

The Representation of the Orient in Western Women Perfume Advertisements: A Semiotic Analysis

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Advertisement, omnipresent in the media and daily life, is constitutive of a widespread cultural practice, circulating commodities as well as knowledge. While research studies have long challenged the ways in which advertising and marketing campaigns in western countries employ gendered imagery that objectify women and reinforce power differences between the sexes in order to sell their products, not much attention has been given to the images of the Orient that are adopted to create woman imagery in advertisements. This paper, by using a semiotic analysis, discusses the representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements—the one type of advertisement where woman images have been a focal point and most fully exploited. Through decoding the signs and discourses in the deployment of Oriental images in women perfume advertisements, the paper attempts to reveal how race and gender are combined to create and reinforce female roles and define femininity in western societies.

The media explosion of the 20th and 21st centuries—mass-produced newspapers and magazines, radio and television broadcasts, and the all-pervasive internet—has given advertising unprecedented power to stimulate desire and mold visual consciousness. The underlying philosophy behind advertising, ultimately, is commercial—to sell products, the genre itself implying the practices of buying and selling in an economic market. Advertisement, however, omnipresent in the media and daily life, is also constitutive of a widespread cultural practice, circulating commodities as well as knowledge. Advertisers take advantage of the technical scope of photography to “insert” or “superimpose” objects in one syntagm onto another, to create something new and imaginatively striking and thus to promote products as well as convey certain cultural concepts (Fiske, 1990, p. 103). Research studies have long challenged the ways in which advertising and marketing campaigns in western countries employ gendered imagery that objectify women and reinforce power differences between the sexes in order to sell their products¹, yet not much attention has been given to the images of the Orient that are adopted to create woman imagery in advertisements. This paper, by using a semiotic analysis, discusses the representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements—the one type of advertisement where woman images have been a focal point and most fully exploited. Through decoding the signs and discourses in the deployment of Oriental images in women perfume advertisements, the paper attempts to reveal how race and gender are combined to create and reinforce female roles and define femininity in western societies.

The paper first reviews the contexts of gender and race in western advertisements and Orientalism. It discusses the stereotyped women imageries and the issue of race in western advertising culture, and elaborates on how gender and race are related in Orientalist theories and practices. Secondly, the paper provides a brief summary of semiotics, which is adopted as the analytical method in this study and explains its sample choosing. Then it analyzes the

three sample women perfume advertisements, examining how Oriental elements, such as Oriental women figures, sceneries, and subjects are deployed to create and reinforce women imagery in Western societies. And finally the paper comes to its conclusion.

Literature Review

Much of scholarly attention has focused on the construction of western advertising campaigns through a gendered lens (Cortese, 1999; Kilbourne, 1990; Manca & Manca, 1994; Williams, 1978). Advertising has been shown to promote images that distort women's bodies for male pleasure, condone violence against women, or belittle the women's movement itself as a playful prank. As studies have shown, the historical rise and development of the capitalist consumer culture has been in many ways inextricable from societal conceptualizations of gender and domesticity (Friedan, 1963; Peiss, 1998). Early manifestations of western capitalist consumer culture drew heavily on middle-class women's expected roles as homemaker and family caretaker, further reaffirming the divide between the female sphere of domesticity and the male domain of work and politics. Advertisements have profited off of such cultural imagery and reinforced, in turn, women's place in the home. With women becoming more incorporated into the workforce after the world wars and the widespread feminist movements, women gained higher social status and advertisements gave more say to women desires and portrayed women in broader terms. However, femininity and women roles are still basically defined in advertisements based on the patriarchal social system. The imagery of women as good homemaker and consumer, of women as sexual objects of heterosexual male desires, and of women as embodiments of leisure and femininity are still the most common themes in advertising, which clearly catered to the tastes and interests of their heterosexual male constituents (Friedan, 1983; Williams, 1978).

Although many studies have examined the gendered dimensions of western advertising culture, there has been a noticeable lack of research that analyzes it through the intersections of race and gender. From a historical perspective, images of the Orient² rarely figured into advertisements—partly because of the small number of these ethnic minorities in western countries as well as their racialized invisibility to the mainstream society. Early Asian immigrants were small in number and generally bad off. Given their limited population size and comparatively poor consuming power, Asians accounted for only a small proportion of the real as well as potential commodity consumers. Advertisements, as a result, seldom considered Asian minorities their major target viewers and thus included few Asian images in them. However, as ethnic minorities grew in numbers throughout the past decades, marketers and advertisers began to rapidly acknowledge their potential impact as consumers. As one of the fastest-growing racial groups, Asian immigrants have offered a very attractive market to advertisers because of their high levels of income and education. Furthermore, the steady global expansion of corporate branches into modernizing economies in Asia and the growing sector of Asian professionals within western countries have also increased the need to re-conceptualize advertisement campaigns in a multicultural fashion. As a result, ethnic-based strategies have become an indispensable terminology in the area of marketing and advertising (Cortese, 1999; Cui, 1997). Under the guise of multiculturalism, the Orient has evolved into an object to consume and a vehicle to stimulate consumption. Examples of this include recent trends in Asian meditation and spa products and youth-oriented clothing lines that have

incorporated “Oriental” paraphernalia like dragons and happy Buddhas into their apparel. At the same time, in the world of advertising as a whole, there is now a move towards more surrealist, metaphorical advertising (Fiske, 1990, p. 93). The actual product has come to matter less as audience participation increases. There is a general trend to include audience experience within the adverts and to create ads that are more in the image of audience motives and desires. Advertisements, building up icons and sending power-giving messages, are produced to cater for the increasingly varied interests and tastes of viewers and consumers, such as those of feminists, gays, and lesbians. Advertising has become more of a kind of visual art that is designed to catch the eye and thus build and reinforce brand names. Asian images, within this trend, provide a viewing experience that is different and exotic, which helps to distinguish a product from its competition and attract more attention. Thus the increasing inclusion of Asian images in advertisements not only attends to the growing Asian customers but also arouses interests in their native/western counterparts. However, Asian imageries in advertisements are, more often than not, portrayed under stereotyped understandings and conceptions which share racial and gender ideologies behind the practices of Orientalism.

In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said (1979) argues that “the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (p. 42). Westerners’ knowledge about the East imagines the Orient in a way that polarizes the Orient from the Occident and places the Occident higher than the Orient in the world hierarchy. The West is depicted as developed, powerful, articulate, and superior, while the East is seen as undeveloped, weak, mysterious, and inferior. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (“Other”) to the West. Since the West discovered the existence of the East, there has been a fascination with and a desire to portray the “Other.” And this enthrallment stems from an aspiration to dominate—the need of Westerners to rule this “exotic” territory. The notion of the Orient as the culturally-inferior Other has also converged with the concept of women as the gender-inferior Other. Orientalist romanticism in the West synchronized White men’s heterosexual desire for (Oriental) women and for Eastern territories through the feminization of the Orient (Kang, 1993; Lowe, 1991). The ideas imbued in Orientalist images of women are a male longing to capture, covet, objectify, and conquer Eastern women as a reflection of, or as analogous to, a desire to gain access and control of the terrain of the Orient. The portrayal of Oriental women (and the feminized Orient) conveys conceptions which include: the view of Eastern women and the Orient as the exotic Other, veiled in mystery and symbolizing the different; and the view of Eastern women as Western men’s conquest, as if they are emblems of the countries they want to rule, and thus endowing them with a submissive quality. Both conceptions have served to stimulate the sexual voyeurism of White Western males and the objectification of foreign Oriental women as their rightful property.

These racial/gendered images have been displayed in movies like *Japanese War Bride* (1952), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), *Sayonara* (1957), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), *Year of the Dragon* (1985), and *Heaven and Earth* (1993), and western literature such as *Memoir of the Geisha* (1999) and musicals like *Madam Butterfly*. Images of the Orient (women) appeared in early twentieth-century advertising cards—themes like porcelain doll-like Chinese women and hyper-feminized Asian men could be found in advertising cards for products such as soaps, waterproof collars and cuffs, clothes wringers,

threads, hats, and tobacco (Kim & Chung, 2005). And now Oriental (women) images have become more evident in present advertising, adopted to promote the distinctive appeal of products. Women perfume advertisements are where these images can be most often found.

In its attempt to research the combined deployment of race and gender in western women perfume advertisements, the paper wants to answer the following questions:

1. What Oriental images are deployed in western women perfume advertisements? And how are these images portrayed in the adverts?
2. How are race and gender related in western women perfume advertisements? And what messages are conveyed through this relation and combination?
3. How do the imageries of the Orient and women in western women perfume advertisements relate to the question of race and gender in western societies and culture?

Method

This paper adopts semiotic methods in examining the sample adverts to illustrate the representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, pioneered the field of semiotic analysis. He was concerned with how cultural meaning is produced, holding it to be structured “like a language.” For Saussure, a signifying system is constituted by a series of signs that are analyzed in terms of their constituent parts which he termed the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the form or medium of signs, for example: a sound, an image, or marks that form a word on the page. The signified, by contrast, is to be understood in terms of concepts and meanings which are broadly common to all members of the same culture, who share the same language (Fiske, 1990, p. 43).

Meaning is produced through the selection and combination of signs along what Saussure called the *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* axes. Saussure coined the term *paradigm* to refer to a sign that forms a member of a defining category (Chandler)—a set of signs from which the one to be used is chosen. The term *syntagm* refers to the linear combination of interacting signs into a meaningful whole (*ibid*)—the message into which the chosen signs are combined. All messages involve an amount of *selection* (from the paradigm) and *combination* (into a syntagm). From these primary distinctions evolve two formal axes or forms of structural relationship: (a) *paradigmatic* axis—a relationship of choice, and (b) *syntagmatic* axis—a relationship of combination. Meaning is accumulated along the syntagmatic axis, while selection from the paradigmatic field alters meaning at any given point in the sequence. If a relationship exists, it is inevitable that a process of formal analysis is possible. Hence, *syntagmatic analysis* gives an overview of a media text as a narrative sequence or as a sequence of signs, while *paradigmatic analysis* studies patterns other than those classed as sequential, within that media text (*ibid*).

Barthes further argued that we can talk of two systems of meaning or signification: *denotation* and *connotation*. *Denotation* is the descriptive and literal level of meaning. It refers to the “first order” of signification generated by the signifier and the signified—the initial, common-sense and obvious meaning of the sign (Fiske, 1990, p. 85). *Connotation*, on the other hand, refers to the “second order” of signification. It involves meanings that are generated by connecting signifiers to wider cultural concerns. Hall views this as the

“associative” meaning, since it describes the interaction that occurs when a sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture (Fiske, 1990, p. 86). Barthes, in attempting to effectively illustrate the difference between denotation and connotation, argues that the distinction between the two is clear in the medium of photography. He sees denotation as the mechanical reproduction on film of the object at which the camera is pointing. He sees connotation, on the other hand, as the individualized aspect of the process—the selection of what to include in the frame, the use of focus, camera angle, lighting, etc. Basically, denotation becomes the term for *what* is being photographed, while connotation refers to *how* it is being captured on film (ibid). Peirce proposed a triadic model of *object, representamen, and interpretant* to illustrate the working of sign systems. He held that nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. The meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation. Thus, according to Peirce, the term “connotation” can be further divided into three more subtle types of sign as follows: (a) *iconic* sign, as one that resembles the signified, (b) *symbolic* sign, as one depending on individual connotation, and (c) *indexical* sign, as one having associations and inherent connections.

Where connotations have become naturalized, that is to say where meanings are accepted as “normal” and “natural,” they act as conceptual maps of ideology by which it is to make sense of the world. These are myths (Barker, 2003, p. 92). Meaning is not the product of the sign itself, but of the *code* within which it is used. Codes are social constructions, situated in certain historical and social contexts. Different texts contain different cultural values and are put in different discourses. They are historically and socio-culturally specific. What sort of a text or code a sign is in sets up a complex set of expectations about what it will say and how. And surrounding texts influence how a particular text is read and experienced. This is what the post-structuralist Julia Kristeva first introduced as *intertextuality*. Intertextuality suggests that media texts should exist in relation to others. It provides the metalingual cues through which a text’s codes may be considered, understood and often questioned (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 1994, p. 96). Thus, myths, the naturalized meanings of signs, are actually cultural constructions. They may appear to be pre-given universal truths embedded in common sense, but are indeed socially produced meanings, even stereotypes in the case of gender identity in advertisements. Signs as such are naturalized codes. Their apparent transparency of meaning is an outcome of cultural habituation. The effect of this is to conceal the practices of cultural coding.

In this study of the representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements, the major source is the internet website Images de Parfums - Collection of fragrance advertisements—a French website which collects photos in all major advertising campaigns of all major western perfume brands in the past decades. Apart from this, the author also searched the past two years’ issues of popular fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Allure*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Prima*, *Elle*, and other internet websites specialized in perfume images, such as Museu de Parfum—Fundacio Planas Giralt, and Fotosearch—Perfume Stock Photos and Images. Out of all the women perfume advertising pictures involving Oriental images, three types of advertisements manifested themselves: (a) adverts picturing Oriental female models/figures in stereotypical images, (b) adverts adopting Oriental sceneries and/or objects as cultural symbols, and (c) adverts grafting biased Oriental qualities onto western female models/figures. Among them, the paper chooses three adverts which are representative of each type to illustrate its point. They are adverts for *Kenzo’s*

Flower, *Revlon's Xia Xiang*, and *Yves Saint Laurent's Opium*. In semiotic analyses of these adverts, the paper will concentrate on the important signifiers and what they signify, the syntagmatic structure of the text, paradigmatic features, semiotic codes, and intertextuality.

Discussion

This advert for *Kenzo's Flower* is full of paradigmatic signs with references to time-old themes of Oriental feminine exoticism. The focus of the photo is a typified pan-Asian woman figure—possibly Japanese, Chinese, or Vietnamese, which is hard to be specified. Her carefully-combed hairstyle (which is often seen in Chinese operas), heavy makeup, and elegant, fluttering white dress—all of which present her as an entertainer, a Madam Butterfly, a courtesan, or a geisha—remind people of the stereotypical “Lotus Blossom baby” image of traditional Oriental women: exotic, enticing, subservient, pampering, self-effacing, self-sacrificing and sensual. Her feminine and exotic allure is accentuated in its sharp contrast with the normalcy of White women figures in ordinary perfume ads which are usually overtly sexy and familiar to the western audience. Her face, half veiled behind an Oriental umbrella, further adds to the mysteriousness she exudes. As commonly depicted in Lotus Blossom images, she throws sexually suggestive smiles and gazes but hesitates to speak. The image in silence objectifies her as the submissive target of male voyeurism.

Syntagmatically, the woman is looking down and sideways, with a cryptic smile, as if toward the blooming red poppy at the upper-left corner of the frame—the flower which the perfume itself is named after and symbolizes Eastern fascination, sensuality, and intoxicating sexual excitement that is forbidden and hard to obtain in noble western life. The figure is in a certain movement, as if dancing, entertaining a male spectator off the frame, or walking and leading a voyage to the red flower—to the East and to sensual pleasure and excitement. The two stone sculptures of strangely-looking spirits in Oriental mythology on the right side of picture reinforce the exoticism involved in the traditional image of the Orient.

Although the photo makes no explicit references to men, it obviously serves a male sexual fantasy. The image of an exotic, mysterious, feminine, and hyper-sexualized Asian woman is very attractive and satiating to the male gaze. It evokes the imagination in men of a faraway and submissive eastern beauty—faraway-ness adding to the woman's mystique, and thus sex appeal and submissiveness send an invitation of conquest, serving the manly desire to dominate and conquer. The message sent here is that women who use this type of perfume will be able to experience and lead her man to experience with her this sensual voyage to the exotic Orient. By using this perfume, she is able to acquire the same feminine allure of this Asian woman and become extra desirable for men. Women (Asian) are objectified for the male desire.

Revlon's Xia Xiang is designed as a floral Oriental fragrance. With its mixed tangerine, jasmine, rose, and gardenia scent (tangerine, jasmine, and gardenia are flowers most often to be found in Asia), it claims to be a bountiful woman perfume, designed to reflect the ancient culture and traditions of the Orient.

Like the first advert, this photo is also full of signs about the Orient. But it differs from the previous one in that, instead of picturing the Oriental women, it mainly deploys Oriental sceneries and objects in its imagery. The ad is filled with binary oppositions in its paradigm. The various visual and verbal signs in this advertisement are used to emphasize the exotic

difference of the Orient. The Chinese watercolor with its simple lines and pure colors, mountains and lakes, spreads out a picture of a remote, quiet Oriental scene which is sharply different from the noisy, crowded, and complicated modern western metropolis. As the words in the ad suggest, *Xia Xiang* is a “fragrance of the imagination”—a fragrance that provides a chance to “travel forward to the past; obtain that which is elusive”; and “allows what is forbidden.” There is a blurring of Western time (“travel forward to the past”)—signifying the West as the present, the modern, the sophisticated, the familiar; and the Orient, on the contrary, is signified as the past, the backward, the simpler, the mysterious. There is also a blending of apparent contraries (“allows what is forbidden,” “obtain that which is elusive”)—depicting the Orient as the desired and the conquered, the West as the one that desires and conquers. And the exoticism of the Orient makes it seem unusual and difficult to get and thus more desirable.

These images also apply to the gender dimension of the ad. The signs in the photo also hint at its sexual contrast—the feminine Orient and the masculine West. The qualities attached to the scenery above are the ones usually associated with Oriental women—modesty, seclusion, submissiveness, and feminine charm. The Chinese fan, which often appears in dancing balls and costume parties and is used by women to cover their faces, suggests the alluring delicacy, reserve, and mystery surrounding Oriental women. The dreamlike superimposition of the fan onto the whole scene gives the ad an extra sense of mystery and further provokes audience’s imagination. And through the Revlon product, this archetypal exotic femininity can be transferred to Western women. The qualities the perfume represents and offers to its female consumers coincide with characters women are imbued with and expected to have in western patriarchal societies, particularly in contrast to those of their male counterparts—tenderness, simplicity, passivity, and domesticity (as the serene Oriental site suggests); this is in contrast to male aggressiveness, sophistication, activity, and working outside. The contrast between the West and the Orient is thus transplanted to the relationship between men and women—men being superior to women as the Occident is superior to the Orient; women being the object to be obtained and dominated and men being the subject to explore and dominate as the Orient is the conquered and the West is the conqueror.

Opium is an opulent Oriental fragrance by French designer Yves Saint Laurent. Smoldering and dramatic, the fragrance is unveiled with spicy, fruity notes that lead to a rich bouquet of heady florals. Underscoring the composition is an exotic melange of sweet aromatic woods and incense. It is claimed to be made for “grand entrances and seductive evenings.” The Oriental theme is carried into the product from its name, scent, packaging design, and advertising campaign.

At first sight, apart from the perfume name, nothing in this photo seems to relate to the Orient. Yet it is in the implied symbolic signs that the race/gender themes are conveyed. Opium, the name of the fragrance and most important signifier in this ad, always reminds people of the unhealthy but intoxicating pleasures drugs offer. It is something seducing yet devastating—just like feminine sexuality. Opium is a species native to western Asia and southeastern Europe. It is cultivated extensively in many Asian and Central and South American countries. Historically opium was also the weapon with which the Western conquerors broke open the Chinese door and spread their imperialist expansion. It is an object which often reminds people of the distant East and the West’s conquering of the Orient.

In this ad, the qualities of opium are grafted onto the visual imagery of the female model. Paradigmatically, the major and almost single color of black sets the tone of the ad. It is a color of sexual appeal, licentiousness, and moral depravity. The model, wearing black tights and camisole, is extremely seducing. Her upheld arms and half-open lips are sexually inviting. Cornered into the middle of two huge mirrors, the model is ready for, yet venerable, at the same time, to male encroachment. Just like the rich and mysterious fragrance entitled Opium, the model is meant to be enticing and seduce men. By wearing this perfume, women seem to have the power to conquer men. However, this kind of portrayal still doesn't escape the traditional image of women as men's objects whose life goal and role are to serve male (sexual) needs and desire. The whole imagery reveals women's sexual orientation as well as submission to men. In addition, another important sign in this ad is the scarlet bottle in front of the model's foot which is especially eye-catching as its color sharply contrasts with that of the rest of the photo. Scarlet itself is a color with usual references to passion, womanly appeal, and adultery. The red perfume bottle is just like the opium poppy, as in the first ad, which symbolizes Eastern fascination, excitement, and forbidden pleasure. And the message here is clear: it is the substance within that red bottle, the Opium fragrance, which endows women with all these alluring qualities.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, some conclusions may be drawn now. As an increasing theme in western women perfume advertisements, the image of the Orient has been fully exploited as a marketing strategy to promote products. The inclusion of the Oriental images not only helps companies to profit off a domestically as well as internationally multi-racial consumer base, but also gives their perfumes a distinctive appeal by celebrating their exotic qualities and the consequent pleasure and power they seem to offer. Underlying these advertising strategies, however, are some ideologies and ideas embedded in western culture. The representation of the Orient in women perfume advertisements reveals the gender and racial hierarchies that have existed and still exist in some western societies.

The paper has examined, through a semiotic analysis, three advert pictures which best exemplify the three types of western women perfume adverts that combine race and gender in their imagery creation. In the first type, Oriental women figures are used as the focal images whereas the second type employs Oriental sceneries and objects as its major signifiers. Another type of adverts mainly has western women figures in them, but these figures are given Oriental qualities. All three types of adverts, though different in their signifying processes, relate to some gendered stereotypes within western patriarchal societies and racial prejudices of the West about the East. The Orientalist notion of the Orient as the culturally-inferior Other of the West converges with the concept of women as the gender-inferior Other of men. The Orient in the perfume ads is portrayed as exotic, mysterious, and submissive. These characters correlate to women's feminine sexuality, domestic role, and subordination to men in western societies. The representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements is generally masculine, objectifying both Eastern and Western women as the visual and sexual target of White men. The exoticization/eroticization of the Orient and women re-affirm the supremacy and domination of the West and men.

Notes

¹ These can be found in Berger's *Ways of seeing* (1977); Betterton's *Looking on: Images of femininity in the visual arts and media* (1987); Bordo's *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body* (1993); Cortese's *Provocateur: Images of women and minorities in advertising* (1999); Goffman's *Gender advertisements* (1979); Kilbourne's *Deadly persuasion: Why women and girls must fight the addictive power of advertising* (1999); Manca & Manca's *Gender & utopia in advertising: A critical reader* (1994); and Williams' *Decoding advertisements: Ideology and meaning in advertising* (1978).

² The Orient in Orientalism refers to the romanticized and misunderstood "Other" as against the Occident (mainly Europe and the United States, but which includes the Middle East, North Africa, and Far East). This paper, in its analysis of the representation of the Orient in western women perfume advertisements, will mainly focus on the Asian part of it, as Asian images constitute a large proportion of, and the most often adopted, Oriental images in present western women perfume advertisements.

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