

The Sexualization of Male Body in Perfume Advertisements in the Period of 2010-2013

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### Abstract

This research explains male body sexualization and discloses its motives in the 21st century's American society through four perfume advertisements in the period of 2010 to 2013 which employ the unforeseen eroticized and sexualized images of men that raise questions among the male body. This research is conducted using semiotics and socio-cultural approach. The findings show sexualization of male body is implemented through nudity, ambiguous sexuality and narrative tales & concepts in contemplation of extending the market into metrosexual men, heterosexual women, and homosexual men. They reveal the new portrayal of men's masculinity –i.e metrosexuality.

*Keywords:* sexualization, metrosexuality, male body, perfume advertisement

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Since the early years of perfume advertising, advertisers have explored and exploited men and women as objects to serve their commercial purposes. Ever since perfume advertising no longer used unvarnished images to describe its product; flowers to describe the floral fragrance, fruits to the citrus, forest to the woody & spicy and so on, they explored the human body and exploited its cultural values. While political distinction in patriarchal society puts women in disadvantageous position, men are also exploited through some negotiations to maintain the traditional hegemonic masculinity (Kartini, 2010). However, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the birth of a new portrayal of men in perfume advertising. The conventional stereo-typically masculine attributes such as professionalism, activism, and holder of power that were commodified to sell the products were soon replaced by mere nudity where traditional portrayals of detached gaze and non-exposed body are subverted.

*Sex Sell* uses sensuality and eroticism to promote sex appeal, making the new portrayal of men is indeed a contrast to the traditional masculinity as in Marlboro advertisements and is more decorative in nature (McGrath, 2006). It is no longer important to show cultural and political values of men that the representation is shifted by frank nudity. Political values that were once used as the commodity are then deviated into potential libido from the aesthetics, passion, sensuality and eroticism of the male body. Relating to the appearance of sexualized images of men, McGrath (2006), Alchemlal (2014) and Blair (2014) argue that men are starting to appear as a sex object. Voyeurism is no longer exclusively imposed on men as the spectator and women as the object of sexual gazing –making men not immune to voyeurism. Burson (2006) explains the possibility of Laura Mulvey's male gaze extension. Erotized male body creates space for

women (as well as men) as active voyeurs of erotic male spectacles. This further opens up spaces regarding the male body in its political functions.

As the proliferation of male sexualized body is happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, physically and sexually ideal men who just merely show the aesthetic function of the body appears more often. Muscularity and attractiveness become the focal point of men's image. Rohlinger (2002) and McGrath (2006) argue that sexual exposure to men is prominent and constant. Sexualized men are not only a short-term advertising trend but turn into the representation of masculinity. When men's exploitation employs the same method to women's, it consequently poses the exact threats that women have been dealing for centuries. The new ideal image of men dictates how men should look to be perceived as masculine, muscular and attractive. Alongside LGBTQ movements and its approbation in the United States, sexuality and gender expression in the society vary. Masculinity also develops along the way with the emergence of metrosexuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has first been introduced by Simpson (1994). Metrosexual men refer to young men who live in an urban area and spend much of their money to improve their appearances. As an advertisement both reflects and creates social norms (Schroeder, 2004), the representation of the sexualized male body in advertisement reshapes masculinity in some extends.

Rohlinger (2002) and McGrath (2006) have noticed the constant occurrence of over-exposed and sexualized men image in advertising even though the number differs between years. However, while the apparent picture speaks volume, the approach of male body sexualization and its motives is unexplored. This research aims to explain how the male body is sexualized and answer the reasons why. Four still perfume advertisements of Marc Jacob "*BANG*" (2010), Yves Saint Laurent "*Kouros*" (2011), Versace "*Eros*" (2012) and Jean Paul Gaultier "*Le Bleu Male*" (2013) are taken as data to answer these questions.

### Methods

This research is descriptive qualitative research to analyze the phenomenon of male sexualization through media product of perfume advertisement. An advertisement not only promotes a product but also conveys a certain cultural concept (Fiske, 1990). It reflects and constructs social belief and ideology through image, sound, text and so on. The inability of perfume advertisement to describe scents put values as the dominant motives behind the photographic elements presented in the text.

This research explains sexualization and its motives in four American perfume printed advertisements. The four sources of data are the four perfume advertisements of Marc Jacobs “*BANG*” (2010), Yves Saint Laurent “*Kouros*” (2011), Versace “*Eros*” (2012) and Jean Paul Gaultier “*Le Beau Male*” (2013) that have been taken from an American online perfume magazine; [www.fragrantica.com](http://www.fragrantica.com). In collecting the advertisements I applied categorizations as follows: Firstly, I chose perfume aimed at men. Secondly, I picked the advertisements which depict single male protagonists. Finally, I sorted the advertisements based on the category of the erotic male concept as developed by Rohlinger (2002) which are:

- a. Sexual overtones are shown because of his crotch area/penis may be illustrated in symbol or actually shown becomes the focal point of the image.
- b. Body and physical appearance are highlighted and may be used as a display area for product display area or logo.
- c. Body is emphasized and focused in plain, blurred or unclear background/setting.

Out of 28 advertisements which fit the categorization, I limited them into taking one advertisement each year from 2010 to 2013 as samples to emphasize the consistency of using the

sexualized male body in recent years. The data taken from them are in the forms of expressions, poses, colors, gazes and all of the photographic elements in the advertisements which function as the signifiers. Then, the data were analyzed using the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes (1968) which connects the sign with the myth of the culture, in which in this study the myth of masculinity.

### Result

Sexualization in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century perfume advertisements presents the male body, not in its biological functions rather in its political functions. Even though men are represented in nudity, their bodies are not absent; Piliang stated that human body, containing a symbol, image, simulation, and artifice, is the central point of economy-politics in a capitalist society (Piliang, 2006). The aesthetic, passion, sensuality and eroticism inside the body are used as a commodity to sell another commodity. Here, pornography “makes human bodies as the part of the political economy of the sign system.” (Kartini, 2010, p. 24). Marc Jacobs “*BANG*” (2010), Yves Saint Laurent “*Kouros*” (2011), Versace “*Eros*” (2012) and Jean Paul Gaultier “*Le Beau Male*” (2013) advertisements show the exposure and exploitation of male body and its sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. To comprehend the phenomenon of male body sexualization, both body and space surrounding it should be analyzed.

One of the main units to analyze sexualization of the male body is the names of the perfumes which are also titles of the advertisements. Contradictory to the late era of perfume advertisements where titles were more conservative and appropriate, these 21<sup>st</sup>-century advertisements are blatantly provocative and straightforward. In 2011’s Marc Jacobs advertisement, the name and title “*BANG*” is used. It is taken from urban slang *Bang* to address sexual intercourse where the female is mounted from behind. This submissive position suggests

high a degree of male aggression. It also represents the position of homosexual sexual intercourse with similar distinctive power between partners. Written in all capital letters, “*BANG*” implicates over-sexual theme of the advertisement just by its title. Similar to it, 2013’s Jean Paul Gaultier also adopts the same method of entitling. “*Le Beau Male*” is French words for “beautiful men”. The literal translation is a straightforward approach to describe the male and masculine representation in the 2013’s Jean Paul Gaultier advertisement. These titles frame the issue of each advertisement.

As provocative as the title “*BANG*” of 2010 Marc Jacob fragrance, the main object of the advertisement is also presented in an erotic manner. Marc Jacob himself as the model presents his male body to be the focal point of the advertisement as he lays fully naked on a bed of crushed aluminum foil and shot from the bird angle. The picture is very vivid; the body is highlighted and the reflections from the foils illuminate it even more. In 2011 “*Kouros*” by Yves Saint Laurent (YSL)’s perfume advertisement, the male body also becomes the focal point by the centered shot to the torso. All four advertisements show male in average height and slim muscular figure. The muscles, however, are densely toned instead of hulking. Biceps and triceps are slightly toned whereas abdominal muscles and pectoral muscles are the most developed. Thus, this picture conforms to the contemporary gay aesthetics on the depiction of the lean, taut and sinuous muscled body instead of huge bulky muscles like the 80s action star Arnold Schwarzenegger has (Ron Long in *Bordo* 2000). For *Bordo* (2000), the type of body mentioned above talks flexible, dynamic, by means in sex is preferable, more erotic and sexy. Large biceps and triceps suggest physical strength where muscular torso and V-shaped figure highlight the pelvic area and suggest men’s vitality.

As the ideal body becomes the focal point of photography in the advertisement, 2012's "*Kouros*" by YSL even embeds it as the main theme. "*Kouros*" is taken from Greek famous standing nude sculpture of men that represents youth. A kouros does not represent any person in particular, yet it presents male body perfection by employing symmetrical and anatomical precision to marble block to achieve proportional and life-sized statue. This new ideal male body shape is also featured by flawless hairless skin, clean-cut attractive faces and sleek styled hair.

Contradictory to the previous era when men were often presented in his natural state, all of the models in the four advertisements are good-looking and perfectly groomed. The skin is clear and unblemished from stain, scar or tattoos. Excluding the 2013's Jean Paul Gaultier's "*Le Beau Male*" where tattoos are used to indicate and enhance sexuality and theme, all of the advertisements show neat and immaculate male body. Men's masculinity that was once shown by hairy chest and facial hair notably mustache and beard have altered to the groomed attractive men as 2013's Jean Paul Gaultier's title: "*Le Beau Male*" or Beautiful men. This phenomenon arises as more men are less homophobic and more tolerable to stereotypically feminine qualities.

Metrosexual allows heterosexual men to belong to a group with traditionally feminine or homosexual characteristic without being labeled as such. Dewing (2007) has explained that not being homophobic is a result of comfort on one's own (hetero)sexuality: "as long as (heterosexual) man is secure in his (hetero) sexuality, he can engage comfortably with homosexual men and in behavior traditionally sanction for women." (p.46). Even though all of the four advertisements show naked male bodies, the phalluses are posed by the perfume bottle rather than actually shown. In 2010's Marc Jacob "*BANG*" and 2012's "*Eros*" by Versace advertisements, as the models' crotch area become the center points enormous perfume figures stand sturdily before the male privates. These perfume figures acting as property are representing



the phallus. This representation suggests that the men's masculinity and sexual aura are contained in the bottle of fragrance: that one might achieve for buying and wearing the product. As Simpson (1994) has argued that metrosexual is a commodity fetishist: a collector of fantasies about the male sold to him by advertising.

Major changes in men representation in the advertisements are not only acknowledged by the body and physical appearances but also the way men are presented. As the object in the advertisements, men are presented comparatively to sex object (McGrath, 2006; Alchemlal, 2014; Blair, 2014). Sexual objectification appears only when the body is evaluated through gaze. The most subtle & deniable way sexualized evaluation is enacted through gaze or visual inspection of the body (Kaschak, 1992). When previous era of the perfume advertising still manages to preserve hegemonic masculinity (Kartini, 2010), the four advertisements show total subversion of how male body would conventionally be portrayed. One of them is the voyeuristic gaze. When Bordo (2000) has found that Calvin Klein could make a shirtless man posing and showing his body with his head looking slightly downward away from the camera to be willing of subordination, 2010 "*BANG*" advertisement deliberately challenge the voyeur. The model looks down straight to the camera while biting his lips: the universal body language of flirting. It is obvious that it is more provocative rather than just merely inviting. Gaze signifies "a psychological relationship of power and sexuality in which the gazer dominates the object of the gaze." (Schroeder, 2004, p. 30). Theory of gaze is often applied in the relation of dominant men and submissive women. However, *BANG* advertisement displays men as the submissive part in provocative manners. The title "*BANG*" does not imply the positive meaning of dominant men. Instead, allowing the domination over the body presented as he poses erotically on a bed of aluminum foils mimicking a ready-to-serve food.

There is no negotiation to maintain the hegemonic masculinity since the absence of other attributes to aid it. The male body is presented erotically submissive to the gazer to consume. Susan Moore (as cited in Burston, 2000) explains that the codes and conventions associated with gay porn (since they always eroticized male body) have created a different space for women as well as men as active voyeurs of erotic male spectacles. However, they do not only exist in gay porn: general media products like advertisement also apply erotic male which invites voyeuristic gaze for both women and homosexual men. Olin (1996) has explained that interpersonally, the gaze “corresponds to desire, the desire for self-completion through other.” (p.20). Heterosexual men spectator also conjoins as erotic male to promote ideal body image for heterosexual men. A similar technique is also applied to 2013’s Jean Paul Gaultier “*Le Beau Male*” where the model sits leaning to the front with his legs closed behind him and flirtatiously looks straightly to the voyeur. His pose is mermaid-like; supporting the sailor theme of the ads identified by the white-navy stripped tees hanging on his shoulder.

2013’s Jean Paul Gaultier fragrance, “*Le Beau Male*”, adopts sailor theme in the advertisements. Not only the model, but the sailor identity is also found in the over-sexualized perfume bottle whereas it takes shape of a male torso in white-navy stripes. The model has a tattoo of a mermaid and waves on his shoulder to enhance a point. Mermaid is a mythical creature having the upper body of a woman and tail of a fish that exists in many cultures throughout the world. Mermaids are described as beautiful, mysterious as well as lethal. They lure sailors to doom with their attractiveness and enchanting melodies. Even though there are different conceptions on this popular mythology around the world, the main symbolizations of mermaid are seduction, allure, and flirtation. With these sexual attributes, mermaids in popular culture are highly correlated to femininity; creating stories and tales about the princess of the sea

like the most popular re-creation by Disney entitled *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The original story of *The Little Mermaid* was written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1835 based on his love letters with his beloved friend Edvard Collin (Thorpe, 2015). The story suggests strong implications about gay love at the era; mysterious, tempting yet impossible. The mermaid represents Andersen and his homosexual desire toward Collin and his inability to express his love physically. Mermaids, due to their fish physiology, cannot perform any sexual intercourse other than oral sex. Oral sex is a powerful indicator of homosexual impulse. As an almost completely male environment, maritime took mermaid as an icon for homosexual sub-culture. The use of mermaid as tattoo among sailor then became the symbol of homosexuals; wearing mermaid tattoo indicates availability and enjoyment of performing oral sex (Orson, 2013). Thus, the usage of mermaid tattoo in the advertisement strongly advised seduction, allure, flirtation in a homosexual context.

A particular theme is also found in the 2012's Versace "*Eros*" advertisement. Adopting Greek mythology, "*Eros*" takes passion and desire as the main theme. Eros is a god of sexual desire worshiped as fertility god that in Roman counterfeit and later Western culture adapted into Cupid: a little baby angel that able to make people fall in love with his bow and arrow. The word Eros means love based merely on lust. In Greek mythology, Eros is a son of Aphrodite –the goddess of beauty. Eros is often associated with same-sex desire. He was regarded as "the protector of homosexual love between men" (Conner, 1998, p.132). While the sexual notion is clearly shown in the theme, "*Eros*" is also associated with athleticism and body perfection. His statue is erected in the gymnasium: a training facility for public games in ancient Greece era where athletes were competing naked as appreciation for male body aesthetic. It is represented by the steady pose of the model with his muscular naked body. His phallus is represented by the

perfume bottle shaped in a square and carved with another Greek mythology, Medusa. Gianni Versace took the myth of Medusa as the face of his brand long ago. Medusa was a beautiful maiden desired by many male Gods. Out of jealousy, Athena turned her hair into snakes and cursed her that everyone who ever saw her eyes would turn into stone. In the modern narrative, Medusa is often presented as a monstrous and villainous figure. However, in the Versace logo, Medusa represents a breathtaking beauty, its power, and strength by displaying her head in the center of the logo encircled by the Greek key. Greek key is a geometrical pattern usually engraved at temples or pottery to represent infinity and unity. The pattern is also embossed on the piece of cloth on the model's shoulder. Just as Medusa in the logo, the Greek key also surrounds the men through the red embossed silk cloth on his shoulder. It represents the new portrayal of Medusa in the form of men: distributing female eternal beauty and power that Medusa possesses into a male body. The borrowed femininity is wrapped with passion and sensuality represented by the red silk cloth and blue color scheme in the background.

In 2013's Jean Paul Gaultier "*Le Beau Male*" advertisement, model is presented in an arctic setting. He poses on pelt rug made from a polar bear on top of the glacier. One of his hands touches the ice as it melts. Animal pelt rug represents power, strength and hunting prowess. Despite its primitive conduct, animal pelt rug is still popular in the modern era to show power and class –as it is expensive, rare and antique. A polar bear is often understood as a ferocious animal and also symbolizes strength and fierceness: the characteristics that define masculine (Schippers, 2007). However, Polar bear in its natural habitat is a playful and nurturing animal. It carries the strongest notion of motherly love as the animal is profoundly gentle and protecting towards its cubs. The polarity describes masculine and feminine traits that exist hand in hand in one. As the model sits on top of the polar bear rug, it represents men stance on the middle of

both: refusing to take stance on the black and white boundaries on conventional masculine and feminine categorization. Metrosexuality demonstrates how male identity can also be entailed by the traditionally feminine traits. This idea is also depicted by the melting ice on the model's touch. Masculinity is often presented in ice or cold as men were expected to conceal emotion: expressing feelings is closely related to female traits that if men do so they are considered weak. On the contrary, affection is depicted by warmness: a traditionally feminine trait which in the advertisement is depicted physically by the model's ability to survive the freezing environment and even able to melt the ice. The reciprocate traits applied to male body further confirm the representation of new men and their flexibility on gender expressions.

How the titles, themes, attributes, and traits are affiliated to the male body which was contradictory to the traditional representation of men redefines the hegemonic masculinity. The traditional representation of masculine men is shifted to metrosexual men where men are more tolerable and utilized to the traditionally feminine traits and appearances, yet is also portrayed in a similar method. Consequently, men are not immune to objectification. How the advertisements present men in sexualizing way, showing the male body as only the collection of body parts and exploiting of its sex appeal, turn men into a sex object. According to Barky in Fredrickson (1997), sexual objectification occurs whenever "sexual functions are separated out from the person." (p.175). A person is disregarded as a whole and only seen for its body and its sexual appeal. Not only that the objectified individual would experience the physiological effects, but consumer of the media products would also be affected by the perpetuating exposure of the new ideal body of men.

Fredrickson (1997) explains that there is a physiological effect on the individual who is being sexually objectified: the observer's perspective is internalized on self (self-objectification).

It leads to a high concern among body image and appearance: physical appearance becomes the main matter. As a result, body-building, grooming culture and cosmetic surgery for men are starting to grow in the United States. The ideal body of men the advertisements present is both inspiring and demanding for men. Men are willing to spend time 14 hours a week in the gym alongside taking a daily protein shake and supplements to lose weight and get the idealized body shape and muscles. The previously feminine culture of grooming is starting to expand: Men become consuming beauty products. Among them are perfume, hair gel, hair dye, skin care products such as moisturizer and also makeups. US consumer culture also enforces it by exclusively selling products for men. Cosmetics companies expand their product line citing the words “For Men” making the worldwide sales of men’s grooming product reach US\$ 7.3 billion in 2002. This equates 15% of all beauty products sold (Miller, 2005, p. 114). Men have not only reached for consumer goods but also surgical enhancement. “Now in 21st century, cosmetic surgery is viewed as another way of seeking self-improvement.” (Ricciardelli, 2011, p. 953). The most common procedure taken is Botox wherein as early as 2000 it is already taken by at least 284.000 American men. Other procedures involve chemical peels, laser hair removal, and steroid injection or implant. Men are starting to go under the knife to achieve the ideal body and look. Harter, as cited in Fredrickson (1992) explains that “physical appearance is the most important domain contributing to the children and young adolescents’ senses of self-worth (female and male alike), outpacing social acceptance, scholastic & athletic competence and behavioral conduct.” (Fredrickson, 1992, p. 179). Physical appearance becomes the main medium in which individual regards those values. When an individual is too concern about physical appearance as the result of self-objectification, it leads to the further effect of mental health risks such as eating disorder, depression and sexual dysfunction. It is reported that a million US men are diagnosed

with body dysmorphic disorder: a disorder that involves a belief that one's own appearance is unusually defective and is worthy of being hidden or fixed. There is also an invention of the Adonis complex: a specific type of body dysmorphic disorder which involves fear of being too small (Miller, 2005, p. 115).

### **Conclusion**

Male body sexualization undeniably exists and becomes a pattern in perfume advertising. Male body is sexualized by three main approaches: (1) nudity or exposing men's bare body where phallus is either being covered or symbolized; (2) ambiguous sexuality or male body is portrayed as fluid where both masculine and feminine attires are interchangeably attached to the body; (3) narrating tales and concept or the body is presented along with concept and story to invite imagination to the voyeurs. Thus, the study confirms that advertising industry sexualizes male body to extend the market into (1) metrosexual men; (2) homosexual men and (3) heterosexual women. The constant sexualized images of men are gradually re-shaping masculinity; inducing metrosexuality as the new masculinity.

This study finds that metrosexuals adopt both the traditionally feminine traits and the contemporary gay culture, especially the gay aesthetics. In some ways, metrosexuality allows men to express themselves as individuals by refusing the gender binary. However, gay aesthetic appropriation by heterosexual men is not an act of inclusiveness for the minority group since it creates a new boundary of 'metrosexuality' that presents a whole different notion in the society – suggesting the refusal of the label. Instead, the appropriation constructs new ideal of masculinity: higher standard for men to achieve the new identity. The study argues that metrosexuals are the product of capitalist society, fueled by consumerism where one's identity is determined through purchased products. The standard set by metrosexuality is only going to pose men as another

victim of capitalist society, to consume, which initially correlates with feminine attributes. Thus, metrosexuality blurs the strict binary between feminine and masculine traits.



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