

Abercrombie & Fitch: The Altering of Cultural Norms

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INTRODUCTION

Abercrombie and Fitch is a store that targets a specific audience to make their customers feel young and beautiful. The young adult population is lured into stores like Abercrombie and Fitch because of the store's sex appeal. Young and beautiful adults are ready at the door ready to greet customers (see figure 1). In order to understand the impact of Abercrombie and Fitch on the young adult population, semiotics, the media, research studies and autoethnography will be utilized. Nonverbal and verbal communication is also analyzed throughout this paper through visual aids and marketing tag lines. The persuasive advertising and marketing techniques used by Abercrombie and Fitch suggest the degree to which sexually explicit visual stimuli alter cultural norms.

JUSTIFICATION

Abercrombie and Fitch was established by David T. Abercrombie in 1892 as high-end outfitter of sporting and excursion goods. The store began going downhill in 1960 and was bought by Michael S. Jeffries in 1988. Since 1988, Abercrombie and Fitch has created a body culture that implies and promotes sexual and erotic lifestyles. It is a store capable of keeping up with the highly demanding fashion culture. However, Abercrombie and Fitch's implied lifestyle has its repercussions. The store can be seen as too provocative and even offensive. According to *Forbes Magazine*, Abercrombie and Fitch "generated controversy with its sexually suggestive catalogs, faced a protest from parent and Christian groups for marketing children's thong underwear with the words *kiss me* and *wink wink*" (Reuters). CBS News reported in 2003 that, "Youth wear retailer Abercrombie & Fitch has agreed to pay \$2.2 million to settle a suit with California labor regulators over allegations it forced

its employees to buy and wear its clothes while on the job” (The Associated Press). The Abercrombie and Fitch culture is depicted through the seductive and luring advertisements of models wearing their clothing or even posing nude. Because young adults are significantly more impressionable than older adults, Abercrombie and Fitch targets the young adults with their sexual advertisements.

What distinguishes the clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch from other retail stores? Why is the young adult population drawn to the clothing store? And how is the retail store able to keep up with the highly demanding fashion culture? Young adults are attracted to Abercrombie and Fitch because of their provocative clothing, nude model posters, and the overwhelming desire to feel attractive and beautiful (see figure 2). Abercrombie and Fitch campaign marketers imply that in order to be beautiful and desirable a shopper must wear Abercrombie and Fitch clothing. The young adult population is lured into stores like Abercrombie and Fitch due to the store’s marketing strategies. They send their messages through young models with rock hard abs and perfect hourglass body. When young adults purchase the clothes from Abercrombie and Fitch they feel attractive and sexy. Customers walking into Abercrombie and Fitch will find themselves surrounded by marketing advertisements that include photos of models with barely anything on. These posters convey beauty, desire, and seductiveness (see figure 3). The small and tight clothing along with the low-rise jeans and shirts depict the erotic lifestyle of the retail store. The young adult population is drawn to the store because they want to be seen as beautiful in the tight and sometimes scandalous clothing of Abercrombie and Fitch.

Abercrombie and Fitch retail stores are significant because the clothing store influences how younger women and men should dress and look. In order for media scholars to understand why stores like Abercrombie and Fitch have a huge impact on the young adult population, they must be able to understand why and how they are compelled to purchase the store's clothing. "The average woman sees 400 to 600 advertisements per day" (Body Image and Advertising). Advertisements affect a woman's self esteem as she compares herself to the models. Men are also affected through advertisements, but not as much and as often as women. Young women and men tend to compare themselves to the models in magazines, billboards, and posters. Because the store alters cultural norms, the Abercrombie and Fitch customers become sensitive about their body. After viewing many body images in advertisements the young adult population may feel unhappy with their lives, dissatisfied, and longing for something more. The remedy to their unhappiness is Abercrombie and Fitch clothing. Their advertisements make the young adult population believe that they can be beautiful and desirable. All that the consumer has to do is purchase and wear the clothing.

Rebelling against parents is seen when young adults wear the clothing of Abercrombie and Fitch. To wear the clothing that older adults view as provocative and seductive is a parent's worst nightmare. According to Jennifer Nelson, an Oakland writer, "Abercrombie and Fitch has angered parent groups with their racy quarterly Field Guide catalogue. The 2003 Christmas edition featured the headline "Group Sex and More!" (see figure 4) and included dozens of pictures of naked young men and women in various sexual poses" (Gross). Rebelling against parents is yet another reason why young adults

flock to Abercrombie and Fitch stores and why the young adults view the marketing ads so highly. To openly defy parents by wearing Abercrombie and Fitch gives the young adults more power and a new way of disrespecting their parents. The young adults want to see the sexy models and be seen as one of the models in today's society. They not only want to become that striking beauty, but they want that seductive appearance that tends to drive parents crazy.

According to Abercrombie & Fitch's 2006 Annual Report on Form 10-K, the company's total sales net increase was 16% from the prior year. Abercrombie and Fitch has now become the largest young adult retail store. Their sales record and overall company performance is directly correlated with the appearance of the store and their marketing strategies. The sales went from \$387.5 million in 2005 to \$449.5 in 2006 proving that sex appeal does sell, and that the young adult population is drawn to Abercrombie and Fitch because of their sexual innuendos (New York Stock Exchange, 2006). Abercrombie and Fitch knows how to effectively target the young adult population and hold their attention. The clothing is exclusive to the young adults, which in turn makes the young adult population feel special.

CRITICAL METHOD DESCRIBED

Abercrombie and Fitch retail stores send impressionable messages through their luring advertisements. The messages convey that the young adult population is capable of being sexy and beautiful when they wear the clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch. In this paper I am going to explain why and how the young adult population is drawn to Abercrombie and Fitch through the use of semiotics. Marketing posters and the appearance

of the store will be analyzed. Semiotics “is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content” (Barthes 111). Personal experience will also be used in this paper to demonstrate my credibility and knowledge as an employee of Abercrombie and Fitch (see figure 5). With the use of my personal experience as a brand representative, I am able to relate to Abercrombie and Fitch in ways that a typical customer would not be able to. The store manager of Abercrombie and Fitch, Sarah Hardison, is interviewed in this paper to notify the reader on how the store captivates only a specific audience and what specifically the store conveys to millions of young adults each day. Through the use of marketing posters and the appearance of Abercrombie and Fitch stores, I will break down the signifiers in each advertisement and store displays to uncover the overall signified message. Researching the effects of Abercrombie and Fitch through mediated messages is vital to understanding what attracts and captivates the minds of young adults in today’s society.

Advertisements are directed towards a specific audience because a certain product is not normally appealing to everyone. Abercrombie and Fitch stores make their target audience obvious and evident through their advertisements in the media. For example, older women and men over sixty come into Abercrombie and Fitch gasping. They find themselves surrounded with pictures of the half naked men and women with barely anything on. The farther you walk into Abercrombie and Fitch the more seductive the pictures become. In the back room, there is a picture that covers the wall from top to bottom revealing a beautiful young woman lying topless with a smile on top of a chiseled young man. They are passionately looking into each other’s eyes. Young women and men

are attracted to pictures just like these because of the sexual display. However, pictures like these are offensive to older generations. While working, I have had elderly men and women approach me and complain about the model posters displayed throughout the store. I hear things like, "Little eyes can see this" and "Doesn't this store have any decency?" Clearly, Abercrombie and Fitch is doing their job and succeeding by only connecting and targeting the young adults. Their goal is to make the young adults feel beautiful and happy by purchasing their clothes, perfume, and accessories. Abercrombie and Fitch's goal is not to convince older generations to purchase and wear their clothing. If the store targeted all ages their clothing would lose the most of the young adult population.

The seductive appearance of Abercrombie and Fitch makes older generations hesitate before walking in to the store. *60 Minutes* explains, "that Abercrombie is the apparel industry's version of Hooters, hiring hotties to work on the sales floor and relegating less bodacious associates to the stock room" (Gross). Daniel Gross refers to the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogues as a *Playboy* magazine. A store resembling Hooters and the catalogues of *Playboy* will attract younger audiences. Abercrombie and Fitch advertisers know that sex sells. Unfortunately, the younger generations are more apt to not think before they purchase an outfit from Abercrombie and Fitch. They act out on instinct and impulse before they realize that Abercrombie and Fitch stores influence sexual behavior and shameless self-promotion. Sexual appeal drives the young adult population to purchase their clothing.

Advertisements that depict beautiful and sexy men on a beach affect the company's sales and the company's ability to open more retail stores. Abercrombie and Fitch is

growing at an insurmountable rate. The retail store is spreading across the world from India to Tokyo. CBS News states that, “As of June 2007, the company operates 984 stores in all U.S. states except Wyoming, six stores in Canada (3 of which are Hollister Co. stores), and one store in Savile Row (London), the first international flagship store opened in London, England on March 22, 2007. Abercrombie & Fitch Co. plans to continue expanding to Japan and adding more stores in Canada” (Locker). As the retail store expands, so do their advertisements and the number of workers at Abercrombie and Fitch. According to *60 Minutes*, “Abercrombie & Fitch wants a sales force that reflects what’s up on its walls—cool yet seductive. Abercrombie’s image is now party-loving jocks and bare-naked ladies living fantasy lives (see Figure 2). Nubile young store “greeters” stripped down during the holidays to boost up sales” (Gross). With the growing number of stores around the world, young adults are being exposed to Abercrombie and Fitch’s sexual advertisements.

If Abercrombie and Fitch did not depicting young and beautiful people, their ads would not be desirable. To be young and beautiful reveals happiness and sexiness. Furthermore, being sexy and seductive brings momentary happiness and joy. The shopper’s self confidence raises when they wear the clothes from Abercrombie and Fitch. The store’s clothes send the message that the only way to be seductive and attractive is to make a purchase. The clothing is then promising a rise in self-esteem. Sex appeal can be bought according to Abercrombie and Fitch. Abercrombie and Fitch targets the hot, young, and the healthy. Their clothing does not accommodate any obese young adult. Their sizes are only meant to fit a certain audience. If overweight young adults were able to wear their

clothing, the thin young adult population would not want to buy the clothing. A customer is seen as special if he/she is able to fit into the clothing of Abercrombie and Fitch.

A study done by Claire E. Driessen, "Message Communication in Advertising: Selling the Abercrombie and Fitch Image," focuses on the controversial advertising methods of Abercrombie and Fitch and its profound effect on the target audience of teens. The research informs the reader on four messages: "The look of an Abercrombie and Fitch Person, The one and only Abercrombie and Fitch, The Abercrombie and Fitch life of luxury, and Not making the Abercrombie and Fitch cut" (Driessen 1). Driessen's study examines the messages that Abercrombie and Fitch sends in order to sell its image. In her literature review, she states that sex is becoming increasingly popular as an image and persuasive appeal in advertising. According to a 1981 study by Reid and Soley, advertisements were more likely to be recognized if an attractive model was used (Severn & Belch). In a different survey, 32% of consumers said they are more likely to buy a product if it has a sexual advertisement (Fetto 10). Sex is controversial in advertising according to Driessen. After launching a new sexy campaign of their image through a catalog, print advertisements, and in-store displays, the company operates 491 stores and \$1.35 billion in revenue by 2002 (Reichert 14). Displaying nude models in the store's catalog was Abercrombie & Fitch's main way of selling clothes. The company inspires the consumers to live for the Abercrombie and Fitch "lifestyle." The company image is also built by the store designs and the employees are a strategy of advertisement influence (Driessen 4). "Abercrombie and Fitch wants a sales force that reflects what's up on its walls" (Safer 2). Driessen also brings pleasure principles into her research study. The

“Pleasure Principle” includes topless women playing by the ocean and young naked men posing in the summer (Driessen 5). Persuasion is used in the advertising market because it is used to lure in the target audience. “In advertising, a consumer must believe in the image, product, or advertisement; therefore, it will not be questioned” (Driessen 5).

Abercrombie and Fitch has not been questioned as to what they want their customers to believe about the store. Later in this paper I interview a manager of Abercrombie and Fitch and ask her questions that reveal the motives and beliefs of Abercrombie and Fitch.

Driessen analyses Abercrombie and Fitch, their marketing strategies, and their persuasive techniques.

Driessen used two Research Questions in her study: “RQ1: What messages are being sent by Abercrombie and Fitch to display its corporate image? RQ2: How are these messages conveyed?” (Driessen 6). The first method in Driessen’s study was the content analysis. The researcher needed to examine the data and let the recurring themes emerge from the advertising campaign. The researcher, Driessen, used a qualitative data collection strategy with the main measurement being in field notes. Collecting the samples of Abercrombie and Fitch’s new campaign, observing the models, the store displays, and the shopping bags was vital to research Abercrombie and Fitch. After comparing the data collected the researcher used a constant comparative analysis.

The results of the study were sectioned off into four categories. The first category, was looking at and analyzing an Abercrombie and Fitch representative. This A&F brand representative is not overweight but thin and “all American.” The second category was the one and only store, Abercrombie and Fitch. “The Abercrombie and Fitch lifestyle is

communicated to be unique and not mainstream” (Driessen 8). The third category in the study was the Abercrombie and Fitch life of luxury. The store even appears luxurious because of the glass windows that stand about 10’ x12’. Every piece of clothing from them can be identified as coming from A&F. The final category was not making the Abercrombie and Fitch cut. “Abercrombie and Fitch communicated messages of disassociation with unattractive and overweight people” (Driessen 10). This study further demonstrates that Abercrombie and Fitch attracts a specific audience. They direct their marketing advertisements towards young, beautiful, and sexy adults.

In the discussion section of Driessen’s study, she lets the reader know that the new campaign is focused on selling the Abercrombie and Fitch symbol as a means of uniqueness, individualism, and luxurious perfection. Further research suggests that the reader should gain insight into what messages the typical Abercrombie and Fitch shopper receives about the Abercrombie and Fitch image and what persuades them to shop at the store. Another study could look into the different advertising methods of the store and its influence on the messages the company communicates (Driessen 11). Driessen concludes her study saying that the consumers are persuaded to purchase the clothing through the company’s image.

Throughout this paper, I am going to use Driessen’s suggestions to further my research. I am going to inform the reader of the typical messages the Abercrombie and Fitch shopper receives, and what persuades the consumer to shop at the store. I will also look at the influence the company has on the young adult population. The focus is going to be on the marketing posters, the store displays, and the employees of Abercrombie and

Fitch. Semiotics and autoethnography are going to be used as the foundation and the framework of my paper.

Semiotics was created by Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of semiotics. It was popularized by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco with the focus on the meaning in texts. The concept of “semiotics is not really concerned with art, but rather with meaning and modes of cognition (the codes that we need to understand a text)” (Berger 34). Semiotics is a sign system with a basic foundation: the signifier, signified, and sign. First, there is a signifier, which includes letters, words, or anything that conveys meaning. The signified is the overall message that the letters, words, or picture reveals to the audience or reader. The signified is also known as the overall concept of the sound image. The sign is something that denotes or refers to something else; it is the combination of the signified and the signifier. The father of semiotics, Saussure believes that there is a world out there that all of us can relate to through the use of semiotics. Saussure used the word “sign” to describe a new science which was seen through his eyes as “a science which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life” (Saussure 33). This new science, he said, would teach us “what signs consist of, what laws govern them” (Saussure 33). Abercrombie and Fitch use semiotics to alter our social life. Explicit sexuality is seen as desirable in today’s culture because of the store’s clear display of sexual innuendos.

Saussure used the arbitrariness of the sign as the first principle of semiotics. When someone uses the word arbitrary it means that there is no good reason for something. An arbitrary choice means that there is not one choice that is better than another. Saussure saw language as cultural convention. Every one must agree on a word to signify a certain sign.

As long as a group of people share the same belief in a word's meaning there is no problem. Sign systems are arbitrary systems according to Saussure; they set up meanings through different codes. Abercrombie and Fitch conveys the message of sex and beauty through their advertisements.

Autoethnography is used in my paper to establish credibility and to demonstrate my knowledge on how Abercrombie and Fitch affects shoppers as an employee. One of the clear benefits of ethnography is the full immersion by the investigator into the environment of the people of interest (Plummer). Autoethnography requires one to live up close and personal with a certain culture. I worked as a brand representative for Abercrombie and Fitch for over 2 years. While working for Abercrombie and Fitch I was immersed in the culture, mindset, and attitude that the company wanted me to present to shoppers. The *Journal of Advertising Research* reveals the importance of the cultural forces in autoethnography.

As we address deeper questions and search for more meaningful patterns, we have to think about people beyond their roles as users, consumers, or "targets." We have to go beyond their physical interactions or emotional experiences with a brand's touch points. We need to know about the effects of cultural forces that surround them, ground them in history, and influence where they are going (Suri).

The importance of recognizing the cultural forces in autoethnography involve understanding what compels the consumer to purchase an item and what trend are they following. In order to understand the importance of the messages the store conveys to its customers I interviewed the Abercrombie and Fitch manager of San Luis Obispo, Sarah Hardison. She is completely immersed in the culture of Abercrombie and Fitch on a daily

basis. Her own autoethnography and credibility is vital to understanding what compels so many young adults to come into the store of Abercrombie and Fitch for their clothing.

OBJECT OF CRITICISM

Abercrombie and Fitch focuses on the perfection of their models and employees in the store. An article by Chanelle Harbin critiques Abercrombie and Fitch models.

“Size 0, long, straight blonde hair, Caucasian, and blue eyes is the look among females seen in Abercrombie and Fitch advertisements. The ads are black and white photos, with a close-up or full length body shot. Because the thin, blonde-hair, and blue-eyes look is predominant in advertising, the image is desired among young women in today’s society. Women attempt to re-create this "look" at home” (Harbin).

The young women want to turn into the beautiful model in the photographs. They believe that becoming like the beautiful, stylish, and thin blond will make them happy and sexy. When customers walk into Abercrombie and Fitch, it is impossible to miss the luring and seductive photographs. The store also reveals their power of sex appeal in the store’s smell. The sexy smell is yet another signifier that is directly correlated to the stores sex appeal. Fierce cologne, the smell lingering in Abercrombie and Fitch stores, is luring, inviting, and undeniably pleasing to the senses. Abercrombie and Fitch sprays their popular cologne, Fierce, every thirty minutes while the store is open to customers. The sexy and alluring smell of Abercrombie and Fitch draws the customers into the store. I see customers smile as they walk in and ask what is sprayed around the store and where they are able to purchase the desirable scent. A shopper is able to smell and experience a part of the store before they even step inside to look at the clothes. The pleasurable scent is just one of the signifiers of sex appeal. The approval of the scent is seen in the faces of customers as they walk into the store and through the sale records of the cologne.

Abercrombie and Fitch continues to promote their colognes and perfumes in their stores with advertisements of perfect, beautiful, and young models. The store gives the young adult population hope and a promise to look like the models because they too can wear the clothing, smell like the models wearing the colognes and perfumes, and ultimately become a part of Abercrombie and Fitch.

Abercrombie and Fitch is unlike other retail stores because they are able to give the young adults the satisfaction of sex appeal and beauty. The store is then capable of getting away with selling sexual appeal in their advertisements. For example, beauty is another signifier that is depicted in an Abercrombie and Fitch advertisement with a stereotypical California beach scene. The signified is the six young men standing in the waves just as the sun is starting to set on the beach. The models are not only representing beauty and happiness, but health as well. The signifiers of beauty are the chiseled face, rock hard abs, tan body, and perfect complexion. Their sexiness, the overall signified message, comes from how they look and appear to others. The models' also use other signifiers in the image to create sex appeal by their pouting lips and penetrating eyes. This reveals that the male models are aware of just how good they look. The young men want to become the chiseled man on the beach that younger women long for. Sex appeal is achieved when purchasing one of the cargo pants or boxer briefs shown in the picture. The young men make the purchase because they can become the sexy beach boy and the young women make a purchase for their man because they want to have that sexy and desirable beach hottie. Abercrombie and Fitch depicts this scene of the signified sexiness on a beach with the signifiers of six young men standing in the waves with matching pants and boxer

briefs. The overall sign in this marketing advertisement is sex appeal once again. The young male adult looking at the ad will feel compelled to purchase their clothing and to become another desirable hottie while the young woman will look at the ad and desire to have a man just like him. Homosexual men will also desire the young men standing in the waves with only boxers on. Young adults will connect sexiness with the Abercrombie and Fitch models and then go to the store seeking the sex appeal that was portrayed in the advertisements.

Abercrombie and Fitch desires the “natural look” of not only their employees, but of the young adults who wear their clothing. The campaign marketers believe that it is not the makeup or hair that makes a person happy and beautiful, but the clothes that a person wears each day that makes them feel beautiful and sexy. The image of beauty is associated with Abercrombie and Fitch each time they place an attractive and sexy model in an advertisement. The advertisements of Abercrombie and Fitch would not be taken seriously by the young adult population if they did not use the power of sex appeal. Their provocative clothing makes it possible for a customer to become the next beautiful model in an advertisement ad, but the customer must take the first step and purchase the clothing.

INTERPRETATION OF A&F

Through personal experience, I am aware that millions of young adults are compelled to purchase the clothing of Abercrombie and Fitch because of their seductive advertisements. The seductive advertisements alter cultural norms of conservative clothing. An advertisement of a hot and sexy guy will not only compel customers, both guys and girls, to come into the store but to compel the young adults to purchase their clothing.

Many young adults will want to look at the guy in the poster and the guys walking by will want to become the hot and sexy guy on the poster. Abercrombie and Fitch marketing campaigns are aware that if you place someone who has an attractive body in an ad, millions of people will take the time to look at the image. The image can and will compel the young to purchase the clothing.

What draws the young adults to Abercrombie and Fitch stores? In my experience, this retail store in particular has a club-feel to it. Instead of glass windows, the store has dark shutters. The ceiling is painted dark and the lights are very dim. The only lighting in the store comes from the reflection of light in the marketing advertisements hung throughout the store. Inside the store the music is loud and exciting for young adults. The older adults cannot stand the continuous “thump thump thump” of the techno music inside the store. The loud and sometimes unbearable music isolates the store and makes it appealing and compelling for only the younger generation. The young adult population is looking for something new, exciting and sexy in today’s generation. The excitement in their music and sexy posters inside the store creates the “club” atmosphere of Abercrombie and Fitch. The “club” atmosphere has an undeniable effect on the young adult population. The retail store’s ability to connect with their specific audience is evident through their recorded yearly sales.

Another side of Abercrombie and Fitch is revealed by the store manager, Sarah Hardison. She says that she is living her dream job as the store manager of the San Luis Obispo at Abercrombie and Fitch retail store. I interviewed her on the 10th of September 2009 to get the point of view of a person that is heavily involved with the store’s activity

and success every day. Sarah informed me that all of the clothes are tighter fitting to give a natural and sexy look. The clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch draws in shoppers because there are “great looking people inside the store that project the Abercrombie and Fitch image, and the image involves perfection and uniqueness in the way that the clothes are worn by the associates” (Hardison). The target audience for Abercrombie and Fitch is between 18 and 25. With this target audience, Abercrombie and Fitch sends the overall “message that Abercrombie and Fitch is the cool place to be, with great looking people, and awesome music” (Hardison). According to Hardison, Abercrombie and Fitch sets the standard for what is cool; many stores try to copy the look of the retail store but their quality of clothing falls short compared to A&F. The clothing has a positive effect when worn because although many of the shirts look alike, each person is capable of dressing and layering the clothes differently. Sarah believes that Abercrombie and Fitch will change a person’s self esteem because while a customer is in the store they will be surrounded by friendly and outgoing models. These models want to make a customer’s time enjoyable while in the store and make them feel confident in the clothing that they purchase.

“Abercrombie and Fitch is the cool party and I am the host, I have to make sure that everyone is having a good time in my store. My associates have a great attitude because they want to give the customers a memorable experience. While working at Abercrombie and Fitch you have to make sure you are rocking the party all the time” (Hardison).

The autoethnography Sarah expresses in working for Abercrombie and Fitch has given her a passion for her job and the clothing she represents. As manager of Abercrombie and Fitch, she is constantly aware of the marketing posters that are placed around the store and the store’s display of the clothing. It is important for the posters to be sexy yet attainable

for the customers. In contrast to Abercrombie and Fitch, the famous shoes- Airwalk- used to target a specific audience. The shoes were only sold at specific stores and the popular line was not mainstream. However, the Airwalk “epidemic” ended when the makers started “translating the language of mainstream products for the mainstream” (Gladwell 214). The owners of Airwalk no longer targeted a specific audience but the entire general public. The brand was no longer exclusive to a specific audience, but available to everyone. They were then perceived as unloyal to their previous customers. Abercrombie and Fitch has yet to make their product available to all stores. A customer can only purchase the clothing at Abercrombie and Fitch stores. The clothing is exclusive to their target audience of the young adult population.

I worked for Abercrombie and Fitch for over two and a half years at the Abercrombie and Fitch in San Luis Obispo, CA. I have been exposed to hundreds of tag lines, marketing phrases, and season phrases on a weekly basis. Each marketing advertisement somehow demonstrates sexual appeal. For example, the season phrase for April 2006 was “Spring Break Clothing Optional.” A few of the T-Shirt marketing phrases have been “Gentlemen Prefer Tig-O-Bitties” and “Mount Her Back” for the men and women’s clothing in Abercrombie and Fitch. A few more shirts had the phrases “Blondes Don’t Pay Cover, I’d Do Me, and An Awkward Morning Beats a Boring Night, and Who Needs Brains When You Have These?” have also created controversy” (see figure 6). A common tag line that is given to each customer that walks into Abercrombie and Fitch is, “Try on our sexy jeans.” The goal is to make the customer feel sexy once they try on and

purchase the jeans. Through each marketing strategy, Abercrombie and Fitch reveals sex appeal. And the clothing norm is then to be sexy and desirable, not cute and pretty.

The appeal to sex is not only geared towards heterosexuals but homosexuals as well. Article writer, Martha Kleder, says that, “Many of the photos are still geared to appeal to homosexuals... With its homoerotic pictures and page after page of hunky flesh exposed, it’s clearly something that has gained the attention of gay fans.” Through my experience as a brand representative and model at Abercrombie and Fitch I would interact with hundreds of homosexual co-workers and customers. The appeal to sex is powerful and it effects homosexuals and heterosexuals. From the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue to posters of models, homosexual appeal and behavior is conveyed and depicted (see figure 7 & 8). Because of Abercrombie and Fitch’s sex appeal to both homosexuals and heterosexuals, there are groups eager to make fun of and pose as models in the stores. For example, 111 male customers in New York City’s Abercrombie and Fitch took off their shirts to make fun of the store’s appeal to sex. The 111 shirtless men were posing as male models for a comedic effect (see figure 9&10).

Abercrombie and Fitch is the icon of sex appeal. Young adults are drawn to the store due to the store display, marketing posters, and employees of the retail store. The store lures customers into the store with an inviting smell and a smile from an employee. In this paper I used the further research suggestions from Claire Driessen to inform the reader of the typical messages the Abercrombie and Fitch shopper receives, and what persuades the consumer to shop at the store. My framework and method consisted of semiotics and persuasion techniques that reveal a shift in cultural norms. I analyzed different marketing

strategies of Abercrombie and Fitch in their store displays and marketing posters.

Autoethnography is demonstrated through the manager of Abercrombie and Fitch, Sarah Hardison, and through my experience as a past employee of the retail store. Abercrombie and Fitch's image has caused millions of young adults to look up to the retail store for direction in what they should wear and purchase.

Kenneth Burke's theory of Identification further confirms my findings and analysis. The Identification Theory consists of dramatism which is "the common ground that exists between speaker and audience, such as physical characteristics, talents, occupation, background, experiences, personality, beliefs, and values" (Griffin 330). When the theory is applied to Abercrombie and Fitch, the customers are able to identify themselves with the look, uniqueness, and image that the company exhibits. The customers are enticed and drawn to Abercrombie and Fitch once they have seen the marketing posters, the store display, catalogues, gift-cards, brand representatives, logos, models, shopping bags, and mannequins. Because Abercrombie and Fitch created different ways that they could reach out to customers, they are more likely to identify themselves with at least one of Abercrombie and Fitch's marketing strategies. The identification theory deals with individual desires. "Abercrombie and Fitch's messages placed the label as something to be desired. Consumers desired to become the image of an elite Abercrombie and Fitch person" (Driessen 11) Abercrombie and Fitch uses its power as an elite retail store to persuade customers to purchase the clothing from every new season.

There were limitations in this paper that need to be addressed. In order for my own autoethnography to be highly credible I need to work at Abercrombie and Fitch longer and

gain more experience in the retail field. Further information on Abercrombie and Fitch could be obtained from the district manager of the retail store. The district managers are involved with many Abercrombie and Fitch stores; unlike the store managers who are only involved with one of the retail stores. Another limitation is the lack of research on the cause and effect relationship in the sex appeal of the clothing store, and the customers that purchase the clothing.

Further research of Abercrombie and Fitch is important to understanding the desires of the young adult population. A study on customer satisfaction could be conducted to see if they are content with their purchase. These young adults who purchase clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch can also be studied to see if they behave differently in comparison those who do not wear clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch. Research could be used in tracking how many young adults purchase t-shirts with sexual advertising sayings written on them verses those with only a moose (Abercrombie and Fitch logo) on the shirt.

CONCLUSION

The retail store, Abercrombie and Fitch, is analyzed in this paper to demonstrate the effect it has on the young adult population through sex appeal. The findings revealed that Abercrombie and Fitch has different marketing strategies that make it easy for customers to relate to the store. The use of semiotics was applied to analyze the store display and the marketing advertisements. Through semiotics sexual appeal is seen as the driving source of Abercrombie and Fitch sales. Personal experience is tied into the paper to reveal a closer look of Abercrombie and Fitch. Every young adult wants to feel beautiful,

accepted, and desirable. Abercrombie and Fitch creates this image through the sex appeal of the store. The image of the retail store is seen through marketing posters, catalogues, gift-cards, brand representatives, logos, models, shopping bags, and mannequins, and tag lines. Abercrombie and Fitch is an elite retail store that captivates and entices millions of young adults to purchase the clothing.

This paper not only informs the reader about Abercrombie and Fitch, but it also furthers understanding in communication studies through semiotics, autoethnography, and the Identification theory. The reader is now aware of Abercrombie and Fitch and the different marketing strategies it employs to sell its image to young adults around the world. Abercrombie and Fitch alters cultural norms for the young adults because they promote sex before marriage, homosexuality, and sexual seductiveness through their clothing and advertisements. A customer becomes a different person when they are associated with Abercrombie and Fitch. They are seen as sexy and desirable, which is the ultimate goal of Abercrombie and Fitch.

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APPENDICES

FIGURE 1



" Google Image Result for

<http://manolomen.com/images/Abercrombie%20&%20Fitch%20in->

[store%20models.jpg](http://manolomen.com/images/Abercrombie%20&%20Fitch%20in-store%20models.jpg)." *Google Images*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2009.

<http://manolomen.com/category/etiquette/page/2/>.

FIGURE 2



"More Heat from Abercrombie & Fitch - Pulpconnection." *Pulpconnection - Addicted to Passions and Pulp*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2009.

<<http://www.pulpconnection.net/2008/02/more-heat-from-abercrombie-fitch/>>.

FIGURE 3



"More Heat from Abercrombie & Fitch - Pulpconnection." *Pulpconnection - Addicted to Passions and Pulp*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2009.

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FIGURE 4

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

“Google Image Result for <http://extremecatholic.blogspot.com/images/abercrombie.jpg>.”

Google Images. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2009.

FIGURE 5



Mitchel, Ashley. "A&F Models." 2007. JPG file.

FIGURE 6



"A&F." *PMW*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2009.

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FIGURE 7



" Google Image Result for

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N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2009.

FIGURE 8



" Google Image Result for

<http://www.commercialcloset.org/photos/adlibrary2/350.jpg>." *Google Images*.

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FIGURE 9



“Google Image Result for http://chuvachienes.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/improv_everywhere_no_shirts.jpg.” *Google Images*.
N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2009. < http://chuvachienes.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/improv_everywhere_no_shirts.jpg.>

FIGURE 10



" Google Image Result for <http://thepiratesdilemma.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/af.jpg>." *Google Images*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2009.