

CAN YOUR SCENT GET *you laid?*

Perfume ads promise sexual magnetism, but what's their true pulling power? Fiona Embleton tried the world's sexiest fragrance. Here's what happened...

Five years ago, I found myself alone in a Parisian bar when a notably handsome Frenchman leant over and whispered in my ear. "I like your perfume..." he said in the sort of seedy Gallic drawl that makes everything sound at least 10 times more indecent than it should. "It reminds me of clean skin between crisp sheets..." The scent, for the record, was Byredo Gypsy Water EDP (£90 for 50ml) and though I abstained from any illicit assignations that evening, I did spend the next 12 months stockpiling Gypsy Water like it was gold bullion.

Now, 37 and single, I often think back to that moment. Sure, Byredo's Gypsy Water is a nice scent – a mix of lemon, vanilla and a sort of damp woodiness – but is it possible that a perfume can have such an effect on someone? Let's be honest, it's a giant leap of faith to think a scent could find you love.

As a beauty editor, I've sat through many perfume-campaign screenings where the implicit message was: one spritz of *this* scent will lead to marathon boning sessions. I mean seriously... Well no, actually, I do mean seriously. I've been single for four of the seven years I've lived in London and have tried every dating permutation you can think of. Even those with clever algorithms and 50-question forms presented nothing. Zip. ▶



Fiona's synthetic pheromones bring all the boys to the yard

So when make-up artist Charlotte Tilbury told me the synthetic pheromones found in certain perfumes were practically “guaranteed to make you more attractive”, a gauntlet was thrown down. Disclaimer: yes, Charlotte Tilbury’s new perfume, *Scent Of A Dream* (EDP, £49 for 30ml), features synthetic pheromones.

Testing the (fragrant) waters

That test involved me dousing myself in Tilbury’s debut perfume for five days. On day one, I soaked every inch of accessible skin – neck, chest, behind my knees – not even my ankles and thighs were spared. First impressions: it doesn’t smell like sex. Well, certainly not the sort of sex I’m used to. I only picked up notes of rose, jasmine, lemon and then some musk, which is a kind of warm and fuzzy sex smell, I guess. Sex with, say... a Ken doll.

Despite wearing my best ‘come-hither stare’ on the Tube, no one leaned in to nuzzle my neck. The office was a letdown, too. “What’s that smell?” one eloquent male colleague shouted across the office. “It’s like the loos on Brighton pier in here.” I sidled up to the three remaining men in the office. “Do I smell... attractive today?” One spat his coffee out. The others looked nervous but obligingly leant in. “It reminds me of...” There was a silence as one leant back in his chair in contemplation. “...My nan.” The others nodded in agreement.

Later, feeling brazen, I thrust my arm into the face of a stranger in a hotel lift. “What does my perfume remind you of?” I asked, as an image of Glenn Close and Michael Douglas going at it hammer and tongs in *Fatal Attraction* popped into my head. “It smells pretty,” he purred. The lift hit the ground floor. He looked back and smiled. Finally, we’re getting somewhere.

The science bit

You’re probably thinking, “Pheromones? What the...?” Okay, so see pheromones as like sexy airborne aphrodisiacs. We secrete them from our scalps, armpits and, er, groins in a barely detectable vapour trail that signals to others our readiness to mate. “Pheromones are only detectable when they interact with bacteria, like a tiny bit of sweat on the skin,” says Dr Nick Neave, an evolutionary psychologist at Northumbria University. “On picking up the pheromone scent, olfactory receptors in the nose activate unconscious parts of the brain



dealing with emotions and sex, making us feel more romantic.” (If you’ve ever found yourself inexplicably attracted to the guy in your spin class, this could explain a few things.)

Pheromones are seen to be so effective for finding love that not only are pheromone parties officially a thing (you sleep in a T-shirt for three nights, then pop it in a zip-lock bag for guests to sniff), but the first ‘mail odour’ dating service has arrived. (Similar shtick, except this time you’re sent a T-shirt to wear for three days and nights *without* deodorant, you send it back, and in return get multiple T-shirt samples. If you find one you like and they like you too, you’re matched via email.)

So it’s no surprise the perfume industry wants in; hence synthetic pheromones in scents. Tilbury built *Scent Of A Dream* on the jasmine-like scent of hedione, which scientists have discovered stimulates the hypothalamus, an area of the brain that releases sex hormones and kickstarts the libido. Another synthetic pheromone used in fragrance (including Tilbury’s) is Iso E Super, reminiscent of cedar ▶

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and said to amplify your pheromone scent when your body heat rises. Escentric Molecules Molecule 01 EDT (£65 for 100ml), celebrating its 10th birthday this year, is almost entirely built on this note and perfumer Geza Schoen swears you'll need a taser when you go out wearing it. Musks also lend a pheromonal effect, making any scents they're blended with seem more sexy and worn-in – like bed hair.

The new Tinder?

But do pheromone scents really work? Some scientists think so, that while we think we're using our charm to flirt, we're actually doing the equivalent of sniffing bums like hound dogs. This is echoed by a study that found women who wore synthetic pheromones were asked on more dates than those who did not. But other scientists are sceptical as humans don't have the same organ in their noses that other mammals use to detect pheromones.

Even if the pheromones in Scent Of A Dream were a placebo, I definitely felt people were nicer to me when I wore it. Uber drivers smiled at me, one barman winked (never happened before) and I chatted to both men and women on my way home – something almost unheard of in London. And near the end of the week something extraordinary happened. I've been going to the same coffee shop for two years and have the same exchange with the cute Italian barista every time. Me: "A skinny cappuccino, please." Him: "£2.20." But now he wants to talk. "Do you live by the sea?" he asked, looking me in the eye for the first time. "It's just, you, um, smell bellissimo." I did the typical British thing of laughing nervously and skittering away. Still, it was fascinating because the only thing I'd changed that day, and in fact all week, was my perfume. I also saw a pattern: most of these encounters happened later in the day, which makes sense as the synthetic pheromones lie in the base of the fragrance, so need around five hours to emerge after the initial spritz.

What's undeniable is that wanting to smell attractive sells perfume. "Men are physically attracted to a woman's perfume if it smells of something they have sexy associations with," says Professor Rachel Herz, a cognitive neuroscientist at Brown University studying the role of body odour and fragrance in attraction. For example, citrus blended with salty aquatic notes could remind him of damp,

bare, sun-warmed skin. Nor is it a coincidence that 'nudity' is a big theme in perfumery. Many 'naked' scents lie on a bed of iris for a subtle fleshy smell that hugs the skin, like Prada La Femme (EDP, £49 for 35ml).

I don't know if it was synthetic pheromones or a placebo that transformed my week, but there is evidence that a placebo works. I am usually shy around men I am attracted to, but doused in Scent Of A Dream and assured it would work wonders, I was bold and coquettish and my behaviour was repaid in kind.

"If you wear a fragrance that makes you feel sexy on a date, then chances are that's exactly what he will think of you," says Herz. In the case of the barista, that date will be happy hour at my local cocktail bar on Friday night. Oh, and I'll be wearing my pheromone perfume, thanks very much. ♦

WHAT YOUR PERFUME SAYS ABOUT YOUR SEX LIFE

Match the latest sexy scents to your relationship status (and thank us later)

1 NO STRINGS: BRITNEY SPEARS PRIVATE SHOW EDP, £23 FOR 30ML

Britney covered in whipped cream is a teenage boy's fantasy. Now she's built a fragrance on that concept, with orange as the key ingredient (which increases levels of oxytocin, a key hormone released during sex).

2 FIRST DATE: THE LIBRARY OF FRAGRANCE NEW BABY EDT, £15 FOR 30ML

A slightly powdery scent with a splash of lemon "minimally masks your natural body odour, so nothing prevents those mating signals from being sent out," says Herz. All you need to do is get over the unsexy name.

3 HONEYMOON PHASE: BOSS THE SCENT FOR HER EDP, £44 FOR 30ML

This is heavy on osmanthus, a flower that emits the molecule indole for an almost dirty, moody quality. When the roasted cocoa surfaces, it does the same thing to the emotional centre of the brain as falling in love.

4 COMFORT AND CUDDLES: THE PERFUMER'S STORY BY AZZI S&X RANKIN, £95 FOR 30ML

When lust wanes and bonding chemicals move in, it's time to bring out the fragrance big guns. Nothing says 'how hot am I?' like a scent laced with leather and musk.

5 ON THE ROCKS: CALVIN KLEIN DEEP EUPHORIA, £38 FOR 30ML

So he's dumped, but that doesn't mean you don't still want him to pine for you. You may wish to conjure up the scent of hot sex on the beach to remind him of what he's missing. This will do the trick.

