

006327*Apparel as Ideology*

The fashion industry has taken on a whole new meaning in our McDonaldized, globalized world. In primitive times, clothing was thought of simply as a means of sheltering oneself from the harshness of the outside world. Garments were things that kept one warm, dry, and protected. In this day and age, society no longer thinks of clothing as something that people simply wear for everyday needs. Instead, we use it as a way to project a certain image, to portray ourselves in a certain “fashionable” way, and to fit in with our peers. Apparel is associated with many ideas that have nothing to do with attire. Although clothing is purchased and worn to convey certain non-associated images that the person wishes to express, such as sex, glamour, and athleticism, it usually is done so at the expense of individuality.

In my opinion, Abercrombie & Fitch would have to be one the biggest sellers of image. One look through their Spring Break 2002 catalogue (not even the one you have to pay for, which is more magazine-esque) makes one start to wonder exactly what it is the company is trying to sell. The models are muscular and handsome, and the focus does not seem to be on the clothing in most of the pictures; instead, it seems as if the store is trying to convince consumers that if they buy this brand of clothing, that they too will have a set of six-pack abs. Even more disturbing is the fact that the store located in the Water Tower mall in Chicago hires two young men to simply parade their bodies; their job is to do push-ups in the doorway of the store and to high-five each other for their great “work.” Abercrombie wants to emanate a certain vision for their store, and the above are just a few of the methods employed in order to do this.

Just as businesses want consumers to associate particular visions with their stores, many gimmicks are used in advertising clothing in order to associate certain images with certain products. One of the most widely utilized techniques is to have beautiful models, top athletes, and famous stars endorse the brands. These celebrities become symbols of the label, which summon pictures to enter the mind, and these images are “drivers, even conjurers, of need” (Barber 127). Which means that once an icon is established in the psyche, the brain believes that it wants that idea and everything associated with it. For example, Jennifer Lopez has her own line of clothing. Obviously, consumers correlate Lopez with the attire, and desire the garments because they believe that possessing the clothing will also cause them to acquire the qualities of Jennifer Lopez. The patron of the J-Lo brand name purchases the clothing because of the persona of the singer/actress, not necessarily for the qualities of the outfits.

Companies no longer advertise the benefits of their products, they advertise the image they want their products to portray. Take Nike, for example. In the corporate report under a section appropriately coined “The Nike Image,” it is noted that “early advertising and promotional efforts focused on the shoe, its features and benefits... in the years since, corporate communication has broadened to make Nike one of the few global leaders with an actual personality” (Barber 67). What has become the “personality” of Nike is considered one of the company’s biggest and most valuable assets. With their many slogans urging athletic and even not-so-athletic consumers to “Just Do It,” Nike has made consumers actually *believe* in their product; believe that Nike *is* sports, believe that buying those products famous athletes use will in turn make them magically athletic, believe that buying those products will make them live a healthy lifestyle. The majority

of consumers do not buy Nike shoes for their durability, their usefulness, or their need; they buy them because that is what Michael Jordan wears. And everyone wants to “be like Mike.”

Some designers wish to persuade consumers that wearing their line of clothing will make the person think, act, or be perceived in a certain manner. Speaking of the object of the advertising industry, Barber writes that “Consumer sales depend on the habits and behaviors of consumers, and those who manipulate consumer markets cannot but address behavior and attitude” (71). This means that certain brands wish to portray images of confidence, sexiness, playfulness, et cetera through their clothing and to convince consumers that they, in wearing these clothes, acquire these attributes. For example, Victoria’s Secret has its “Very Sexy Miracle Bra” line, the advertisement for which states “What is sexy? The ‘Very Sexy’ Miracle Bra Collection,” Tommy Girl by Tommy Hilffiger is an All-American “Declaration of Independence,” and Bebe has “sassy, sexy, life-of-the-party looks.” The consumers of these brands are also the patrons of the images the brands exude.

Although we are made to think that fashion will make us stand out and get noticed, it really just makes us look like everyone else. A visit to a typical college campus on, say, a chilly fall day, will confirm this. The vast majority of students will be wearing either jeans or khakis and a sweater. Most of the clothing will be from the same three or four establishments. Many stores have extremely similar clothing styles, and most of the time, were it not for the name on the tag, one would not be able to distinguish if a shirt had come from Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle, J. Crew, or the Gap. Most adolescents buy clothing simply for the name. “TOMMY” is written across the

chest, “BILLABONG” is sprawled down the sleeves, and a Nike “Swoosh” parades along the back.

People think that they are buying clothing to express themselves, to express their individuality. However, clothing is mass-produced. Something that is mass-produced cannot be used to express something individual. Anyone could buy the same clothes, wear them in the same manner, and look exactly the same as the next person. We can only express our individuality to the extent to which clothing manufacturers produce different clothing styles. Most people do not have the time or skill needed to make their own one-of-a-kind clothing. Furthermore, the manufacturers will only make clothing in the most efficient (McDonaldized) way possible, which means that all of the clothing will be basically the same across the board.

All aspects of consumerism are in some way affected by McDonaldization, and the fashion industry has not escaped. This is because there is no aspect of our lives that McDonaldization has not touched. The four dimensions of McDonaldization are efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer 12). Efficiency is seen with having one type or brand of clothing in the same place, having the clothing produced in the most efficient (fastest and cheapest) way, and by having the clothing efficiently located in a place where the greatest number of consumers live. It is more efficient for a business to manufacture one type of clothing per season; that way, there need be only one method for shipping and displaying the finished products. Calculability is used when determining how many products of a particular style or color to manufacture and ship, and calculating the numbers that will be sold. Companies can secure large numbers of sales in the future by sacrificing quality in their products. Clothing which is worn down

easily or that is unwearable after one season ensures that customers will have to purchase additional attire. Another way the fashion industry is McDonaldized is by some stores/designers having their own “Ronald McDonald.” According to Ritzer, these mascots help to “embed... [the images] deeply into popular consciousness” (7). Old Navy has Magic the Dog, and Ralph Lauren has his Polo Bears. These objects help to bring an aura of fun to the products they represent.

In the fashion industry, image is everything. Products do not sell simply for the sake of use; they sell because of the images associated with them. Consumers purchase these items because they desire the qualities that they have been correlated with. Clothing is associated with ideas that are not directly connected with the apparel, which allows the consumers to be controlled by the industry. True variety in fashion does not exist because the industry has been exceedingly McDonaldized, leaving consumers to all look basically the same. Individuality has been sacrificed for cheaper prices and higher profits.