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The Creepy Porn of Abercrombie & Fitch: Are Parents Blind?

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Abercrombie and Fitch, an old-line traditional clothing company and outfitter, has reinvented itself for the new generation. Founded in 1892, the company served as outfitter for Theodore Roosevelt's expeditions to Africa and the Amazon jungles, and later sold guns and fishing equipment to Ernest Hemmingway and President Eisenhower. But, as any trip to the local mall will tell you, times have changed.

Once billed as "The Greatest Sporting Goods Store in the World," the company is now one of the hottest retailers to youth, who are glad to advertise the store's name on their T-shirts, cargo shorts, and underwear. The chain has 625 stores, most located in upscale suburban shopping malls and trendy retail settings. The company also operates "Abercrombie" stores for younger adolescents and over 100 off-brand "Hollisters" stores for high schoolers. Trust me, your kids know where they are.

The stores feature huge black-and-white photographs of young male and female models wearing a minimum of clothing and showing a maximum of skin. The images are what the postmodernists call "transgressive," in that they subversively imply sexual situations that, if portrayed more overtly, would offend. This is most glaringly apparent in the company's use of homoerotic imagery with boys and young men, who are shown cavorting suggestively with one another and resting on each others' naked chests. If you saw this on the lawn of your local high school, you would hit the gas, lock the doors, and take your son promptly home. Instead, parents are shelling out the cash for their sons and daughters to wear the company's logo on their clothing.

But the really blatant porn is found in the company's frisky catalogue, or "magalog" as it is called. Over the past few years, Abercrombie and Fitch has developed this product into some of the most pornographic and sexually explicit material to get in kid's hands—and they are getting it.

The latest edition of the quarterly catalogue is just out as the Back to School Issue 2003: The Sex Ed Issue. Oh, it's an education, alright. One quick look will be an education for America's parents.

Let me put this as delicately as I can. This catalogue is filled with naked youth—boys and girls—involved in suggested sexual activities including heterosexual intercourse, group sex, exhibitionism, and homosexuality. Got your attention? The "Greatest Sporting Goods Store in the World" has moved on to new sports, and the players aren't wearing clothes.

Come to think of it, one of the oddest features of the "catalogue" is the fact that the models aren't wearing clothes and the clothes are pictured without the models. The message, and the photographs, aren't subtle.

Nor, I should add, is the text. The narrative overlaying the photographs is crude and sexually explicit—and basically unquotable on this Web Log. Suffice it to say that the message encourages youth to get as much direct sexual knowledge as possible, and presents this as the lifestyle to seek and admire. Be pretty, be popular, be cool, be buff, be naked, and be promiscuous. That's the message in a nutshell.

The wrapper on the catalogue advertises its “mature content” and states that parental consent is “suggested” for youth under age 18. That suggestion is about as effective as the “no talking in the halls” signs at the local middle school. What the statement actually communicates is, “Buy me and be cool—just don't get caught.” The warning makes the magazine all the more desirable.

Several government officials got the message. In 1999, Michigan Attorney General Jennifer Granholm [now the state's governor] sent three children aged 10, 13, and 14 into a local Abercrombie and Fitch store without adults present. All three were able to purchase the catalogue. Illinois Lieutenant Governor Corinne Wood called for a boycott of the chain, as did the Chicago City Council. The chain is still smiling and prospering. The negative publicity has only served to increase the firm's cache and popularity among the young. If parents get this upset, something really fun must be at stake. The company doesn't even have to advertise on television. Its message is getting out just fine.

Pornographic images—intended to attract with deliberate sexual interest—appear on billboards, advertisements, and in prime-time entertainment. That is part and parcel of the degeneration of America's sexual mores. The pornographic images are so prevalent and common that many of us do not even notice. A friend who keeps a very close watch on his teenage sons recently told me that he is confident they are not seeing pornography. Nonsense. They may not be looking at pornographic internet sites, X-rated movies, or magazines, and that's urgently important. But if they drive down a public highway, watch the commercials that go with television sports, or have their eyes open at the local mall, they are confronted with pornography. It's everywhere. That's why Abercrombie and Fitch pushes the boundaries a bit farther each year. In this culture, you have to work hard to remain scandalous.

Last year, Abercrombie sold thong underwear for girls [in children's sizes!] with the words, “Eye Candy” and “Wink Wink” printed on the front. The Hollister stores have featured boys' T-shirts with sexually suggestive messages that play on words. Kids are showing up at school and at church wearing the company's logo without embarrassment—and their parents are letting them advertise the lifestyle.

Hard as it is to believe, some are even buying their kids the catalogue. An Illinois mother told the Daily Illini [newspaper of the University of Illinois] that she buys the catalogue for her 17-year-old son. “I do screen what my son sees,” she said, “but I think there's nothing wrong with it.” Call me old fashioned, but I think times have changed when mothers are buying porn for their teenage sons. Listen, Mom, he's not looking for artistic merit. Who's kidding whom?

Would you let your kids wear clothing emblazoned with the Playboy or Penthouse logo? Then why Abercrombie and Fitch? Christian parents, like all parents, want their kids to be happy and popular. Many will argue that this is just no big deal. It's just clothing.

No, it's not just clothing, just advertising, or just publicity. It's buying into a lifestyle, rewarding pornography, and advertising sexual promiscuity. Abercrombie and Fitch is laughing all the way to the bank, aided and abetted by America's parents. Now, that's really creepy.

