

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

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.



1. Which of the above scents would you most like to smell on someone?
2. Have you (or someone you know) experimented with different perfumes or aftershaves?
3. Which factors influence you when deciding 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	enhance	instinct	niche	replica
boom	fragrance	juggernaut	notion	revenue
brand	get stuck in	knockoff	personalise	scent
cognoscenti	inspire	match	pioneer	self-taught

1. a copy of something, often made to look the same as the original _____
2. the money a company earns from selling things _____
3. a smell, especially a nice one _____
4. having learned a skill by yourself without formal lessons _____
5. a mixture of different things combined together _____
6. grow or become very successful very quickly _____
7. a company that makes and sells products under a special name _____
8. people who know a lot about a special subject _____

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9. a natural feeling or reaction that guides behaviour _____
10. a very large and powerful company or product _____
11. a cheap copy of an expensive product _____
12. go well together or be the same _____
13. make something better or stronger _____
14. a pleasant smell, often from a perfume or flowers _____
15. to start doing something with energy and enthusiasm _____
16. make someone feel a strong desire to do something creative _____
17. special and small, made for a particular group of people _____
18. an idea or belief about something _____
19. make something special for one person _____
20. someone who is the 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.

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6. The gentle _____ of her perfume reminded him of a garden full of roses after the rain.
7. When she started making perfumes, she _____ and bought everything necessary.
8. She was _____ by the smell of the beach to create a perfume called Tropica.
9. Independent perfumers tend to trust their _____ and not follow the traditional rules.
10. Big names like Chanel and Dior are _____ that dominate the global market.
11. Always the _____ of designer perfumes are much cheaper than the originals.
12. He enjoys _____ his perfume to his clothes, with different scents for different styles.
13. Their company makes _____ perfumes appeal to a small specific group of people.
14. The _____ that some perfumes are for men and others for women is being challenged.
15. Teenagers are _____ their scents by mixing two or three perfumes.
16. The _____ of independent perfume introduced new smells like lipstick or sun cream.
17. The market is full of _____ of expensive perfumes, but they often don't last as long.
18. Perfume companies can earn millions in _____ every year from global sales.

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19. When he entered the room, he immediately noticed the _____ of vanilla cookies.
20. He is a(n) _____ perfumer who learned everything from watching YouTube videos.

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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; it is set to generate revenue of about £45bn in 2025, according to Statista. This growth is driven by gen Z and millennials, who have formed a unique relationship with fragrance due to social media and Covid isolation – 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 Perfume took off, somewhat unexpectedly, during lockdown, says Suzy Nightingale of the podcast On the Scent. "It was expected the fragrance market would fall, but it boomed," says Nightingale, an award-winning perfume blogger. Successful perfume influencers play a key role in the storytelling side of these products. They spin tales of the weird girls and confident boys who wear these scents; PerfumeTok influences 66 per cent of gen Z purchases.
- 4 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". 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, notably Eden Perfumes, a family-run business in Brighton now lauded for its own scents as much as its knockoffs.
- 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. You can buy perfume ingredients such as fixatives, solvents and scent compounds online, so, like microbrewers and bakers before them, self-taught perfumers simply got stuck in.
- 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. "Being self-taught has given me the freedom to approach perfumery from an artistic and instinctive place," she says.

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- 11 Cathleen Cardinali, co-founder of Thin Wild Mercury, found that nothing beats word of mouth. As she posted on social media after Roan's viral message: "[Our] customers went crazy tagging us in an international pop superstar's Instagram because they were so excited by the notion that she might like their favourite little indie perfume brand."
- 12 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 have created the 45 billion pounds revenue for 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?

b. In your own words, explain why 2025 is an exciting time for the perfume industry.

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 – smellmaxxing or scent layering – 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 to blockbuster fragrances, notably Eden Perfumes, a family-run business in Brighton now lauded for its own scents as much as its knockoffs.

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

creating including losing personalising smellmaxxing
experimenting learning marketing sharing

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 distinctly different scents in the products for men and women.
- It is immediately obvious 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 be a good representation of this celebrity 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 demonstrating a quiet strength and allure. Fusing spicy smells like pepper and cinnamon and intertwining them with woody notes from sandalwood, it is superb for making an unforgettable first impression. Perfect for people who enjoy feeling effortlessly confident.