

## 'Smellmaxxing' and 'frag heads': how the gen Z perfume boom came up roses for indie brands

### Level 2: Intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.



1. Which of the above would you most like to smell on someone?
2. Have you (or someone you know) experimented with different perfumes or aftershaves?
3. How do you decide which perfume(s) or aftershave(s) to wear?

#### 2 Key words

a. Match the correct word to each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

blend  
boom  
brands

cognoscenti  
enhancing  
fragrances

inspired  
instincts  
juggernauts

matching  
niche  
personalising

pioneers  
replicas  
scent

1. copies of something, often made to look the same as the original \_\_\_\_\_
2. a smell, especially a nice one \_\_\_\_\_
3. a mixture of different things combined together \_\_\_\_\_
4. to grow or become very successful very quickly \_\_\_\_\_
5. companies that make and sell products under a special name \_\_\_\_\_
6. people who know a lot about a special subject \_\_\_\_\_
7. natural feelings or reactions that guide behaviour \_\_\_\_\_
8. very large and powerful companies or products \_\_\_\_\_
9. going well together or being the same \_\_\_\_\_

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10. making something better or stronger \_\_\_\_\_
11. pleasant smells, often from perfumes or flowers \_\_\_\_\_
12. made someone feel a strong desire to do something creative \_\_\_\_\_
13. special and small, made for a particular group of people \_\_\_\_\_
14. making something special for one person \_\_\_\_\_
15. people who are first to do something new \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You may have to change the form of the word.**

1. This perfume is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ of flowers and spices, so it smells both sweet and warm.
2. The independent perfume business \_\_\_\_\_ after the popularity of TikTok videos.
3. Le Labo is a luxury perfume \_\_\_\_\_ that sells unique and expensive fragrances.
4. Only a true \_\_\_\_\_ can recognise each ingredient in a complex perfume.
5. Scent layering is a way of \_\_\_\_\_ perfume to make it last longer and smell stronger.
6. The gentle \_\_\_\_\_ of her perfume reminded him of a garden full of roses after the rain.
7. She was \_\_\_\_\_ by the smell of the beach to create a perfume called Tropica.
8. Independent perfumers tend to trust their \_\_\_\_\_ and not follow the traditional rules.
9. Big names like Chanel and Dior are \_\_\_\_\_ that dominate the global market.

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10. He enjoys \_\_\_\_\_ his perfume to his clothes, with different scents for different styles.
11. Their company makes \_\_\_\_\_ perfumes that appeal to a specific small group of people.
12. Teenagers are \_\_\_\_\_ their scents by mixing two or three perfumes.
13. The \_\_\_\_\_ of independent perfume introduced new smells like lipstick or sun cream.
14. The market is full of \_\_\_\_\_ of expensive perfumes, but they often don't last as long.
15. When he entered the room, he immediately noticed the \_\_\_\_\_ of vanilla cookies.

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*The global fragrance market is bigger than ever as small makers are buoyed by PerfumeTok – and teenage boys*

**Alice Fisher**

**30 June, 2025**

- 1 "Will the girl who I just met at the perfume store please comment the perfume you recommended," wrote Chappell Roan on Instagram last month. "You said it smelled like lipstick." The post went viral and the scent – Girl of the Year by the Los Angeles perfume house Thin Wild Mercury – instantly sold out. The brand is one of a growing set of perfumers reinventing scent for new fragrance fans.
- 2 The global fragrance market is the biggest it has ever been and still growing. This growth is driven by gen Z and millennials. PerfumeTok drove 45 per cent of social media scent sales in the US by 2023. Instead of a dab behind the ear, they prefer scent layering – wearing two or more perfumes at the same time – and scent wardrobing (matching fragrances to different occasions).
- 3 Teenage boys have become surprising cognoscenti when it comes to luxury aftershave. The TikTok term for scent layering in this age group is "smellmaxxing", a buzzword that became so prevalent that the New York Times defined it last year as a "term for enhancing one's musk".
- 4 While previous generations were satisfied with scent juggernauts such as CK One, Le Male, Poison or Opium, an emerging group of "frag heads" wants more. The idea of personalising your scent – smellmaxxing or scent layering – is key for them. Still, what 16-year-old can afford to layer a £90 Loewe scent with something marginally cheaper from Armani?
- 5 As luxury scents boomed post-pandemic, so too did dupes – replicas of designer products. Offering luxury style at low prices, dupes feel more Robin Hood than guilty secret. Some new brands started providing vegan or cruelty-free alternatives to blockbuster fragrances.
- 6 As well as dupes, "niche perfumes" gained traction. While cosmetics giants such as Coty, Guerlain and Estée Lauder have dominated since the early 20th century, independent pioneers appeared who followed their instincts and taste rather than market research. Brands such as Le Labo, Sol de Janeiro and Byredo changed the game – Le Labo's Santal 33 was the fashion circle's signature scent and a Santal 26 candle appeared in Beyoncé's Lemonade film in 2016.
- 7 Indie companies looked to creators who had taught themselves to blend new scents. As the industry traditionally requires a chemistry degree, a spell at a (preferably French) perfume school then an apprenticeship at a fragrance house, this influx of new blood has been a huge shakeup.
- 8 Independent perfumers can bring a bit more imagination to the process. The British scent company Earl of East recently collaborated with the musician Bon Iver, who they asked to do a blind smell test, then used his answers to create a custom scent inspired by his latest album. The resulting range of mood mists and candles instantly sold out.
- 9 Paul Firmin, a co-founder of Earl of East, thinks the lack of formal education behind the brand is a strength. It started as a hobby and a market stall but is now stocked globally. It holds workshops for customers who want to make their own perfumes.
- 10 Another autodidact is Maya Njie, a Swedish-born, UK-based perfumer, who started her fragrance house in 2016. She was inspired by family photo albums; holiday snaps of Gambian beaches led to her perfume Tropica, which combines sea salt, pineapple and coconut.
- 11 If you're looking for the smell of lipstick, sun cream from a day at the beach, smoking in a car, or have some other olfactory fantasy, this new generation of self-taught perfumers are waiting to play it out for you.

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Which perfume sold out after a viral Chappell Roan Instagram post?
2. Which age groups are influencing the growth of the global fragrance market?
3. What is 'scent layering' and how is it different from traditional perfume use?
4. What is important to a frag head?
5. Why might it be difficult for a 16-year-old to layer luxury scents?
6. What are 'dupes' and why do people buy them?
7. Which celebrity film featured a product made by Le Labo?
8. What makes independent perfumers like Earl of East and Maya Njie different from traditional perfumers?
9. What inspired Maya Njie to create fragrances?
10. According to the article, what kind of unusual scents are perfumers making now?

#### 4 Key language

a. Match the rules for use of the gerund with the examples from the article.

When to use a gerund	Examples
1. After certain verbs, e.g. <i>enjoy, start, mind</i>	a. The idea of personalising your scent is key for them.
2. After prepositions, e.g. <i>for, in, of</i>	b. Offering luxury style at low prices, dupes feel more Robin Hood than guilty secret.
3. As the subject or object of a sentence	c. Some new brands started providing vegan or cruelty-free alternatives

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b. Complete the sentences with a gerund from the box. Then match the sentences to the rules.

creating  
experimenting

including  
learning

losing  
marketing

personalising  
sharing

smellmaxxing

1. Many young people enjoy \_\_\_\_\_ with scent layering.
2. Independent brands started \_\_\_\_\_ vegan and cruelty-free perfumes.
3. Frag heads believe in the importance of \_\_\_\_\_ your scent.
4. She thanked him for \_\_\_\_\_ her perfume recommendations on Instagram.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ how to mix different scents can be exciting for beginners.
6. The brand gave \_\_\_\_\_ unexpected ingredients in their perfumes a lot of thought.
7. Some luxury brands don't mind \_\_\_\_\_ customers to companies that make dupes.
8. They succeeded in \_\_\_\_\_ their product to younger audiences through TikTok.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ has become a popular trend among teenage boys.

c. Finish the sentences below.

- Smellmaxxing has become popular because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- I enjoy wearing perfumes / aftershaves that smell like \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

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#### 5 Discussion

##### a. Discuss these statements.

- There should be different types of smells for men and women.
- You can always tell if someone is not wearing an original, luxury brand perfume.
- These new styles of perfume have opened up a world of possibilities.

#### 6 In your own words

##### a. Imagine you are responsible for creating a signature perfume for a celebrity. Choose a famous person and decide which smells best represent that person. Then think of what the perfume should smell like and create a product. Use these questions to guide your ideas.

- Which kind of audience does this celebrity appeal to?
- What does this celebrity represent to their audience?
- Which smells would be popular with that kind of audience?
- Which smells would represent this celebrity well and which would not?
- What would be a good name for the perfume?
- Where would this perfume sell and who would it sell to?

##### b. Give a presentation. Imagine you are presenting your new perfume to the celebrity. Describe what it smells like and explain what it represents and the effect it will have on people. Here are some phrases and a model to help you with the description. Include gerunds in your description.

###### Intensity of the perfume

- light and airy
- strong and powerful
- intense
- subtle

###### Smells

- floral
- woody
- fruity
- spicy
- fresh
- aquatic

*Moroccan Mist is the ideal perfume for showing your inner power. Mixing spicy smells like pepper and cinnamon with woody notes from sandalwood, it is great for making an intense first impression. Perfect for people who enjoy feeling confident.*