Imagine That!
Stimulating Consumers' Imagination for Scented Product Omnichannel Success

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Abstract

Distribution channels for scented products rarely interact. Consumers either smell and buy scented products in store or purchase them online without smelling. Such channel isolation is inefficient. To achieve synergies, we propose a new omnichannel strategy, rooted in the neurobiology of olfaction, unique to scented products. The key is to design product packages (i.e., scent names and artwork) that stimulate consumers' imagination, or olfactory imagery, aiming to maximize curiosity and intent to try. Unlike extant omnichannel strategies deployed at the retail phase, our recommendations are at the product design phase where the scented product package is the strategy.

> *"I think an element of 'guess the smell' is a fun game."* [1]
> *— Anya Hindmarch, British designer*

Introduction

Sophie just moved to a new apartment and wants to add a personal touch with a pair of new scented candles. She plans to visit the nearest mall, smell several candles in store, and then decide which ones to buy. The typical

consumer journey for scented products – encompassing beauty, flavor and fragrance, personal care, and home care – closely resembles Sophie's, especially among millennials and Gen-Z consumers, with nearly 66% of likely online shoppers in both generations preferring to smell scented products in person before purchase.[2] Indeed, consumers want to smell before they buy, as was told to entrepreneur Abigail Stone by prospective investors as she pitched her new online scented candle shop Otherland, illustrating the key challenge of scented product managers in the digital era: bridging the wide gap between the screen and the nose, widened to a gulf by the growth of digital channels and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this challenge, scented products managers have resorted to various strategies. The first strategy, typically adopted by luxury companies, is to rely on brands themselves as an object of status and desire, thus the scented products become "an entry point into a lifestyle."[3] For example, Gucci's new line of scented candles, embellished with the house's signature motifs, heralds an "era of the $800 candle" which shows no signs of abating.[4] However, this particular strategy cannot be pursued by most brands: the selling point of these "instagrammable" products are their decorative and signaling appeal rather than their scent.[5]

A more viable strategy most commonly pursued is to facilitate consumers' online purchases with trials before commitment and easy returns. Scentbird lets consumers "date fragrances before buying them" by shipping full-sized fragrances at no charge until commitment after five days.[6,7] The Perfume Shop offers a "Try More" service with a shipment of three free samples and a "Try Me" bundle consisting of a sample and a full-size fragrance. Consumers are allowed to return the unopened full-size bottle if they are not satisfied with the sample. The strategy Scentbird and The Perfume Shop use encapsulates consumers' entire customer journey into an online channel by providing opportunities to smell the fragrance without visiting their store.

What's Missing?

Although scented product managers try to facilitate online purchases without smelling, and consumers can also gather information on how a product might smell by reading scented product descriptions, reviews from experienced users (e.g., in websites such as Fragrantica.com or Basenotes.com), and articles and posts by scent experts (e.g., fragrance designers and fashion bloggers), a crucial point is missing: focusing squarely on promoting online purchases isolates offline and online channels, which hardly promotes synergies across channels. That is, if consumers' search and fulfillment online remain mostly "self-contained,"[8] firms may largely lose benefits of consumers' visits to the store. Trials and unplanned purchases

after browsing are two such benefits. Another is social interaction: compliments on a fragrance from friends and fellow shoppers can go a long way, since compliments and trials are major drivers of scented product purchases.[9] In addition, store visits establish a valuable, additional touch point (i.e., a "direct or indirect contact with a brand, a firm, or a retailer") in the customer journey, fostering positive brand attitude and preference, establishing and solidifying customer-channel brand relationships, and developing brand awareness, trust, consumer feedback and data availability.[10-13] How can scented product managers bridge the screen to nose gap, and reap the benefits above described? Instead of focusing solely either on online or offline channel, one possibility is to utilize the online channel to steer the customer journey to the offline store, an approach known as omnichannel retailing. This approach calls for providing a seamless customer experience across channels and is a major trend across multiple product categories. Typical omnichannel strategies used by leading brands, such as Walmart, BestBuy, and Target, include "buy online, pick up in store," and providing in-store only discounts.[14,15,16]

Yet, a straightforward application of omnichannel strategies for scented product managers may not be enough, because the customer journey for scented products is far different from that for computers, groceries or other household items. Instead, we contend that the architecture of a successful scented product omnichannel strategy must be founded in understanding the unique neurobiological properties of olfaction. Unlike other senses, olfaction automatically triggers memories and emotions *even in the absence of scent itself*,[17,18] stimulating consumers to spontaneously imagine how a product would smell – this imaginative ability is referred to as olfactory imagery.[19]

This article aims to leverage this imaginative process to develop strategies uniquely tailored to impact consumer decision processes related to scented products by "nudging" consumers' imagination, fostering their desire to look for scented products in-store, resulting in effective omnichannel synergies. The proposed strategies rely on carefully integrating scent names and package artwork to trigger knowledge and experiences in memory for different consumer segments. Unlike most omnichannel strategies, which are deployed after a product has been designed (at the retailing stage), an innovation in the strategies presented here is that they are deployed at the product design stage – for scented products, packaging *is* the strategy. In the following, we explain this packaging strategy and how it can result in omnichannel synergies in the scented product category. Then, we discuss how to implement such a strategy and the crucial role of consumer segmentation to this effect.

Olfactory Imagery: Scents in the Mind

Olfactory imagery is a form of mental imagery specific to the sense of smell, independent of imageries from the other senses.[20] Just as the sense of vision can conjure "pictures in the mind,"[21] the sense of smell can invoke "odor-like mental images."[22] Olfactory imagery thus describes the sensation of smell in the absence of a physical scent, an experience that consumers can recognize as it occurs,[23-25] and which can be triggered by cues unrelated to olfaction, such as verbal cues (i.e., words).[26] This can occur because, psychologically, our cognitive system allows "dual-coding" verbal cues as well as the ability to seamlessly translate them into mental images.[27,28] For example, when consumers read the scent name "coffee," they might also mentally smell the aroma of coffee, forming olfactory imagery. This imaginative process is experienced by consumers, by activating the same brain regions that are usually stimulated when they physically smell a physical scent.[29-32] Knowing this, might scented product managers be able to carefully design scented product names that stimulate this imaginative process? We set out to see if we could answer this question.

To understand the mental imagery across the five senses that consumers might form based on a scent name, and the relative importance of olfactory imagery, we conducted a study that closely mimics a typical situation consumers would encounter when shopping for scented products online. Participants read a scent name on a computer screen, either "Lavender Bouquet" or "Floral Bouquet," reporting all the thoughts that came to mind. Thoughts associated with "Lavender Bouquet" were "purple," "a soothing bath smelling of lavender," "my grandmother because she uses a lavender perfume," "romance," and so forth; whereas thoughts activated by "Floral Bouquet" were "summertime when you can smell different kinds of flowers," "weddings," "a lot of yellows and pinks," "happiness," among others. Participants then were presented each of their thoughts and classified them as being associated with each of the five senses, or none. For example, "lavender" might be classified as matching the sense of vision (how a lavender flower might look) and olfaction (how a lavender flower might smell), but the thought "happiness" might match no specific sense.

In the absence of any physical scent, and stimulated only by the scent names on screen, participants spontaneously generated thoughts across all five senses, with thoughts associated with the sense of smell (i.e., olfactory imagery) being the second most common, following visual imagery (see Figure 1). Our evidence confirms that when consumers are exposed to scent names online, they may spontaneously imagine how the product smells based on the cues in the name.

Figure 1. Thoughts Triggered by Scent Names
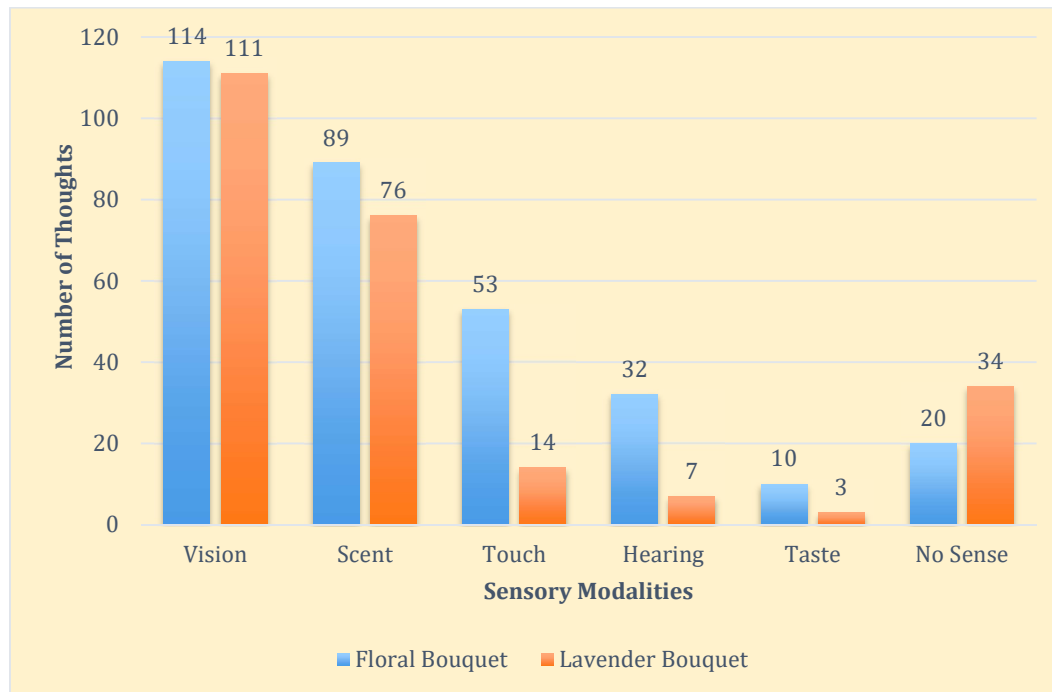
Implication #1: Consumers can imagine a scent, even when it is absent, when stimulated by scent names online. Knowing this, scented product managers should harness the power of this spontaneous imagination by strategically designing scented product names.

Benefits from Sparking Olfactory Imagery through Scent Names

The aforementioned insights invite further questions: How do managers name a scent that will trigger olfactory imagery? How can firms benefit from this imaginative process? Which scent names maximize these benefits? We unpack these questions by proposing a categorization of scent names and by verifying how exposure to such names influences consumer behavior.

Observation reveals that some scent names do not suggest the product's scent, such as proprietary names (e.g., Head & Shoulders Shampoo for Dry Hair), and highly abstract names (e.g., Bath & Body Works Shower Gel *Gingham*),[33] and others hint at the product's scent (e.g., Bath & Body Works Hand Cream *Rose*, Love Beauty and Planet Soap Bar *Bountiful Bouquet*). Focusing on this latter category of name, two types of names emerge.[34] One includes specific scent notes (i.e., scent descriptors such as apple, lavender, ginger, etc.), and the other includes general scent categories. For example, Bath & Body Works Hand Cream *Rose* is a specific scent name, explicitly suggesting the scent of rose. When consumers shop online and are exposed

to this name, it is safe to assume that they will unequivocally believe the hand cream will smell like rose. But, in contrast, Love Beauty and Planet Soap Bar *Bountiful Bouquet* is a general scent name because "Bouquet" suggests a mixture of multiple floral scents without featuring any specific scent note. Just as the proverb reads "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes." Does this mean that consumers may also have different interpretations of what flowers comprise a bouquet? Do general scent names result in a variety of different olfactory images of a floral scent? We conducted another study to test this proposition.

Participants were asked to provide feedback for a new shampoo. Half of the participants saw the specific name "Lavender Bouquet" in a computer screen while the other half saw the general name "Floral Bouquet." Next, they were asked to describe what a shampoo with the corresponding scent name might smell like. We found that those exposed to general scent names described more scents than those exposed to specific scent names. Hence, general scent names triggered more scents in consumers' olfactory imagery. Consistent with our expectation, consumers thought that "Floral Bouquet" might smell like a combination of several flowers (e.g., gardenias, iris, roses, etc.), whereas "Lavender Bouquet" just smelled like lavender.

Crucially, the olfactory imagery activated by these name types influenced consumers in different ways. After the aforementioned shampoo scent description, participants were asked to imagine this scent in their mind (i.e., to form olfactory imagery). Then they answered two follow-up questions: if given a chance to smell the actual product scent later, 1) how confident they were that their imagined scent would match the product scent and 2) how interested they were in smelling the actual scent. It turned out that since participants' olfactory imagery included more scents when presented with "Floral Bouquet" than "Lavender Bouquet," people were less sure of how the shampoo might smell, thereby feeling *less confident* that their olfactory imagery would be precise (see Figure 2). Counterintuitively, this lack of confidence did not dissuade participants; instead, they reported a *higher* interest in smelling the actual shampoo than participants who saw "Lavender Bouquet" (see Figure 3). Hence, while it is generally believed that consumer confidence in a given product positively impacts product trial or purchase,[35] we find that low confidence in the accuracy of the imagined scent actually enhances consumer interest in scented product trial (i.e., smelling the product).
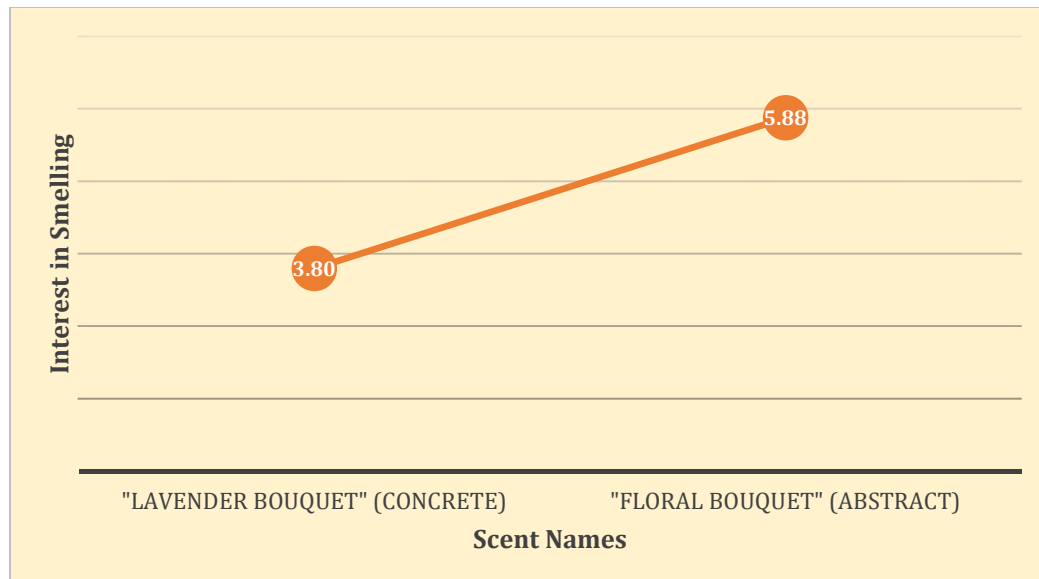
Figure 2. Consumers' Confidence in the Extent to Which Their Olfactory Imagery is Identical to the Actual Product Scent Based on *Scent Names*
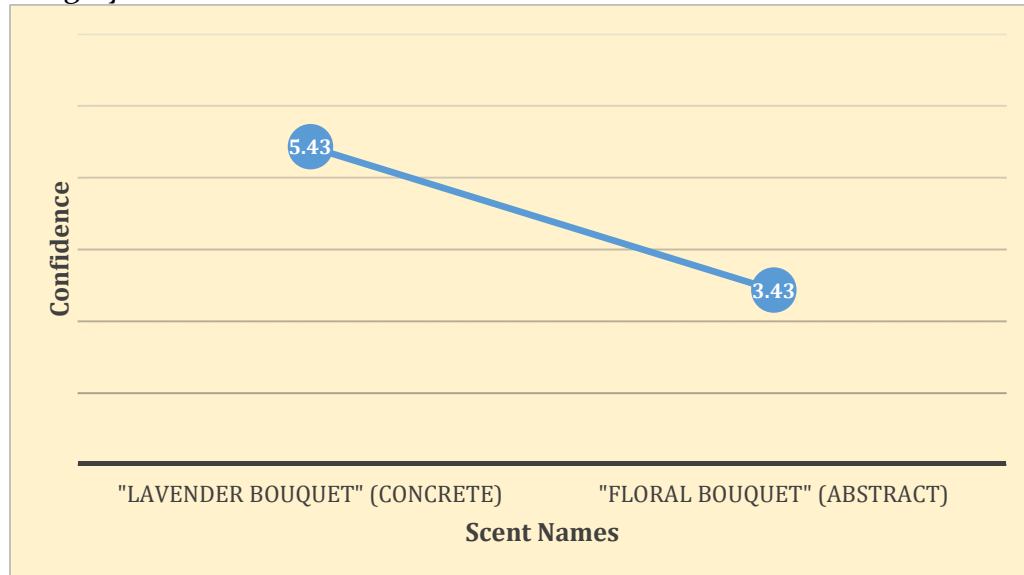
Figure 3. Consumers' Interest in Smelling the Actual Product Scent Based on *Scent Names*

Implication #2: General scent names are a powerful "teaser" that stimulates online shoppers' desire to smell scented products, thereby driving them to physical stores for product trial. Careful scent name choices at the packaging design stage can bridge the gap between nose and screen, facilitating omnichannel synergies.

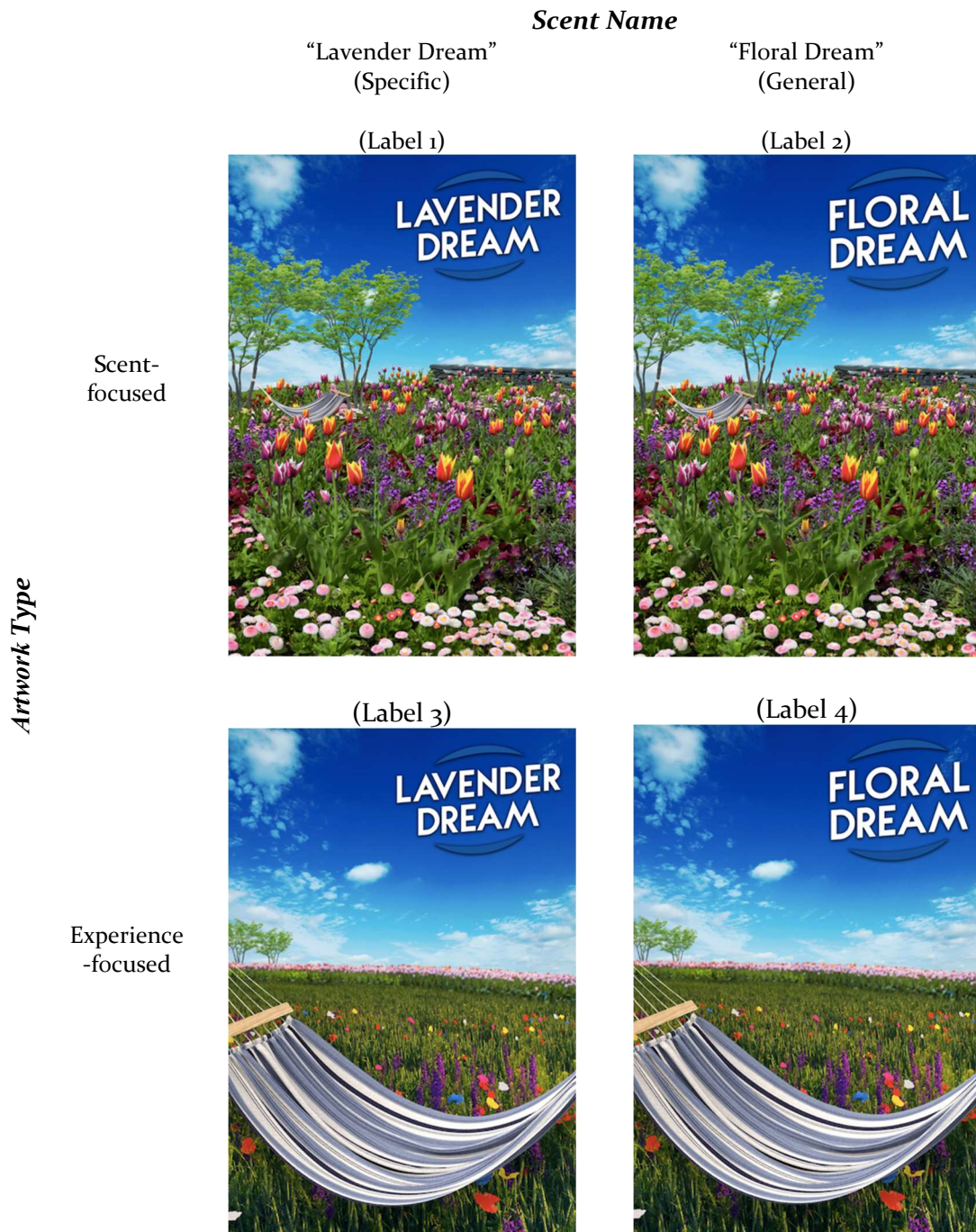**Package Artwork Further Reshapes the Imaginative Process**

In addition to verbal cues, previous research shows that another external cue, pictures, can trigger olfactory imagery as well.[36,37] Pictures are commonly used to this effect in print advertisement, resulting in increased consumption.[38,39] For example, when consumers imagine the smell of chocolate chip cookies based on a picture, they salivate more and consume more actual cookies, a phenomenon termed "smellizing."[40]

Some scented product brands display verbal cues on product packages — for instance, a Zara scented candle only displays the name "Fleur D'Oranger." Others include both a scent name and graphic artwork —a Bath & Body Works shower gel bottle may feature the scent name "White Jasmines" along with artwork of jasmines on the bottle. In the latter case, the scent-focused artwork refers to the scent object, directly communicating how the product would smell. Alternatively, some artwork is experience-focused, attempting to relate the product's scent to a pleasant place or experience by showing a beach view, a night scene, a Christmas tree with lights and gifts, and the like —Yankee Candle's "Garden Picnic" candle features a picnic scene on the jar. Artwork therefore not only serves to improve a scented product package's visual appeal, but also provides further scent information. Since the interplay of visual cues (scent- *vs.* experience-focused) and verbal cues (specific *vs.* general) on scented product package results in different designs, would olfactory imagery be further reshaped, resulting in different outcomes regarding confidence and interest in smelling? And, which designs are most effective for omnichannel synergies?

To explore, we designed four labels per the above combinations (see Figure 4), with similar names as the earlier study: the specific scent name "Lavender Dream" and the general scent name "Floral Dream." Scent-focused artwork was designed with a flower field at the front, drawing consumers' attention to imagine these flowers' scents, whereas experience-focused artwork was constructed with a hammock shown prominently in front of the flower field, reminding consumers of an outdoorsy, relaxing experience on a pleasant spring day. We put these labels to the test in an additional study where participants were randomly assigned to observe one of the four labels, presented as scented candle labels. After observing their assigned label, participants described what the scented candle would smell like based on the label, imagined its scent in their mind, and reported their confidence and interest in smelling the actual scent if given a chance.

**Figure 4.** Four Labels for Scented Candle Packages

Scent Name

"Lavender Dream"   "Floral Dream"
(Specific)   (General)

(Label 1)   (Label 2)

Artwork Type

Scent-
focused

(Label 3)   (Label 4)

Experience
-focused

In general, findings are consistent with our previous study: consumers' confidence in the accuracy of their imagined scents is negatively correlated with their interest in smelling the actual product scent (see Figures 5 and 6). In other words, the larger number of scents in olfactory imagery, the lower confidence consumers would have in the accuracy of their imagined scents, yet the higher interest consumers would have in smelling the actual product scent. As noted, managers should focus on designing labels that generate more scents in consumers' imagination, leading to lower confidence yet higher interest in smelling. However, crucially, not all labels investigated optimally tapped into consumers' imaginative process.

Figure 5. Consumers' Confidence in the Extent to Which Their Olfactory Imagery is Identical to the Actual Product Scent Based on the *Four Scent Labels*
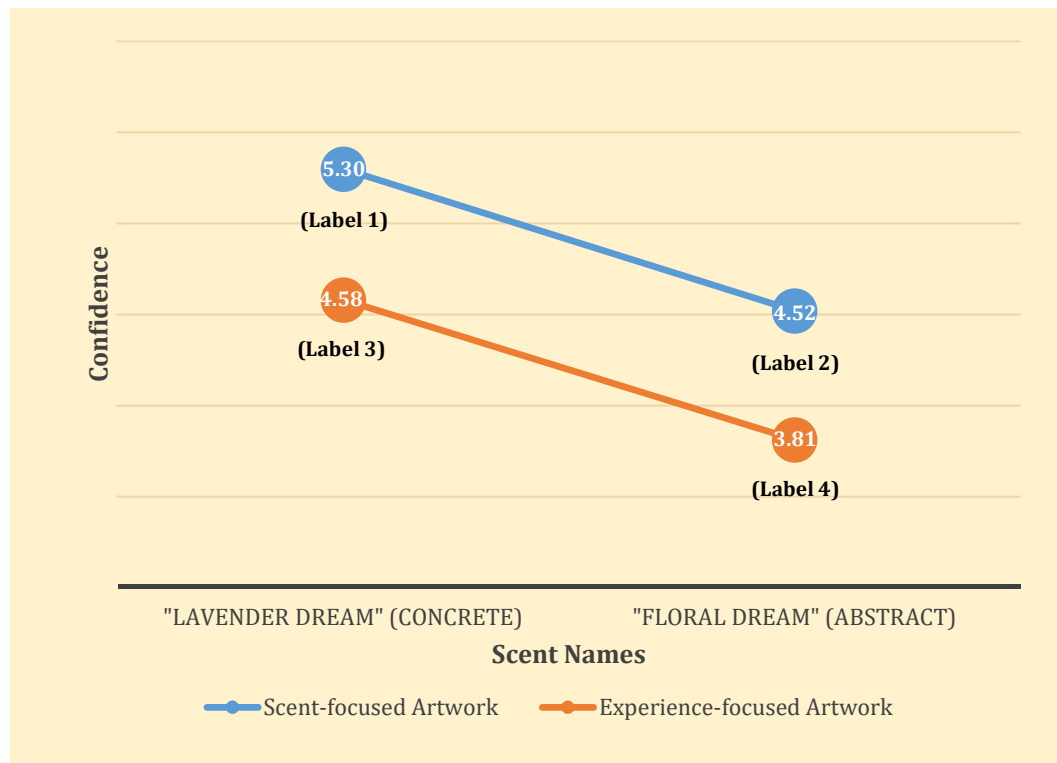
Figure 6. Consumers' Interest in Smelling the Actual Product Scent Based on the *Four Scent Labels*
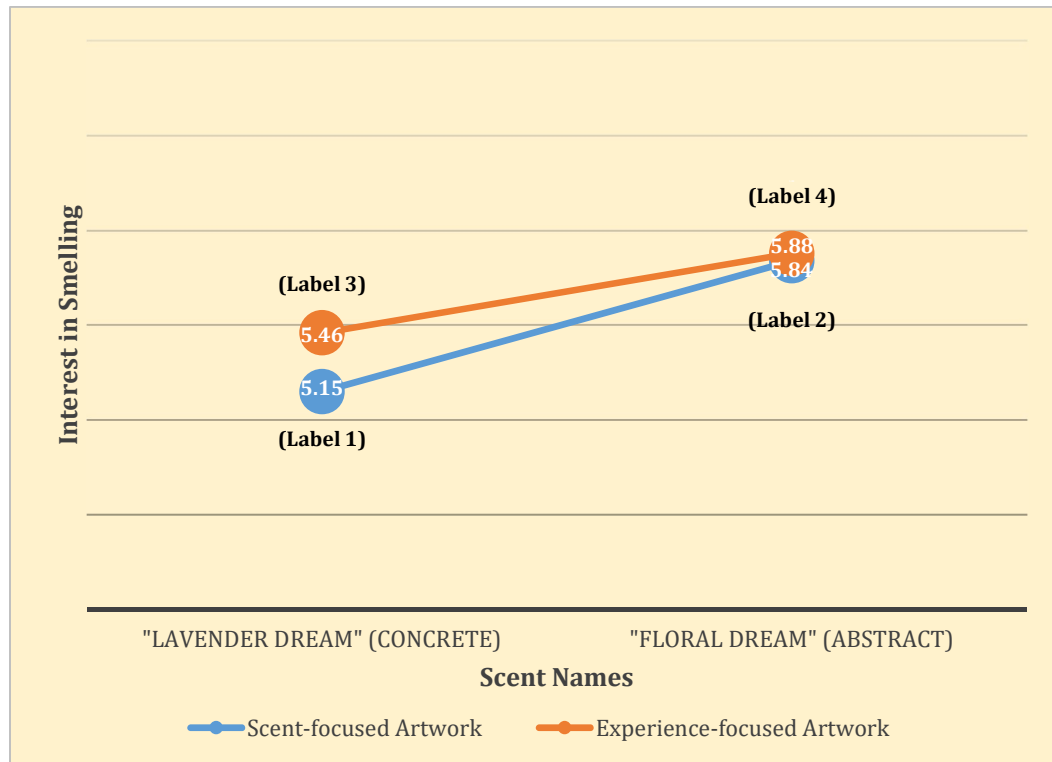
Per Figure 6, labels 2, 3, and 4 develop similarly high interest in smelling, with label 1 performing significantly worse. Among the three effective labels, label 4 features experience-focused artwork and a general scent name, while labels 2 and 3 include either experience-focused artwork or a general scent name. While this confirms the more effective nature of general scent names, these findings suggest that experience-focused artwork is also more helpful to encourage imagination than scent-focused artwork. For example, the experience-focused artwork in our study (hammock front and center) may make consumers imagine themselves lying down on the hammock enjoying a spring breeze amidst the fragrant smell of flowers. Such an experience-driven imagination might result in more free associations, not limiting olfactory imagery only to the flowers shown in the artwork. We believe that general scent names and experience-focused artwork (whether alone or in combination) truly lets consumers' imagination fly and most likely results in omnichannel synergies.

Label 1, in stark contrast, stifles the imagination, as it provides precise scent name information via scent-focused artwork and a specific scent name. Although the artwork features lavenders, tulips, roses, and more, leading consumers to imagine how every flower might smell, their thinking process

has already substantially focused on olfaction. Meanwhile, the specific scent name "Lavender Dream" heavily cues a lavender scent, further helping consumers pin down what exact scent to expect. Such precise information leaves no ambiguity and room for imagination. If one already knows what lavender smells like, what's the point of visiting a store?

Implication #3: General scent names and / or experience-focused artwork are most likely to result in omnichannel synergies. Managers designing scented product labels with both verbal and visual cues should include both general scent names and experience-focused artwork, or at least one of them. Specific scent names paired with scent-focused artwork are not recommended.

Making Sense of Scent Market Segments

Our research indicates that scented product managers should lead their omnichannel strategies with package design. In the absence of a physical product to smell, merely observing a scent name (potentially accompanied by artwork) on the computer sparks consumers' olfactory imagery. Thus, it is imperative to present consumers with designs that will provide a "teaser" to their imagination, fostering curiosity to motivate a store visit. The key is to use verbal cues (i.e., scent names) and/or visual cues (i.e., package artwork) to facilitate olfactory imagery generation, without fully revealing the product's scent. While it may appear commonsensical to provide as much information to the consumer, human nature dictates this is not the case in the realm of olfaction, where consumers desire mystery, curiosity, and surprise. We recommend managers to use general scent names or to combine them with experience-focused artwork to provide an information "sweet spot:" for scented products, a little tease goes a long way.

However, managers must also recognize that scent is in "the nose of the beholder," and thus different consumers might respond differently to scent names and artwork, and even have different attitudes towards the imaginative process. Our main recommendation to encourage consumers' imagination as the driving force for omnichannel synergies should target the Imaginative and Curious consumer segment, first described in Meng *et al.*[41] Imaginative consumers form olfactory imagery by recalling multiple scents and relevant past experiences and enjoy this imaginative process. Out of such enjoyment, or in order to confirm their imagined scent, these consumers would desire to visit stores and try the product. Curious consumers are also thrilled when exploring novel stimuli, experiencing fun by elaborating and trying to "fill in the blanks" when having missing information.[42] Once online consumers flock to their local store, omnichannel synergy benefits will occur,

such as adding new touch points, consumers' forming more positive attitude toward brand and enhancing sales.

Contrarily, specific scent names and scent-focused artwork, which we find do not inspire the imaginative process well, and thus are not conducive to omnichannel synergies, might in fact be ideal to target the Analytical consumer segment.[43] Analytical consumers do not like ifs, buts and maybes; instead, they expect precise scent information on a package and then buy (or not) accordingly, depending on their existing preference for the specific scents suggested. Hence, specific scent names and scent-focused artwork are more informative for this segment. Although Analytical consumers have low interest in smelling a known scent at store, knowing what a product smells like increases the probability of purchasing online (if they like the scent). Thus, we envision an overarching, segment-specific approach to maximize scented product managers' omnichannel synergies and sales. For Analytical consumers, the *Inform* strategy provides precise scent information, for Imaginative and Curious consumers, the *Imagine* strategy encourages imagination through package design. The two strategies, the benefits of each strategy, and their relation to omnichannel synergies are compared in Table 1.

Promoting scented products online – especially new scents consumers are likely to be unfamiliar with – is a formidable task, because most consumers prefer to smell before they buy. In an age of TikToks, tweets, and social distancing, managers might seek answers in the realms of big data, augmented and virtual reality. Instead, we contend that the future is in the past: in harnessing the unique, powerful imaginative properties of the sense of smell, the most primitive among the five senses. Informed by decades of sensory and neurobiological research, as well as data-driven, controlled laboratory studies, this paper provides a new blueprint to deliver omnichannel-based synergies. The key principle is to strategically design product scent names and package artwork to stimulate consumers' imagination to spur online sales and a higher desire for in-store product trial, resulting in a seamless, omnichannel shopping experience, reaping synergies as a result. As noted by British designer Anya Hindmarch: "I think an element of 'guess the smell' is a fun game."[44] Our research says that consumers like to play, too.

Table 1. Olfactory Imagery Triggered by Two Types of Strategies and Outcomes

	Inform Strategy (e.g., specific scent names and/or scent-focused artwork)	Imagine Strategy (e.g., general scent names and/or experience-focused artwork)
Olfactory imagery	Precise, including a single or a few scents	Vague, including multiple scents
Preference for imagined scent	Precise: Consumers can immediately determine whether they like or dislike. Common responses can be simply "yes" or "no."	Vague: Consumers cannot exactly determine whether they like or dislike. Common responses can be "maybe" or "I'm not sure."
Ideal consumer segment (from Meng, Zamudio and Jewell, 2018)	Analytical consumers	➢ Imaginative consumers ➢ Curious consumers
Online purchase decision for ideal segment	➢ Yes, if consumers like the specific scent in their olfactory imagery ➢ No, if consumers dislike the specific scent in their olfactory imagery	Unlikely: Consumers want to visit a store to confirm their olfactory imagery (which increases the likelihood of a store purchase)
Store visit/trial decision for ideal segment	No store visit or trial	Consumers may proceed to visit the store and try the scented product
Omnichannel-based synergies	Only online purchases likely to be observed. No omnichannel synergies.	➢ Store visit adds a new touch point, possibly increasing consumer's brand preference. ➢ Store visit may increase sales because of consumers' unplanned purchases.

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