

**Too Sexy Too Soon? A Case Study of Abercrombie & Fitch**

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## **Introduction**

Abercrombie and Fitch, an American retailer with nearly 800 U.S. and international stores, is no stranger to controversy. The company has long profited from shock value and consumer backlash not only in its marketing, but also in its clothing and employment practices. Known for its preppy, casual style of mid-luxury clothing, the retailer is a mainstay in the American shopping mall. But recent controversies about its product style and marketing practices have kept the company continually in the news. The latest controversy is no different.

In March 2011, the company posted a new product on its Abercrombie kids website: the “Ashley” bikini, a striped triangle bathing suit, sized for girls ages 8 to 14. It seemed innocent enough until one small word in the clothing description caused a firestorm of media and activist backlash. The website described the bikini as a “push-up,” complete with “extra padding for breast enhancement.” (Mendez, para. 1) Because this description was added to a website that markets to girls as young as 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, it caused an uproar about the company’s intentions of over-sexualizing young girls. Comments began pouring in decrying the company’s apparent lack of decency or sensitivity. All were asking the same question: “how soon is too sexy?”

Did this controversy expose a company intent on objectifying young girls? Or is it another cog in the successful marketing wheel of one of the popular clothing retailers in America?

## **Company Background**

Founded in 1892 as an elite outdoor clothing store, Abercrombie and Fitch, or A&F, was the brainchild of owners David T. Abercrombie and Ezra H. Fitch. In 1976, however, the company

closed after filing for bankruptcy, but was revived soon after by Oshman's Sporting Goods of Houston as a mail order retail store. Eventually, the company was sold again to The Limited in 1988 and then became a publicly owned company. Known for its preppy, "casual luxury" style, A&F finds great profitability in positioning itself as an up-scale, trendy clothing store for pre-teen, teenage and early adult. In addition to A&F and Abercrombie, A&F also owns Hollister & Co., Gilly Hicks and Reuhl, all stores that cater to A&F's primary market of teenagers and young adults.

### **Marketing and Advertising**

A&F's advertising style, while not unique in its use of sexuality, is recognizable in using nude or partially nude models in magazine and store displays. The still photography style is poignant, usually black and white and often features models in suggestive poses, which promotes its sensual style. The marketing style evokes themes of "popularity" and "fantasy" to sell to a consumer group known for its attention to fashion and the allure of "being cool." *Time* magazine described A&F's marketing approach as selling "a technicolor teen lifestyle." (Reynoldsburg, para. 1) The company's marketing is successful because it extends its corporate image beyond print advertising and into its stores, publications and employees to create a cohesive brand experience.

According to a content analysis conducted of an A&F advertising campaign, "corporate image also includes the extent to which each marketing instrument contributes to the brand image and the extent to which that image enhances desired economic behavior of markets." (Driessen, 2005, p. 1) Additionally, Driessen (2005) suggests "Abercrombie & Fitch communicate[s] its

image as a lifestyle. Abercrombie & Fitch is more than a pair of jeans and lacey tank top; it is a company whose image is created by message of how to dress, act, and live the Abercrombie & Fitch life.” (p. 7) To that end, including sexually suggestive bikinis for its children’s store, appears to be another way for A&F to extend its lifestyle image to a younger demographic.

A&F has often come under fire for its advertising by activist groups that believe its images are too graphic. One only needs to walk into a retail store to see the sexuality on parade with large posters of barely clothed models and the employees that are hired as models that fit the company’s “look.”

A&F continually defends its risqué advertising style. Sam Shahid, an A&F board member and head of Shahid & Co. the advertising agency that designs the campaigns, explains it as “there’s no such thing as being too sexy. You’re speaking to the kids. Everybody talks about sex all the time.” (Kazdin, 2003, para. 8)

And many believe the retailer won’t be changing its tactics any time soon. Author William B. Werther (2006) believes “as long as the company remains racy (within the bounds of legality)—and still manages to appeal to and reflect the desires of its largest audience—there is a chance they will continue to conclude that ‘sex *still* sells.’” (p. 269)

### **Too Sexy Too Soon?**

Faced with mounting pressures to “fit in” or be “popular,” many young girls gravitate toward any product that guarantees attention. In a modern society, attention is equated with sexiness,

and several theories explain why girls are often the target of this media bombardment. According to the 2007 American Psychological Association, “the sexualization of girls is a broad and increasing problem and is harmful to girls.” Additionally, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls states “if girls purchase (or ask their parents to purchase) products and clothes designed to make them look physically appealing and sexy, and if they style their identities after the sexy celebrities who populate their cultural landscape, they are, in effect, sexualizing themselves.” (para. 12) Extreme or continued exposure to sexualizing products is believed to lead to low self-esteem, body distortion and anxiety, especially in young girls who are experiencing naturally low levels of self-esteem through puberty.

Considering that A&F is just one example where companies have crossed the proverbial decency line, why the fuss? Should companies be held to a higher standard when promoting clothes to a younger population of girls? Many psychologists think so. Dr. Nancy Irwin, believes that [sexual-themed] garments could encourage premature sexual promiscuity: “Wearing a padded bra at that age... is encouraging sexual precociousness, a dangerous muscle to flex for the girl as well as for peers and predators,' she said. (*Daily Mail*, 2011, para. 10)

Additionally, child psychologist Dr. Michael Bradley believes a focus on early sexual growth could have long-term damaging effects:

“One, we're shaping their beliefs. We're actually teaching them that this is their primary value in this culture, that's what they're all about. Second, we're shaping their behavior. We find that kids that get into this stuff do get into high risk early-onset sexual behavior. Third, we whack their body image. We tell them ‘You're not okay as you are. You have to use this

kind of stuff.' Finally, we're taking their childhoods away from them. At age eight we throw them into this pressurized, high anxiety world they're not ready to handle and we think it's part of why we see so much depression and anxiety in kids." (Jezebel citation)

### **Out of The Ordinary?**

Even though the A&F controversy seems one-of-a-kind, over-sexualization of young girls is not a new phenomenon. A&F joins a long line of companies that have pushed the envelope when it comes to shock value. Consider the following from *The Charlotte Observer*:

- 1959: The Barbie doll debuts, sparking discussions across the decades about everything from her impossible measurements to whether she presents a false ideal to young girls. In 1992 a teen version of the doll created an uproar when she famously declared: "Math class is tough."
- 1960s: Sexy takes on a waifish style, as Twiggy popularizes little-girl androgynous styles and stick-skinny looks.
- 1980: Fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields creates a stir when she appears in a Calvin Klein ad, teasing: "Want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."
- 1984: Madonna's release of "Like a Virgin" sparks girls and young women to copy her street urchin looks with short skirts over leggings, bras as outerwear and fishnet gloves.
- 1995: Calvin Klein takes heat again for an ad campaign where prepubescent models pose in pornography-like settings. (Off-camera adult men are heard enticing them to disrobe.)
- 2001: The first Bratz dolls - vampy playthings with oversized heads, skinny bodies and clothes that include thigh-high boots and tight dresses - are released. By 2006 their sales surpass Barbie.

- 2008: Vanity Fair features a suggestive photo spread of 15-year-old Disney Channel star Miley Cyrus with a bare back, clutching a sheet to her chest. Parents are outraged and Cyrus claims to be "embarrassed" by the Annie Leibovitz photos.
- September 2011: JC Penney pulls a T-shirt with the statement "I'm too pretty to do homework so my brother has to do it for me."

### **Bikini Controversy Takes Hold**

In March 2010, when the "Ashley" bikini became top news, there was no stopping the inevitable heated reply. "I think it's horrible," said one mom interviewed by *The Naperville Sun* (2011), "it makes these little girls grow up so fast. And that's a shame." (para. 7) According to the *Daily Mail*, (2011) parenting expert Dr. Janet Rose says: "This is appalling. If a parent buys a padded bikini for an eight year old, children's services should be called." (para. 5) Parenting blog Babble.com blogger Rebecca Odes added: "The push up bra is, effectively, a sex tool, designed to push the breasts up and out, putting them front and center where here they're more accessible to the eye... How is this okay for a second-grader?" (para. 4)

A Jezebel.com post states "The fact that in two separate instances, the idea for a padded bra for tweens (as young as eight years old) was able to make it from conception to production and into stores, is disturbing in and of itself, as it means that every step of the way, not one person said, "Hey, maybe this isn't the best idea" (or if there was, they were in the minority)," revealing a disconnect between what stores think will sell and what the public thinks is decent. (para. 7)

Many observers felt this latest controversy was predictable. The Daily News (2011) states “while the company may be ducking fire for its latest questionably marketed clothing, over-sexualizing tweens is not new ground for Abercrombie, which stirred up controversy when it started selling thongs to pint-sized customers in 2002.” (para. 8)

Other controversies about A&F’s product have occurred over the past few years. Take for example, in 2002, A&F launched a line of underwear, specifically thongs for the same age group (8 to 14) printed with phrases such as “wink wink” and “eye candy.” And in the same year, the company was admonished for selling shirts that depicted racial stereotypes of Asians, including one shirt showing Chinese laundry workers with conical hats and the phrase, "Wong Brothers Laundry Service: Two Wongs Can Make It White." (CNN, 2011). And in 2003, the company stopped publishing its controversial holiday magazine, *A&F Quarterly*, which routinely featured full-nude models in suggestive poses.

### **Corporate Response and Responsibility**

A&F’s only public response to the bikini outrage included a short post on its Facebook page stating:

“We've re-categorized the Ashley swimsuit as padded. We agree with those who say it is best "suited" for girls age 12 and older.”

The post received 110 “likes” and 162 comments, mostly in support of the company. No other official statement came from the company. Albeit limited, the response was truthful and a reaction to the voice of its customer. But was it enough?

To answer that question, one can look at other responses by the company of similar controversies. A&F's response to the thong controversy was equally as light-hearted and brief:

“The underwear for young girls was created with the intent to be lighthearted and cute. Any misrepresentation of that is purely in the eye of the beholder.” (Abraham, 2011, para. 15)

This response invited another round of criticism. It's satirical tone made critics believe that those who opposed the product were “harboring their own dirty thoughts.” (Mont, 2011, para. 20)

When attacked for its racially demeaning t-shirts. The company's response was one of surprise and shock that it was even an issue.

“We're very, very, very, sorry... We personally thought Asians would love the t-shirt.”

One can see in these responses, that A&F does not take itself too seriously. The company is clear and truthful in its responses to controversy. But, the main criticism is that it is not the kind of truthful the public wants to hear. In a society where hyper-sexuality and objectification is become more of an issue, companies that choose to walk the line of public decency will most likely continue to receive negative feedback.

## **The Future**

The question of corporate responsibility is one of great debate. Should A&F be held more accountable for its clothing, especially those marketed to an age group eager for attention? Or does the responsibility lay with the consumer, or in this case the parent buying this type of clothing for their children? To continue to appeal not only to its target market, but the purchasing

power of the parents, A&F should consider its customer's expectations and work to understand how it can sell popular products within socially acceptable limits.

Some see controversies such as these as educational moments for young teens. Dr. Bradley also states in the same Jezebel.com article he bashes the company, he also suggests to "ask your kid what they think about the stuff. You have to shape their beliefs. Engage your enemy on the battlefield of beliefs. Ask her why she does it, what she gets out of it, what the payoff is, where this is gonna to go." (Jezebel.com, 2011, para. 15) By engaging in conversations with young girls, these controversies can provide opportunities to examine the media's pressure and decide if they want to participate or stand against it.

In a society where sex continues to sell, A&F has found ways to be controversial, yet successful. Reported sales in the second quarter of 2011 equaled \$916.8 million, lower than the expected earnings, but it shows the controversy did not have a significant effect on its bottom line.

Even throughout multiple controversies, A&F remains consistent in its style and relationship with the public. No matter how risqué the public perceives it to be, A&F does what it wants, just like the teenage market it caters to. So if A&F is merely being itself, does the adage "beauty (or in this case sexiness) is in the eye of the beholder" ring truer than ever? It's up to the consumer to decide.

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