

Married to the MOB: Sexually Empowering Women across the Globe through Brand Image

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Keywords: fashion / lifestyle retailing / sexual empowerment / women's streetwear

Abstract

In the past, the streetwear clothing industry was predominantly run by and targeted towards men. Since the debut of women's streetwear brand Married to the MOB (Most Official Bitches) in 2004, the industry has greatly changed. CEO and founder, Leah McSweeney, created a global empire, paving the way for several other women's street wear brands to emerge safely. Married to the MOB's branding techniques are extremely nontraditional and have, thus far, proven to be remarkably successful. With the use of clever, racy slogans that adorn the brand's clothing and accessories, provocative images promoting the clothes, and a very upfront brand image that "sex sells", Married to the MOB has gained a following of independent, powerful women all over the globe. What seems to be the most alluring aspect of the brand is the powerful and sexual women's urban lifestyle to which Married to the MOB's customers can relate. The goal of this paper is to investigate the branding techniques used by Married to the MOB to determine the correlation between the brand's sexual image and its success.

Introduction

According to Feona Attwood, female sexuality is often seen as a "response to sexism and to second wave feminism" (404). Whether one agrees with this statement or not, it is clear that this sexual empowerment is most prominently attributed to the media (more specifically, HBO's *Sex and the City* television series) and the fashion industry. Since the debut of *Sex and the City* in 1998, women have had an obvious growth of sexual confidence, which most likely is a result of the show's more contemporary and progressive view of female sexuality. This controversial show blurred the boundaries between pornographic and mainstream media, giving women all over the nation the confidence and initiative to become more sexually empowered. There is, however, much discussion as to whether a woman's explicit sexuality is a "tired, old representation of female passivity" or a "very contemporary image of a sexually autonomous, powerful woman" (Attwood 397). The correlation between society's overtly sexual image of women and the recent public sexual empowerment of women will be analyzed through the brand image of women's retail company, Married to the MOB. "Now more so than ever it's about playing the 'female card' in the fashion industry (Blasberg) and Married to the MOB's clothing, company lifestyle and brand image have promoted the sexual empowerment of women since the company debut in 2004.

Target Market

In order for a fashion brand to be successful in an era of intensifying competition, it must be able to create an effective image by knowing their target market's age, gender and personality better than the other brands against whom they are competing. Although this may seem like an obvious statement, it is more deeply connected with a company's compositional makeup than one may think. Moss states that it is imperative for a company to be composed of creative people whose "personalities and gender matches those of the purchaser/end user" (279). As a result, the company members produce work that not only reflects their lifestyle, ethics, beliefs, and taste but those of their target market as well. This information solidifies the correlation between Married to the MOB's success and its company makeup, which consists of a team of outspoken and openly sexual women who design for the target market that shares a strong pride in their personality, gender and lifestyle. In an interview with SJ Owen from Acclaim Magazine, CEO and founder of Married to the MOB Leah McSweeney states: "When me and my designer get together to run through ideas we always make sure it is something we would wear or want in our closet. That is the main thing! I would say what makes MOB stand out from the crowd is that there is actual substance. We live the life we are selling". It is very clear that McSweeney knows exactly who her target market is because in the interview she states that it consists of herself, her friends and any other women that share her beliefs and lifestyle. This ensures that the company will be able to create and deliver merchandise that appeals to the customer's liking.

Advertising Campaigns

One aspect of Married to the MOB's branding technique that has caused them to gain a lot of recent exposure is their choice of celebrity endorsements. As stated by Angela Carroll in her article "Brand communications in fashion categories using celebrity endorsement", the consumer looks to a brand for "self-expression, self-realization and self identity" (146) and the use of celebrity endorsement makes this a simpler task (151). This simplification is due to the fact that well-known celebrities have the ability to send a more powerful image message than models that are unknown, thus connecting with the consumer on a more personal level. By identifying and connecting with the celebrity that is used in an advertisement campaign, the customer develops an emotional attachment generated by socio-psychological associations. As a result, a loyalty is formed between the brand and the consumer (Carroll).

Married to the MOB's Summer 2010 advertisement campaign featured porn star Faye Reagan (Figure 1). Infamously renowned for her girl on girl action, Reagan is extremely well known in the porn industry. In the below image Reagan's sultry hair and eyes in addition to her open mouth present a yearning expression that the viewer has the option of either fantasizing about or simply accepting as an expression of comfortable sexuality. Her body positioning as she pulls down her shirt to reveal cleavage in this image is similar to a pose she would hold in her pornographic photo shoots and/or movies. The fact that Reagan is not wearing a bra is very apparent to the viewer, heightening the sensuality of the image. McSweeney's choice in employing Reagan to endorse her company is a blatant message to the public that Married to the MOB embraces and empowers women's sexuality while simultaneously gaining much attention for crossing the bridge between pornography and mainstream fashion media.



Figure 1: Faye Reagan featured in Married to the MOB's Summer 2010 Ad Campaign
Photo courtesy of Married to the MOB. All Rights Reserved

Figure 2 shows Leah McSweeney (right) and her model sister Sarah McSweeney (left) in an extremely sultry scene that resonates with the definition of fetishes. Every single aspect of this image exemplifies objects that are highly regarded as fetish subjects. According to Valerie Steele's book *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, color symbolism is greatly associated with fetish fashion. Other objects that are directly associated with fetish fashion include velvet, leather, lingerie, high heels and tattoos. The two most prominent colors associated with fetish fashion are black and red. Black is the most popular because it is a "powerful color—abstract, pure, and mysterious" (Steele 190). This color also has a lot of cultural history that influences human responses to it such as "night, death, danger, nothingness, evil, perversion, rebellion, and sin" (Steele 192). The color red is the rival color to black when it comes to terms of visual power and symbolism. Red represents "blood, fire, wine, and rubies" as well as "passion, anger, danger, and revolution" (Steele 192). From the red velvet curtains to the lipstick on both girls' lips, to the tousled red hair that cascades down Leah's back and finally ending on the red patent leather high heels on Leah's feet, the color red dominates this image. Clearly the themes of passion, danger and even revolution are present in this image. But how is the theme of revolution portrayed in this image of the two overtly sexual women? The answer is that McSweeney is on a mission to revolutionize the acceptance of women's sexuality. Although overpowered by the color red, the items that are black are very carefully chosen. The areas of the body that are covered in black are the areas most closely related with fetishes, the genitals and the feet of Sarah McSweeney.



Figure 2: Sarah McSweeney and Leah McSweeney featured in Married to the MOB's Spring 2010 Ad Campaign
Photo courtesy of Married to the MOB. All Rights Reserved.

According to Steele, “Clad in a high-heeled shoe, ‘the foot becomes a mysterious weapon which threatens the passive male; and he glories in being so conquered.’” She quotes, “The whole idea of a female’s wearing high heels is to [signify power and] emphasize her naturally dominant and aggressive personality” (101). On the subject of lingerie, Steele explains, “By artfully concealing the body, especially the genitals, underwear heightens sexual curiosity, holding in promise the thrill of exposure” (117 - 118). And to top this image off, two tattoos are exposed on Leah’s body—her hand and her foot. There is no mistaking the sexually dominant message behind this ad campaign, especially since the models are the McSweeney sisters.

After examining the two aforementioned advertisement campaigns done by Married to the MOB this past year it is very clear that McSweeney uses the company’s brand image and advertising campaigns to promote and empower women’s sexuality. Her choice to use in-your-face advertising to sell female sexual empowerment while simultaneously selling her company brand has greatly contributed to the “sexual openness” and “individual empowerment” that is “used to delineate the post-feminist sexual ideal” (Attwood 401-402).

History of the Company

Presenting and analyzing the company history of Married to the MOB and the history of founder and CEO, Leah McSweeney, is specifically unique because the company and its achievements are both relatively new. McSweeney does supply through interviews, however, a bit of the history. In 2002, McSweeney got in an argument with and was assaulted by an NYPD police

officer. She then filed a lawsuit and took the officer to court, winning a settlement of \$75,000. With the help of the settlement money McSweeney was able to invest in Married to the MOB (Olshan).

The brand name “Married to the MOB” originated from the lifestyle that McSweeney and her friends carried at the time of creation. McSweeney states that “at the time I started the company I would joke and say I had the mob wife lifestyle because I was unemployed and would just chill all day, go to brunch, shop etc” (Owen). She also adds that the mob references plays on the “Retail Mafia” which consists of McSweeney’s male friends that have clothing brands. As for the acronym MOB stands for “Most Official Bitches” which is the group name McSweeney gave herself and her friends (Owen). McSweeney states that although she chooses to create and produce merchandise that she likes and would wear, she gains inspiration from her friends and the women of New York City. She strives to design for women who are not afraid to speak their minds and stand up for themselves. Having grown up in Chelsea, New York, McSweeney has been part of the city’s urban lifestyle for the majority of her life (Owen).



Figure 3: Married to the MOB towel featured in the Summer 2008 Ad Campaign
Photo courtesy of Married to the MOB. All Rights Reserved.

Upon releasing Married to the MOB, McSweeney received much negative feedback claiming the brand’s success was a result of her relationship with men’s streetwear brand Alife co-founder, Rob Cristofaro. In response to the negative feedback McSweeney continued with even more drive to promote her line of tee shirts knowing full well the goal she was striving for. Pictured

above in Figure 3 is the infamous towel from Married to the MOB's Summer 2008 collection that reads "Men Are The New Women". This towel plays off of the men's streetwear brand Supreme's logo. McSweeney states that Supreme is an anti-female brand that ironically uses a font created by feminist Barbara Kruger. Therefore, she created this graphic to pay homage to women and state her feelings towards the anti-female men that she works among in the streetwear industry (Chalifoux). Although there was a large amount of negative feedback when McSweeney first launched Married to the MOB, the brand is now sold in more than 50 stores worldwide (Reagan).

Real Life MOB

To determine whether Married to the MOB truly reaches its target market on a personal level I took to the street in search of the ideal MOB woman. Although the brand is well known, not many women are daring enough to wear some of the clothing. This, however, is not the case for Jillian Fragetti, 19, a student at Drexel University. When asked if she identified herself with the brand image she stated "...definitely...because the company is all about empower[ing] women, standing up for yourself, and crossing boundaries where women haven't gone before, leaving a mark on the world." Fragetti believes that by wearing the brand

...you're definitely making a conscious...statement...especially because a lot of the merchandise has very blunt sayings displaying what the company represents. Everything you wear turns you into a walking advertisement and wearing a shirt that says 'Bitches Reign Supreme' not only shows that you stand behind what the company stands for but [that you] also believe in it...letting it represent who you are as a person."

Conclusion

By using the branding techniques of brand identity, gender identity, personality identity, brand/customer relationship, celebrity endorsement, female empowerment and overt sexuality Leah McSweeney is well on her way to creating a new genre of clothing for women with her brand Married to the MOB. Coming into the streetwear scene during a time of male domination McSweeney had the daring ability to powerfully express herself and present what she had to offer: her lifestyle, ethics, beliefs and most importantly herself. By continuing to do so, McSweeney has ensured Married to the MOB a place of success and power in the women's streetwear industry that it is sure to maintain.

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