding associative regions of the limbic system. The limbic system receives its information from the various sensory regions such as the sense of smell (Schwartz, 1980; Schmidt and...
It is thus understandable why the perception of certain fragrances, as pointed out by Engen in Chapter 4, can be connected with a recollection of specific experiences, or why when we experience childhood odours, we simultaneously perceive past emotions. For example, if one were to go back and visit one's old school and smell the floor wax, many memories would return; one may relive anxious or apprehensive feelings experienced many years ago, perhaps when one had to take a test.

The olfactory receptors are so closely linked with the limbic system that a dysfunction of the latter can manifest itself in the form of a dysfunction of corresponding sensations in the olfactory system and vice versa (Hacke, 1975; Engen, 1982). Thus the symptoms of schizophrenia, for example, can manifest themselves in the form of olfactory hallucinations. A patient may smell strange odours and suspect the presence of toxic gases. This can lead to increased fears in conjunction with paranoia. Based on the fact that sensory receptors have direct contact with the emotional centres of the limbic system, we conceived and carried out two studies.

In an initial study women throughout West Germany (270 in all) who expressed an interest in perfume were asked to complete some personality questionnaires to determine their emotional characters. First, we gave each woman a sample which contained four different fragrances (4 x 3 design): fresh, such as 'O Lancome'; floral-powdery, such as 'Nahema'; oriental, such as 'Shalimar'; and chypre, such as 'Parure'. The fragrance notes are described in the H & R Genealogy of Feminine Notes (1986); cf. Mensing and Beck, 1984b.

We then tested their emotional mood tendencies, using Melcher's Colour Pyramid Test (CPT). This is a test that clarifies the affect structure for the dimensions of extroverted/introverted and emotionally ambivalent/emotionally stable moods (Heiss and Halder, 1975; Halder-Sinn, 1982). In addition, we tested their emotional tendencies by giving another test – the Lüscher Colour Test (Lüscher, 1974).

The data revealed surprising results. The two personality affect dimensions of the CPT were shown to be significant in revealing a person's perfume preference; the results were:

1. Extroverted perfume users, who looked for stimulation, had a significant (5 per cent level) tendency towards fresh fragrance notes.
2. Introverted women had a tendency (5 per cent level) towards oriental notes.
3. Emotionally ambivalent perfume users were significantly (5 per cent) more fascinated with floral-powdery notes.
4. Emotionally stable perfume users showed no significant tendency towards any one specific kind of fragrance note.

With these results, we could propose a hypothesis: fragrance users (other than the emotionally stable group) with a very extreme personality in one of these dimensions prefer their fragrance type in an absolute way. For example,