Betsey Johnson:
A Brand that Cartwheeled Through Four Decades

Elizabeth Hanson

Keywords: Betsey Johnson / branding / womenswear

Abstract

Betsey Johnson exploded on the fashion scene in the late 1960’s, launching a fashion revolution. Using avant-garde fabrics and the inspiration of British rock, the ballerina silhouette and street fashion, she built a brand that appealed to the likes of actresses, models and even first lady at the time, Jacqueline Kennedy. Over the next four decades, Betsey Johnson the designer - and the brand - continued to evolve and flourish through interesting variations on her tried and true theme of the fun, flirty, aggressive and teasing female, topped off by over-the-top runway shows featuring a cartwheel by the designer at the end of each collection. This paper will discuss the longevity of the brand over four decades and how the 68-year-old designer continues to make a strong, passionate fashion statement.

Introduction

In 1969 the world was a very different place. I was a sophomore at Drexel majoring in Design and Merchandising. On a trip to New York, I stumbled upon a boutique on the Upper East Side called Betsey Bunki Nini. The clothes were wild, the store oozed excitement. I was drawn inside to explore and to learn. Here is where my fascination for all things Betsey Johnson began and has continued in 2011.

As I learned more about Betsey Johnson, the brand, I realized that there were many parallels with myself and Betsey Johnson, the woman. Johnson’s fashion career began when she entered and won a Mademoiselle guest editor contest. I fancied myself a fashion editor in- training and submitted work to many magazines but never won anything.

I was a fan of her Alley Cat label in the 1970’s, proud to be sporting her A-line minis and artsy embroidered sweaters. Her daughter, Lulu was born in 1975; the same year I had my own sweet Melissa. I followed her rise to fame, including her associations with artists, musicians, and celebrities.
Johnson’s four-decade career has weathered a fashion fickle public, several economic downturns, a bout with breast cancer and the threat of a corporate take-over in recent months. This paper will attempt to uncover the development of the Betsey Johnson brand, evolving and continuing to survive because Johnson does what she loves to do and “fashion comes around to her every few years” (Blausen).

History

Betsey Johnson was born in Wethersfield, Connecticut on August 10th, 1942. She graduated from Syracuse University, magna cum laude in 1964 and parlayed her short-term guest editorship at Mademoiselle into a permanent position in the magazine’s art department. She was sent to London when the Beatles were the “it” group and Carnaby Street was the eye of the style storm (“Betsey Johnson”).

She returned to New York and became a designer for the clothing boutique Paraphernalia. Next came a stint with the Alley Cat clothing line and then her own New York shop, Betsey Bunky Nini. In the early 1970’s she began her own clothing label and company, Betsey Johnson LLC, with ex-model Chantal Bacon as executive director (Schiro).

During the next two decades, her clothes were sold in large department stores and she had more than 20 U.S. boutiques selling her reasonably priced creations for under $150 (“Betsey Johnson”). A new division, Luxe, was launched in 1991. This was a more expensive line that was conceived from her background in ballet (“Betsey Johnson”). Her “sweetly sexy swimwear collection” and a platform shoe collection and her own fragrance came about in 1992 (“Betsey Johnson”). The Ultra collection debuted in 1996 and featured “better fabrics and more elaborate styling” and “was priced up to $500” (“Betsey Johnson”). In 1999 personal experience with breast cancer prompted a line of bags and accessories displaying the cancer survivor’s emblem, which she worked into her own graphic interpretations. She donated a portion of sales to charity (see figure 1).

The Betsey Johnson line is now also sold via Internet and the current website states that 100 boutiques both in the U.S, and Europe are planned by the year 2012 (“Company Bio”). But the company accumulated $48.8 million in debt as of last year. Steven Madden Ltd. bought the debt in September of 2010 (Karr).

The 68-year-old Johnson now resides in the East Hamptons and spends one week a month in Betseyville, her Mexican vacation home. She has passed on her expensive Manhattan residence and more creative control of the business to her daughter Lulu. Johnson says that she has worked hard to set up her team and is now happy to consult, but still wants to remain the brand’s inspiration (Gizowski).
Developing and Sustaining the Brand

The early beginnings of the Betsey Johnson brand were inspired by Johnson’s association with a hip Carnaby Street crowd and her fraternization with Andy Warhol and his friends. Johnson’s first husband was John Cale, one of the principles in a rock band called the Velvet Underground. Her first pattern model was Edie Sedgwick, a Warhol pal. Her dancers’ roots and real woman body-type (smaller on top with larger hips) prompted the tight fitting tops and tutu skirts that she
says will always be the basis for her design. In her own words, “I am basically about a ballerina torso and a full skirt” (Blausen).

Johnson’s initial branding techniques correlate with the findings in Jean A. Hamilton’s article *The Macro-Micro Interface in the Construction of Individual Fashion Forms and Meaning* (cited in Hancock 25). In this instance, the macro arbiters would be the hip crowd, the trendy artists and the counterculture musicians who were seen as proponents of the brand. Consequently, those who became customers associated the clothes with these fashion arbiters and gave micro level meaning to the clothing. The young women who wanted to feel flirty and sexy gravitated to the Betsey Johnson brand because, by wearing them, they could feel a part of the trend and possibly desired by celebrities.

Johnson designs for herself and throughout her four-decade reign, Johnson’s customers were made to feel that they had a relationship to her designs and to her products. The relationship was never developed via mass media ad campaigns. Johnson was and still is a master at visual merchandising.

![Image of a Betsey Johnson boutique](https://example.com)

**Figure 2:** Whimsical artwork by the designer adorns the walls of a Betsey Johnson boutique and reiterate the sassy, flirty Johnson brand.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Hanson. All Rights Reserved.

Just as that first boutique seemed to be calling to me to enter its doors when I first discovered it in NYC, all of the Betsey Johnson boutiques demand attention and are a cluttered explosion of
pink, black and red. The whimsical artwork on the walls (see figure 2), most drawn by the designer, depicts sexy cartoon women wearing the clothes sold in the store. Sales associates wear the clothes, accessories are displayed near the outfits, and the store in the King of Prussia, Pennsylvania mall has a life-size cardboard cutout of Johnson standing next to a mannequin. (see figure 3) Even the dressing room curtain fabrics could possibly be Betsey-wear.

Figure 3: Life-size cardboard cutout of designer Betsey Johnson at Betsey Johnson boutique in King of Prussia Mall, King of Prussia, PA.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Hanson. All Rights Reserved.

French philosopher Roland Barthes categorizes clothing into real garment, terminological garment and rhetorical written garment (cited in Hancock 17). Just walking around Johnson’s shop, looking at her artwork, and visiting her website, her emphasis is on the third category, describing the clothing through words and photographed images. The fantasy garment is part of the brand and Johnson herself is always the brand.
Johnson’s brand is not for everyone. It is affordable but she designs what she is feeling and living at a particular time, and the energy and passion conveyed in her products convinces her customers to go along and live it with her. In the terms of Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern brand culture (cited in Hancock 20), Johnson’s target market (fragmentation) is a woman like herself, the young, and young at heart. Her signature cartwheel at the end of every fashion show, even as a senior citizen, speaks volumes about the woman and her brand.

**Conclusion**

Johnson has been adamant about staying independent since the beginning (Heintz) but this is not the reality. Since the end of 2010, she has lost the services of her executive director, friend and partner, Chantal Bacon, who resigned. The company is currently owned by Steven Madden Ltd. (Odell).

According to Madden, his plan is to see shoe sales become 30 percent of total sales over the next year and to expand the daytime dress category. He says that Johnson “will still handle all design” and that “Betsey is my partner. She has nothing to worry about and I will protect her” (Odell).

With Madden’s history of stock manipulation, money laundering and securities fraud (Odell), it will be interesting to see what transpires with the Johnson brand under the Madden helm and an interesting topic for a subsequent paper.
Works Cited


