

MUSCLE'S TUSSLE: MRF TRIUMPHS IN TRADEMARK AND COPYRIGHT CLASH AGAINST POWERMAX



When you think of brands, their logos are usually the first thing that pops into your head. Like Apple's famous bitten apple logo—it is instantly recognizable. But what if another company starts using a logo that looks almost the same? That is when the idea of “deceptive similarity” comes into play. Deceptive similarity happens when two logos are so alike that people might confuse one for the other, thinking they are connected, while in reality, they are not. This can lead to confusion among the customers. On July 1, 2024, the Madras High Court heard the case of MRF Limited v/s Powermax Rubber Factory. MRF, a leading Indian tyre manufacturer, accused Powermax of Trademark infringement and sought damages. The Trademarks in question included MRF's "Muscleman Device" logo, "MRF CHEETAH," "MRF SAHARA," "MRF SAFARI," and "PAHALWAN." MRF claimed these Trademarks were registered under the Trade Marks Act, 1999, and the Copyright Act, 1957, long before Powermax's existence. The case primarily focused on whether Powermax's logo, featuring a strongman with a robot head, infringed upon MRF's "Muscleman Device" and "PAHALWAN" logos. Powermax had already ceased using the other three logos following a cease and desist notice from MRF. MRF contended that they had been using the “Muscleman Device” and “PAHALWAN” since 1961 and had them registered in the 1980s. They showed Financial records of Powermax where there was an increase in Powermax's sales after they started using a similar logo. They argued that Powermax has infringed their Copyright as well as the Trademark as it was the Artistic Creation of MRF.

Powermax defended itself by claiming that their logo, which depicted a half-size bodybuilder with a robotic head, was independently created to signify the strength of their tires. They argued that the thematic similarities were unavoidable given the shared representation of tire strength and claimed that this did not amount to infringement or passing off. Additionally, Powermax contended that Copyright protection does not extend to themes, asserting that no Copyright infringement occurred.

MRF further claimed that Powermax was trying to benefit from their hard-earned reputation. This concept when a business misleads customers by making them think their goods or services are associated with another well-established brand, thus passing off the goods and services. Powermax couldn't prove they didn't know about MRF's Trademarks. Relying upon the case of R.G. Anand vs. M/s. Delux Films 1978 AIR 1613, they argued that using a bodybuilder theme was not protected under the Copyright Act, and that many tyre makers used similar themes, as it indicated the strength of the tyres. The Court ruled in favor of MRF, finding Powermax's logo deceptively similar to MRF's “Muscleman Device.” The Court noted that MRF's logo was unique and well-recognized, solely associated with MRF. Using the “lay observer's test” to compare the Trademarks, the Court found that Powermax's logo, despite minor changes like arrows and lines, closely resembled MRF's logo. Citing cases like Colgate Palmolive Company v. Anchor Health And Beauty Care Pvt. Ltd. 2003 VIII AD (DELHI) 228 and Cadila Health Care Ltd. v. Cadila Pharmaceuticals Ltd. AIR 2001 SC 1952, 2001 (5) SCC 73, the Court concluded that Powermax was guilty of passing off and infringing MRF's Trademark.



The Madras High Court's decision in favor of MRF is a significant reminder of the robust protections available under Trademark and Copyright law. By granting a permanent injunction and awarding damages, the court has sent a clear message that the integrity of established Trademarks and Artistic works must be upheld. This ruling not only protects the interests of MRF but also serves as a deterrent against future infringements by emphasizing the legal consequences of unauthorized use of protected Trademarks and logos. The Court concluded that the similarities were likely to confuse consumers, amounting to both Trademark and Copyright infringement, as well as passing off. The Court emphasized that the distinctive elements of MRF's logo had been copied, which could mislead the public into associating Powermax's products with those of MRF. The Court granted MRF the requested injunctions, ordering Powermax to cease using the infringing logos and materials. The Court also awarded nominal damages of Rs. 5,00,000 to MRF and mandated Powermax to pay the costs of the suit.