



A Detailed Analysis of Trademark Infringement with the Technicalities Involved in the Legal Proceeding Between L'Oréal SA, the Plaintiff & Bellure NV, the Defendant¹

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Date of Receiving: 04th January 2023;

Date of Acceptance: 27th February 2023;

Date of Publication: 18th March 2023

SUMMARY OF THE CASE

The L'Oréal vs. Bellure case was a trademark infringement case that was heard in the High Court of Justice in England and Wales in 2009, and eventually made its way to the European Court of Justice. The case was brought by L'Oréal, a well-known beauty and cosmetics company, against Bellure, a company that produced imitation fragrances. L'Oréal

¹ *How to cite the article:*

Singh S., A Detailed Analysis of Trademark Infringement with the Technicalities Involved in the Legal Proceeding Between L'Oréal SA, the Plaintiff & Bellure NV, the Defendant; *International Journal of Law, Management and Social Science*, Jan-Mar 2023, Vol 7, Issue 1, 60-63

claimed that Bellure had infringed on their trademarks by using similar fragrance names, packaging, and advertising, which could confuse consumers and dilute the distinctive character of L'Oreal's brands.

Bellure, on the other hand, argued that their use of L'Oreal's trademarks was a form of comparative advertising, which is permitted under European Union law. Bellure claimed that their use of L'Oreal's trademarks was not likely to cause confusion among consumers, and that it was necessary in order to provide consumers with information about the nature, characteristics, and qualities of their own products.

The case was eventually referred to the European Court of Justice, which ruled in favor of L'Oreal. The court held that Bellure's use of L'Oreal's trademarks amounted to trademark infringement, as it was likely to take unfair advantage of, or be detrimental to, the distinctive character or reputation of L'Oreal's trademarks. The court also held that comparative advertising was not an absolute defense to trademark infringement, and that it must be used in a manner consistent with fair competition practices.

In the above case L'Oreal was the plaintiff or claimant, and Bellure was the defendant or respondent.

TRADEMARK INFRINGEMENT

Validity of Mark

L'Oreal relied on their federal trademark registrations as evidence of the validity of their marks. In the United Kingdom, as in many other countries, a federal trademark registration is considered *prima facie* evidence of the validity of the mark. This means that L'Oreal did not have to prove the validity of their marks from scratch; instead, their federal registrations were considered to be strong evidence that their marks were valid and enforceable. L'Oreal was able to present their trademark registrations as evidence of the exclusive rights they held to use their marks in connection with their products, and to show that Bellure's use of similar marks was likely to cause confusion among consumers.

Priority of Usage of the Mark

L'Oreal had to prove that they had priority of usage of the marks in question. Priority of usage means that L'Oreal had to demonstrate that they were the first to use the marks in connection with the relevant goods or services, and that they had continuously used the marks in the relevant market.

To prove priority of usage, L'Oreal submitted evidence to the court showing that they had used the marks in question for many years prior to Bellure's use of similar marks. L'Oreal provided evidence of their use of the marks in advertising, packaging, and other marketing materials, as well as evidence of sales and other commercial activity associated with the marks.

L'Oreal also submitted evidence of their federal trademark registrations as further proof of their priority of usage. The fact that L'Oreal had obtained federal trademark registrations for the marks in question was seen as strong evidence that they had established priority of usage, as federal registration is generally only available to the first party to use a mark in connection with particular goods or services.

A likelihood of confusion

L'Oreal had to prove that there was a likelihood of confusion in the minds of consumers as a result of Bellure's use of similar marks. This means that L'Oreal had to show that the average consumer would be likely to confuse Bellure's products with L'Oreal's products, or to believe that there was some connection or affiliation between the two companies.

To prove a likelihood of confusion, L'Oreal submitted a range of evidence to the court, including evidence of the similarity between their marks and Bellure's marks, evidence of the similarity between their products and Bellure's products, and evidence of actual confusion among consumers.

L'Oreal argued that the use of similar marks and packaging by Bellure was likely to cause confusion among consumers, who might mistakenly believe that Bellure's products were associated with or endorsed by L'Oreal. L'Oreal also submitted surveys and other evidence showing that consumers were indeed confused by Bellure's use of similar marks and packaging, and that this confusion was likely to lead to a loss of sales and damage to L'Oreal's reputation.

Court's decision

While Bellure did challenge the validity of L'Oreal's marks, arguing that they were too vague and descriptive to be enforceable, the court ultimately found that L'Oreal's marks were valid and enforceable based on their federal trademark registrations. It is worth noting that while federal registration is prima facie evidence of the validity of a mark, it is not conclusive evidence, and the validity of a mark can still be challenged and must be proven in court. In the L'Oreal vs.

Bellure case, the court ultimately found in favor of L'Oreal, but this was based on a consideration of all the evidence presented, not just L'Oreal's trademark registrations.

Ultimately, the court found that L'Oreal had established priority of usage of the marks in question, and that their use of the marks predated Bellure's use of similar marks. This helped to strengthen L'Oreal's case and bolster their claim of trademark infringement against Bellure.

The court ultimately found in favor of L'Oreal, holding that Bellure's use of similar marks was likely to cause confusion among consumers, and therefore constituted trademark infringement. The court also found that Bellure's use of comparative advertising did not provide a defense to trademark infringement, as it was not used in a manner consistent with fair competition practices.

Case Analysis

The case was significant because it addressed the issue of comparative advertising and its limits in the context of trademark law. The court held that comparative advertising is not an absolute defense to trademark infringement, and that companies cannot use comparative advertising in a way that is likely to cause confusion among consumers or damage the reputation of a competitor.

The case also underscored the importance of establishing priority of usage in trademark disputes, as L'Oreal was able to rely on their earlier use and federal trademark registrations to establish their right to exclusive use of the marks in question.

Overall, the L'Oreal vs. Bellure case provides an important precedent for trademark law, particularly with respect to the use of comparative advertising and the need to establish priority of usage in trademark disputes.

Case learnings

The L'Oreal vs. Bellure case provides several key lessons and insights as follow -

1. Importance of Trademark Registration: The case highlights the importance of registering trademarks with the relevant authorities. Federal registration of a trademark is prima facie evidence of the validity and ownership of the mark, which can be used to prove priority of usage and establish a strong position in trademark disputes.

2. Limits of Comparative Advertising: The case provides guidance on the limits of comparative advertising in the context of trademark law. While comparative advertising can be a legitimate form of competition, companies must use it in a way that is fair and does not create a likelihood of confusion among consumers.
3. Likelihood of Confusion: The case also provides insights into the legal standard of "likelihood of confusion" in trademark law. To succeed in a trademark infringement claim, a plaintiff must prove that the use of a similar mark is likely to cause confusion among consumers as to the source of the goods or services in question.
4. Importance of Evidence: The case highlights the importance of submitting evidence in trademark disputes, particularly evidence of actual confusion among consumers. This can include surveys, customer feedback, and other forms of evidence that demonstrate the impact of the allegedly infringing mark on consumer perceptions and sales.

OPINION

In my opinion the case was neither contributory or vicarious infringement but rather **direct trademark infringement**.

Contributory infringement occurs when someone contributes to, facilitates, or induces another party's infringing activity, while vicarious infringement occurs when someone benefits from the infringing activity of another party and has the right and ability to control that activity, even if they did not directly engage in the infringing activity themselves. In the L'Oreal vs. Bellure case, L'Oreal alleged that Bellure's use of similar marks and packaging in relation to its perfumes and other beauty products constituted direct trademark infringement, as it was likely to cause confusion among consumers and dilute the distinctiveness of L'Oreal's marks. The court ultimately found in favor of L'Oreal, holding that Bellure had engaged in direct trademark infringement, and did not consider issues of contributory or vicarious infringement.

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