

# Message Communication in Advertising: Selling the Abercrombie and Fitch Image

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## ABSTRACT

Advertising is a frequently used influential and persuasive means of communication, especially on teens and young adults. Abercrombie and Fitch is a corporation whose advertising methods have been controversial because of the profound effect its message has on the target audience of teens and young adults. Research found Abercrombie and Fitch used its new campaign to communicate four prevalent messages: The look of an Abercrombie & Fitch Person, The one and only Abercrombie & Fitch, The Abercrombie & Fitch life of luxury, and Not making the Abercrombie & Fitch cut. These messages were communicated through numerous venues, and persuaded consumers to purchase the products through identification with the Abercrombie & Fitch image. Keywords: content analysis, message communication, Abercrombie & Fitch, identification

## INTRODUCTION

Less than one year ago Abercrombie & Fitch decided to remove its main form of advertising, the magalog *A&F Quarterly*, from the market. The controversy created around this company's advertising is intriguing. The way a company communicates its image to consumers is an interesting method of message communication. Image by itself is "multidimensional constructs containing cognitive and emotional elements" (p. 86). 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" (p.83). Additionally it encompasses "the quality of management, corporate leadership, and employee orientation" (Haedrich, 1993, p.83). This research study will examine the messages communicated to sell the Abercrombie and Fitch image, this will be done by analyzing the messages sent through Abercrombie & Fitch's advertising and how these messages are packaged.

Advertising is a potent and extremely prevalent form of communication in America. The average consumer sees about 3,000 advertising messages in a week (Speck & Elliot, 1997). Commercial images shape people's perceptions and Abercrombie & Fitch targets the impressionable demographic of American youth. Abercrombie & Fitch's past advertising demonstrates the company agrees with Gould's (1994) assertion that it is important for sexual messages to relate to the product, or the advertisement is likely to be ineffective. Therefore, Abercrombie & Fitch must maintain the idea that one becomes sexier by wearing Abercrombie & Fitch clothing.

In the summer of 2004, Abercrombie & Fitch produced its first post *A&F Quarterly* campaign. This new campaign is important to the organization; an unpersuasive campaign will likely hurt the company's ability to maintain its over one billion dollar yearly revenue (Safer, 2003). The campaign is also important because the company has the power to shape and influence young adults through its marketing, the creation and maintenance of its image, and the cultural messages its image communicates to America.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *Sex and Advertising*

Advertising is "one of the most prolific and all-encompassing forms of communication in the world" (Reichert, 2003, p.20). This form of company to customer communication raises concerns about the ethics of advertising because the practice of it is very persuasive and influential (Treise & Weigold, 1994). Advertising has become a prominent means for organizations to create or adapt their image. Image creation is a public relations strategy that has increasingly targeted young adults and teens because they are not receptive to traditional direct advertising (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). Advertisers target the demographic group of young adults and teens because they account for a large portion of American consumer spending. Last year teens spent \$100 billion and parents spent an additional \$50 billion on their teens (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). Sex is becoming increasingly popular as an image

and persuasive appeal in advertising. Sex in many medias began to explode in the late 1990s such as in Cruel Intentions, Britney Spears, MTV Spring Break, MTV Undressed, Victoria Secret, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Calvin Klein (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). The combination of influential advertising, specifically using sex appeal, and the buying power of young adults and teens leaves much room for message interpretation. Message interpretation becomes increasingly important as current advertisements are replacing the “one message fits all” approach with “discrete messages targeted according to consumer profiles” (Nowak & Phelps, 1994, p. 54).

The usage of sex appeal in advertising is nothing new. Sexual images (nudity) have been found in advertisements as far back as the late 1800s (Reichert, 2003). In the early 1900s sex was used to sell soaps, fragrances, and lotions (Reichert, 2003). These advertisements claimed to make a woman sexier for a man’s pleasure. Sex advertising boomed in the 40s and 50s, but not without controversy (Reichert, 2003). During this time and still today, many companies have found success using sex appeal in advertising. Maidenform bras began to use models with their shirts off and became the number one bra company (Reichert, 2003). Jovan fragrance used sexuality to sell its product and company revenues went from \$1.5 million to \$77 million in seven years (Reichert, 2003). Sex appeal can be found in historical advertising and continues to grow in the present day. The usage of sex appeal in today’s advertising is considered by looking at advertising influence, target audiences, and consumer opinion.

The use of advertising has great influential impact on the American public. According to a 1981 study by Reid and Soley, advertisements were more likely to be recognized if an attractive model was used (Severn & Belch, 1990). In a different survey, 32% of consumers said they are more likely to buy a product if it has a sexual advertisement (Fetto, 2001). The typical American desires being wanted and admired by their peers. Advertising is a widely used source by Americans to find out how to achieve this feeling at least on some level. Using this idea, sexy people sell the idea that the product is for sexy people and having it makes a person sexy (Reichert, 2003). Sexiness can be portrayed in clothing, positioning, lighting, location, interaction, body of the model, skin, actions of model, and sexual presence (Reichert, 2001; 2003). Companies also use this idea to associate the company image with desirability. Sexuality associates brands with sexual activities and increased attractiveness, something desired by consumers (Reichert, 2003). Influencing consumers through advertising also requires believability. In a survey believability was rated as high importance in an advertisement message (Speck & Elliot, 1997). Not only must an advertisement influence the consumer, it must be presented in a way so the consumer believes its message. This requires a great deal of thought about who will see the advertisement, which leads to the second aspect of sex appeals in advertising, target audience.

When using sex as an appeal in advertising, it is crucial to consider the target audience. In America there is the largest number of teens ever (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). As mentioned before teens’ vast amounts of spending are influential on the American economy. For this reason teens and young adults are the focus of this research. Teens see numerous advertisements a day, but are most influenced by their peers (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). They are also known to buy into more advertising promises of what a product may do for them, than any other group of people (Reichert, 2001). Creating advertisements to target this audience is tricky. Many advertisers believe “to win teens’ loyalty, you have to speak their language” (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999, np.). This means consumers relate to models, so the models must be like the target audience (Reichert, 2001). To create models like the target audience many companies buy into the practice of “cool hunting” consultants. “Cool hunting” consultants inform companies of current and upcoming trends for teens. The consultants find trendsetters and leaders in schools, malls, and local hangouts. Correspondents take pictures and interview people about their style and then look for patterns and themes in the trendsetters (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). Companies willingly pay \$20,000 annually to subscribe to the “cool hunting” consulting firm, Look Look’s, research findings (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). Advertisers know young adults are just entering sexual knowledge and sex advertising feeds this hunger (Reichert, 2001). Therefore, sexual images are used because it grabs the consumer’s attention (Reichert, 2001). In a survey, 51% of 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 year olds admit they pay more attention to ads with sexual images (Fetto, 2001). Given the money and mindset within this target market, it is easy to make the connection to why companies would use sex appeal. But it is also important to consider the third aspect of sex and advertising, what do consumers think?

Sex in advertising is controversial, and it is important to consider the consumer’s opinion. While many feel there is too much sex in advertising (Treise & Weigold, 1994), most feel if sexual advertisements are done with relevance and appropriateness, they are more likely to be accepted (Gould, 1994; Treise & Weigold, 1994). Concerns arise in sex appeal usage when unintended audiences view the advertisement (Gould, 1994). Similar unease appears when advertisers target teens and young adults with these advertisements. There are concerns that these advertisements are idolized and teach young adults inappropriate behavior (Reichert, 2001). Negative aspects of this target audience advertising include females idolizing the sexual models and comparing themselves to the advertisements (Gould, 1994). In a survey, 55.2% of respondents agreed sexual advertisements influence a teen’s

decision to be sexually active (Treise & Weigold, 1994). However, the idea in advertising is give and take; the media learns from teens and teens learn from the media (Goodman & Dretzin, 1999). One cannot specifically say who influences whom, so although consumer's concerns arise sex continues to be used as an influential advertising tactic.

#### *Abercrombie & Fitch*

One company that has distinctively used sex appeal to sell its product is Abercrombie and Fitch. In 1993 Abercrombie and Fitch had thirty-six stores and \$85 million in revenue. 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, 2003). The Abercrombie and Fitch advertising campaign is examined through company history, advertising practices, and the current controversy.

David Abercrombie, who sold top of the line hunting, fishing and camping gear, founded Abercrombie in 1892. In 1900, Ezra Fitch bought part of the company and in 1904 the name was changed to Abercrombie and Fitch. Fitch was determined to expand the company, while his partner was not and so resigned in 1907. Abercrombie and Fitch then went on to become the largest sporting goods store in the world (Lower Manhattan Information, 2003). CBS described the original Abercrombie and Fitch as a store that "reeked of old money and Waspy pretension" (Safer, 2003, p.1). Abercrombie and Fitch provided sporting goods for numerous people including several presidents (Lower Manhattan Information, 2003). Since then Abercrombie and Fitch has been bought and sold several times. When Abercrombie and Fitch went bankrupt, it completely changed its image and started selling young adult clothing instead of hunting and camping gear (Safer, 2003). In the late 1990s Abercrombie and Fitch broke off and became independent from The Limited who had previously owned the company (Morton, 2002). Abercrombie and Fitch launched a turn around campaign with their new clothing by putting ads in upscale magazines, opening in suburban malls, and developing the *A&F Quarterly*.

The company's unique publication, the *A&F Quarterly* magalog, was one of its most prevalent means of advertising its image. In 1998, Abercrombie & Fitch issued over 1.5 million catalogs and sent the *A&F Quarterly* to 350,000 paid subscribers (Cuneo, 1999). The "catalog" did not follow contemporary retail standards. Rather than showing models in Abercrombie & Fitch clothing, the magalog was filled with mainly semi-nude or nude Caucasian males and females in their twenties that were precisely posed as to not show total nudity. Paradoxically, Abercrombie & Fitch's main way of selling clothes was to show nearly nude models. The magalog has been described as selling the idea of "party-loving jocks and bare-naked ladies living fantasy lives" (Safer, 2003, np). Additionally, some have claimed the message Abercrombie & Fitch sent was that youth should live "a lifestyle full of semi-nudity, nudity, and promiscuity" (Stroup, 2001, p.56). The *A&F Quarterly* was so controversial that it produced the last magalog ever for Christmas 2003.

Arguably, Abercrombie and Fitch's advertising practices also could be described as low key. The company uses a very small budget for advertising. Abercrombie and Fitch's main advertising is print advertisements in *Interview, Out, Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair* at about \$2 million yearly (Cuneo, 1999). Print media is a good choice because magazines have target audiences so advertisement avoidance is lower (Speck & Elliot, 1997). Other main sources of advertising were the *A&F Quarterly* and A&F catalog which is the same as the *Quarterly* only it did not contain stories that were in the *Quarterly* (Cuneo, 1999). In September 1999, Abercrombie and Fitch tried putting commercials on cable television (Cuneo, 1999). The campaign did not last long, but did air three different commercials before being pulled. The last major advertising decision the company made was to pull the *A&F Quarterly*. This decision comes at a great risk to Abercrombie & Fitch. The company now relies on an image marketing strategy. "One voice marketing communications is when a company maintains a clear and consistent image, position, message and/or theme across all marketing communication disciplines or tools" (Nowak & Phelps, 1994, p. 51). "Brand/image advertising...is useful and necessary for creating an image or identity that clearly distinguishes a brand from its competitors" (Nowak & Phelps, 1994, p. 56). In retail imaging a company is very important, if the target audience feels a company does not reflect cool it may be quickly dropped. For example, Abercrombie and Fitch's stock dropped when the clothing line was predominantly cargo pants and cargo pants were no longer considered cool (Carter, 2000). After restructuring its clothing line, Abercrombie and Fitch's stock rose (Carter, 2000). In order to avoid repeating this event with every style change, Abercrombie and Fitch claims the decisions of hiring and marketing are determined by the image the company maintains (Edwards, 2003). The first decision of the company was to have an "inspirational" brand; therefore, it will not expand the number of main stores beyond 400 (Edwards, 2003). The company wants to inspire consumers to strive for the Abercrombie and Fitch "lifestyle." Abercrombie and Fitch sells a "lifestyle" of popularity that people aspire to have (Reichert, 2003). This "lifestyle" that the company sells is its image. This image is described as a "sexy, shrunken, neo preppy look" (Knestout, 2002, p.68). The "intent is to present A&F as an elite brand that attracts the beautiful people, not a label that looks for the masses" (Edwards, 2003, p.17). These beautiful people, the company targets, are "fashion-savvy

older teens and young adults” (Knestout, 2001, p. 68), under 25, and typical college students. “A & F shrewdly understands that teens want to belong, and has captured their dollars by making sure they want to belong to the beautiful, exclusive world that the Abercrombie image projects” (as cited in Reichert, 2003, p. 235).

The creation of Abercrombie and Fitch’s image is not a few playful semi-nude photos. The image building begins at the center of operation, company headquarters in New Albany, Ohio. The company spent \$130 million to build itself a headquarters modeled after a college campus (Morton, 2002). The campus was designed in Adirondack style based on the original founder’s inspiration (Morton, 2002). The purpose of a campus setting is to stay focused on the target audience, college students (Torkells, 2001). Corporate officials spared no expense in recreating many aspects of a college campus and life. On the Abercrombie & Fitch campus one can find fireplaces, non-motorized scooters, the same techno music as played in the stores, bonfire pit, ATM, gym, photo processing, cafeteria, desks that look like library carrels, and chalkboards throughout buildings (Morton, 2002; Torkells, 2001). Abercrombie and Fitch purposely secluded the campus and had “outside influences banished in favor of immersion in its brand identity” (Morton, 2002, p. 131). Since college age students are the target market it was only appropriate to have the grand opening of the campus as a keg party at the bonfire pit with a band performing (Torkells, 2001).

The company image is also built by the store designs. Each store cost around \$650,000 to open (Abercrombie and Fitch website, 2003). Stores are decorated Adirondack style including canoes, large leather couches, moose heads, and dark Victorian style wood. Splashed into the Adirondack style is the sex appeal, large framed posters of the Abercrombie and Fitch models are placed throughout the store.

The employees are a third strategy of advertising influence. Employees often are or look like college students, including the CEO Mike Jefferies who is often found wearing sandals and shorts (Torkells, 2001). Abercrombie and Fitch seeks out “young, attractive, mainstream athletic types, and the cheerleaders who might be their girlfriends” (Edwards, 2003, p. 17). One source describes employees as “young, attractive, and overwhelmingly white” (Safer, 2003, p.1). “Abercrombie and Fitch wants a sales force that reflects what’s up on its walls” (Safer, 2003, p. 2). Sales associates are required to wear the in season clothing while working in front of customers (Cannella, 2003). Employees have been threatened with being sent home if not wearing the proper clothing (Cannella, 2003). Corporate officials have been known to tell store managers that the sales associates must look like the people in the Abercrombie catalogs and in-store posters (Safer, 2003). The company even hires attractive male models during the holidays to stand at the store entrances shirtless to attract consumers inside (Reichert, 2003; Safer, 2003). The theory behind this tactic is “Cool, great-looking guys attract cool, great-looking girls, who attract...Get it?” according to CEO Michael Jefferies (as cited in Reichert, 2003, p. 234). Corporate officials and employees define the Abercrombie and Fitch image in the Abercrombie and Fitch models, which are on store posters, bags, gift cards, the website, catalog, and the magalog *A&F Quarterly*, which brought light to the sex and advertising controversy.

Abercrombie and Fitch has been rocketed into controversy because of its magalog, *A&F Quarterly*. The magalog is a combination magazine and catalog used to display the college life of drinking, friends, parties, and sex (Reichert, 2003). One example of the controversial messages inside the “Pleasure Principle” issued magalog would be.

Pleasure in psychoanalysis, the tendency or drive to achieve pleasure and avoid pain as the chief motivating force in behavior. Summer being our favorite time of the year and all, we’ve worked extra hard to bring you our best issue yet by letting the pleasure principle be our guide through the hottest months. As cited in Buckley, 2001, p. 58.

The “Pleasure Principle” issue like many other issues includes topless women playing by the ocean and young naked men posing in the summer (Buckley, 2001). Negative aspects of this advertising arise when unintended audiences view the advertisement (Gould, 1994). In 2002, Illinois past a state resolution that condemns the advertising practices of Abercrombie and Fitch (Abercrombie and Sex, 2001). First, the intentions of the company should be considered when evaluating advertisements (Treise and Weigold, 1994). This is not to say Abercrombie and Fitch does not take any measures to send the catalog to an appropriate audience. To subscribe or purchase the *A&F Quarterly* an I.D. showing proof of being over 18 years of age is required (Buckley, 2001). Subscription forms are only accepted through in store drop offs where an I.D. is then checked (Buckley, 2001). Also when controversy arose about the “Drinking 101” magalog, Abercrombie and Fitch recalled the magalog and a sticker was added to tell readers to: be smart and responsible” (Cuneo, 1999, p.1). However, the director of advertising, Sam Shahid claims the only way he will change the current advertising approach is if the target market, college students, change what they want (Edwards, 2003).

#### *Persuasion*

Advertising is not mere photos and slogans shown to consumers in hopes they will buy the product. There is a communication art behind every photo, store display, slogan, or commercial called persuasion. Advertisers use the

communication method persuasion to sell a company, product, or image to consumers. This research is based in the theory of persuasion because it examines the advertising messages Abercrombie & Fitch use to persuade its target market. Persuasion can be defined as “to win belief or stimulate action by employing all the factors that determine human behavior;” therefore, “to shape and control their behavior and beliefs” (Kruger, 1967, p. 296)

Persuasion is an approach with many view points and much research; Kenneth Burke takes an approach to persuasion that closely applies to advertising. Researcher Kenneth Burke believes persuasion is “induced by identification” (Baxter & Taylor, 1978). Identification is defined as the “process of identifying ourselves with various group movements, and relationships through our experiences with symbol systems” (Baxter & Taylor, 1978, p.1). According to Burke’s theory, one’s “properties” must align with another’s “properties” in order for one person to identify with another (Baxter & Taylor, 1978, p.174; Day, 1960). Properties include: concepts, images, ideas, and attitudes (Baxter & Taylor, 1978). This means Abercrombie & Fitch must have an image with properties that the target audience identifies with when viewing. If Abercrombie & Fitch uses this approach in its advertising practices, the target audience will purchase Abercrombie & Fitch products because they identify with the messages and symbols advertised. Burke’s theory claims in order for the persuasion to be effective the persuader must make itself the answer to the identification (Baxter & Taylor, 1978 p. 175). In order for one to do this, the persuader would first need to create a strategy, such as an image, that will be identified with by another person (Baxter & Taylor, 1978). According to Burke, consumers will create realities and relationships in the symbols produced in advertising (Baxter & Taylor, 1978). When identification occurs, a person is persuaded into actions by trying to continue the identification.

The main ways identification is created are through experience, belief, and desire. Burke explains an experience that two people share will create identification (Day, 1960). The experience can be a reference to something in the past, and does not need to be experience together at the same time.

The second common way identification is shared is through a belief. A belief is something a person must believe in completely. If a person truly believes, he will not look for or require any truth in the belief. However, the person should have reason for creating the belief (Houtlosser, 1998). In advertising, a consumer must believe in the image, product, or advertisement; therefore, it will not be questioned. In order for a belief to be created, a company must provide the consumer with a reason to believe.

The last common way identification is created is through desire. Humans are motivated by desire (Minnick, 1957). Pathos “plays on hidden desires, frustrations, hostilities, and prejudices” (Kruger, 1967, p. 300). Advertising is notorious for using peoples’ desires to sell a product, image, or idea. A consumer can be persuaded through desire by displaying a product as a solution to someone’s desire, such as persuading a person to buy the extra options on a car to solve their desire to be “cool”. The other way would be to create the product to appeal as a desired item, such as Tickle-Me-Elmo that was advertised as a product every child desired.

Burke believes “identification is the only means of achieving persuasion” (Day, 1960, p. 273). Identification as a tool of persuasion can be very effective in advertising.

#### *Summary*

The previous Abercrombie and Fitch campaign used strong marketing tactics and appeals that even became controversial. In light of everything, the company decided to unveil a new campaign. The new campaign is important because the company must still maintain the image created from the sex appeals that the company is so strongly based on and that grew Abercrombie and Fitch into a billion dollar company. The campaign is also important because through the combination of today’s advertising practices, sex appeal, Abercrombie & Fitch as a company, and the influence of persuasion, a very strong and powerful image may be projected to American consumers.

Abercrombie and Fitch’s previous campaign had a profound effect on its target market. This effect led to a great deal of research on Abercrombie and Fitch’s messages and approaches; similar to the original campaign, the new campaign demands research because of its expected influence on consumers.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because of advertising's influence on consumers and Abercrombie & Fitch's advertising practices, it is important to analyze Abercrombie & Fitch's new campaign to determine what messages it is sending to America's youth and how those messages are being packaged. This research will specifically address two questions:

RQ1: What messages are being sent by Abercrombie & Fitch to display its corporate image?

RQ2: How are these messages conveyed?

## METHOD

This research, a content analysis of Abercrombie and Fitch's new campaign, uncovered the messages sent to consumers and how those messages were packaged. The overall design of this study was grounded in the qualitative research tradition. The goal of interpretive work is the study of meanings, or the ways individuals make sense of their world through their communicative behaviors (Putnam, 1983).

The first method of data collection was content analysis. Content analysis is defined as "a systematic method to analyze the content and treatment of communication" (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 477). This research was a qualitative content analysis because the researcher did not look for specific messages within the Abercrombie and Fitch campaign. A qualitative content analysis was the best approach for this research because it allowed the researcher to examine data and let themes emerge from the content of the advertising campaign. This study was an extensive content analysis including an in-depth analysis of Abercrombie & Fitch literature and artifacts.

### *Data*

The researcher employed a qualitative research data collection strategy, content analysis. The content analysis samples were obtained through Abercrombie and Fitch's advertising venues including catalogs, magazines, and the organization's website. Additionally, samples were obtained from store displays, employee dress, shopping bags, promotional items, and gift cards.

The main measurement was through the use of field notes. Field work is defined by Reinard as "the study of people acting in natural courses of their daily lives" (2001, p. 183). This method was adapted to take field notes on the advertising campaign without the interruption of research. The researcher observed and took field notes of messages in the campaign that could not be taken into collection, some of these items included store displays, employee dress, and promotional items. Detailed notes were recorded of messages found in sample items that were collected including magazines, catalogs, and the Abercrombie and Fitch website.

### *Procedures*

The researcher conducted an exhaustive search to collect samples available from the new advertising campaign. The researcher joined the Abercrombie and Fitch mailing list to receive promotional mailing, which was a catalog, and purchased the new A&F magazines at the store. Pictures and videos for the advertising campaign on the Abercrombie and Fitch website were downloaded. The researcher also went into three Abercrombie and Fitch stores multiple times and observed store displays, shopping bags, and employee's dress. Stores, mailings, and the website were continually checked and collected until the point of data analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

After collecting the data, the researcher employed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding data analysis component of the constant comparative analysis. Open coding involved a process of identifying and categorizing the primary patterns in data and was the first step in the qualitative study (Patton, 1990). Specifically, open coding involved the labeling phenomena, discovering categories, naming categories and developing categories in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The researcher followed five steps during data analysis. Step one, the researcher collected data samples from different venues used in the newest advertising campaign to convey messages. Step two, the researcher wrote down all messages observed and collected from the Abercrombie and Fitch advertising campaign. Step three, the researcher combined all messages found into similar groups to create labels. Step four, the researcher combined labels into categories to narrow down the topics. During steps two through four the researcher continued to search for data and add it into data analysis. Step five, the researcher wrote the results into a paper based on the categories found in research. The final product of this analysis is the report of core messages sent through Abercrombie and Fitch's campaign and the communicative strategies the campaign employed.

## RESULTS

The research results presented are from a constant comparative analysis of the data collected. The messages communicated by Abercrombie & Fitch emerged as four categories. The emergent categories represent messages Abercrombie & Fitch used to sell its product to consumers. Table one identifies the emergent categories in this study. This research found Abercrombie & Fitch used visual means to send messages, which made it difficult to report the messages separate from the packaging of the messages. Since the meaning of the messages was embedded in the context of its presentation, the four emergent categories reveal the messages sent. Each proceeding description demonstrates the meaning of the messages and how those messages were packaged.

**Table 1.** Emergent Categories of Abercrombie & Fitch Messages

1. The look of an Abercrombie & Fitch Person
2. The one and only Abercrombie & Fitch
3. The Abercrombie & Fitch life of luxury
4. Not making the Abercrombie & Fitch cut

Abercrombie & Fitch communicated 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. The data revealed Abercrombie & Fitch is not a product for all people; the first emergent category of messages dictated for whom the Abercrombie & Fitch product is designed.

### *The Look of an Abercrombie & Fitch person*

The look of an Abercrombie & Fitch person is conveyed in almost every venue possible including catalogs, consumers, employees, gift cards, in-store brand representatives, magazines, mannequins, models, posters, shopping bags, the product, and the website. The look of an Abercrombie & Fitch person is created through age, build, race, gender and apparel.

One of the most prominent aspects of the Abercrombie & Fitch person is the target age, young adult. Models in the catalogs, magazines, website, and store posters appear to be in their early twenties. In addition, store employees and in-store brand representatives appear to be in their late teens and early twenties. Final reiteration of the Abercrombie & Fitch age is the consumers. During in-store observations the estimated age of consumers shopping in the store was eighteen.

The build of an Abercrombie & Fitch person is another predominant message communicated through catalogs, consumers, employees, gift cards, in-store brand representatives, magazines, mannequins, models, posters, shopping bags, the product, and the website. The Abercrombie & Fitch person is not overweight; models used for advertising and promotional items were notably thin. During in-store observations it was noted that no Abercrombie & Fitch employee was overweight. In addition, during several observations the only even slightly overweight person in the store was a mom who was shopping with a thin young adult. Abercrombie & Fitch products are constructed to continue this message of thinness. Abercrombie & Fitch clothing is not made in large sizes; women's sizes were XS to L in shirts and 00 to 10 in pants and men's clothing was sized S to XXL in shirts and 30x30 to 36x34 in pants. All messages communicated a build of thin and toned bodies.

The race of an Abercrombie & Fitch person is another message communicated through models and employees. The prominent race of the Abercrombie & Fitch person was Caucasian. There were a few African American people used as models in catalogs, magazines, posters, and the website, however they were far outnumbered by Caucasian models. For example, in the *Back to School* catalog only three photos included an African American person. One of these three photos was a full-page photo. The research did not produce any other races of models. During in-store observations, which included the day after Thanksgiving, the only race seen in store employees and consumers was Caucasian. It should be noted the observed store is located in a predominantly Caucasian area.

The look of Abercrombie & Fitch males and females was more similar than different, however differences in look were noted. The Abercrombie and Fitch male was similar to the common phrase of 'All American.' The male models used for catalogs, cologne bottles, gift cards, in-store brand representatives, magazines, shopping bags, store posters, and the website were all muscular and tan. The Abercrombie & Fitch look required a fresh, defined face and styled hair. The feature that stood out the most when analyzing data on the Abercrombie & Fitch male was not what was seen, but instead what was not seen, a shirt. The main focus of an Abercrombie & Fitch male was the well-sculpted chest and abdomen. This look is packages in several areas; first during the "Naughty but Nice" campaign at the Abercrombie & Fitch observed store the male in-store brand representative wore Abercrombie & Fitch pants and no shirt. Second, in the entrance to the male section was a large poster of a man with his shirt completely unbuttoned to display his chest and abdomen. Third the photo greeting to the Abercrombie & Fitch website during

the Christmas season was a Caucasian, blonde, male with his shirt open to display his well-defined chest and abdomen. Another aspect of the look of an Abercrombie & Fitch male is apparel. Male clothing is often destroyed denim jeans, cargo pants, button up shirt, vintage t-shirt or athletic warm-ups. Most observed Abercrombie & Fitch male employees were attractive, muscular, and wore Abercrombie & Fitch destroyed jeans, vintage t-shirt, and sandals, which supports the male Abercrombie & Fitch look.

The look of an Abercrombie & Fitch female was sophisticated sexiness. The faces had minimal make-up, and the models have natural beauty. The female models were found in the same venues as male models. The focus of the female was how attractive or sexy the female looked in Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. The female models were fully clothed in minimally revealing Abercrombie & Fitch attire. Three venues communicated different messages than the above data. The first was the in-store brand representative who wore a mini jean skirt and lacey cami. The second was NOW perfume for women, which has a partial side view of a topless women holding up her hair. The third differing venue was the clothing sold at stores. The short minis were often not worn in advertisements, but stores still carried the product. The typical observed female employee reiterated the Abercrombie & Fitch look with a fresh face, thin body, and all in season Abercrombie & Fitch clothing.

Another message communicated of the Abercrombie & Fitch look was wearing all Abercrombie & Fitch apparel. For example, in the magazine a male model wore all Abercrombie & Fitch clothing including boxers that displayed the logo. Female models as well dress in all Abercrombie & Fitch appears. The catalog list the Abercrombie & Fitch brand perfume as something the model was wearing. Majority of the shoppers during in-store observations were already wearing Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. Employees also wear all Abercrombie & Fitch apparel, and tend to blend in with store shoppers.

The look of Abercrombie and Fitch does not include any completely nude models. All photos that alluded to nudity were male, except the NOW perfume. Any photos in the *Rising Stars* magazine that alluded to nudity were shown again in a different position so clothing could be seen.

The specific look of a young adult, white, male and female, with an attractive body is not entirely unique, but the Abercrombie & Fitch person is unique. Abercrombie & Fitch is a company that prides itself in being unique. The company takes several steps to communicate its message, there is only one Abercrombie & Fitch.

#### *The one and only Abercrombie & Fitch*

Abercrombie & Fitch used numerous venues to communicate the company's unique lifestyle image. Messages of uniqueness were found in product displays, Abercrombie & Fitch activities, endorsements and the "Naughty but Nice" campaign.

Abercrombie & Fitch's desire to be unique was most prominent in product displays because written explanations of uniqueness were given. Small signs were placed on tables next to the product and gave a summary about the clothing item. Many of the signs mentioned why the product was unique such as stitching, design, handcrafted destroyed denim, and style. Some product display signs suggested other Abercrombie & Fitch items that were complementary to the presented item.

The Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle was communicated to be unique and not mainstream. Under the lifestyle section, the website displayed numerous activities for the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle. The image of being on the forefront was communicated through activities such as kart racing, powder puff, canoe surfing, wake skating, pond hockey, and freestyle BMX. A&FTV puts a short Abercrombie & Fitch film together of people engaging in the unique activities, such as the previous listed, and then posts the film on the Abercrombie & Fitch website. Sporting activities were also communicated as part of the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle, however the sporting activities are extreme sports like the previous activities mentioned or rugged sports like hiking. The website also communicated the music choice is not mainstream pop music, but for the most part alternative music. This music was also played loudly at stores.

Another way Abercrombie & Fitch communicated messages of uniqueness was by not using mainstream celebrities to endorse its label. For example, in the *Rising Stars* magazine a quote was given from William Woodsworth, instead of a popular Hollywood celebrity. The Fall and Winter 2004 A&F magazine highlighted unique rising stars in America. Each magazine included a short biography of twenty-five people who had something unique to share such as they lost their legs, wanted to be a tattoo artist, or skied professionally. For example, on the cover of *Stars on the Rise* was Jeremy Bloom who is attractive and fits the Abercrombie & Fitch look, however he was unique because he is also an Olympic skier. The magazine focus was on the people's unique stories, and not the Abercrombie & Fitch label. This campaign also put the unique stories and photos up on large poster displays in stores and on the website during the back to school season.

Abercrombie & Fitch's Christmas campaign also created uniqueness for the company. The "Naughty but Nice" campaign started the day after Thanksgiving and runs every weekend until Christmas. During the campaign "hotter

than hot” in-store brand representatives were available to take pictures with for a donation, all proceeds went to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. As mentioned before, the in-store brand representatives were Abercrombie & Fitch models and look alike models. An attractive female and shirtless male stood at the entrance to every Abercrombie & Fitch store, and waited for people to come and take pictures with them. In the editor’s note, Abercrombie & Fitch welcomed “our friends” to participate in the campaign.

The last emergent message that came from the Abercrombie & Fitch image was luxury. Store atmosphere, product displays, and pricing were all used to communicate to consumers that the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle is filled with luxury.

### *The Abercrombie & Fitch life of luxury*

The Abercrombie & Fitch stores were designed with luxury in mind. The outside of the store had large glass windows with framed posters of Abercrombie & Fitch models that stood about 10’x12’. Large posters filled the windows and made it difficult for mall shoppers to see inside without walking into the store. The Abercrombie & Fitch windows also had navy canopies above each window. The scent of men’s cologne was the first thing that hit consumers stepping into the store. The scent was enjoyable, a nice cologne and not something that smelled cheap. Once inside the lighting was dimmed slightly and stark florescent lighting was nowhere to be seen. The black painted wood floors and concrete gave the store a modern look, while the large brown leather couches and chairs ground a traditional rich feeling. Black and white photos of Abercrombie & Fitch models were framed and hung throughout the store, reiterating the Abercrombie & Fitch look. The framed photos, leather furniture, LCD screens, canoes, and large moose head above the cash register created the feel of being in an elite north woods club instead of local retail store.

The Christmas 2004 slogan “Casual Luxury” sent a verbal message of the Abercrombie & Fitch image. “Casual Luxury” was found everywhere from glass windows, product displays, and electronic credit card displays, to LCD TVs and the website. Abercrombie & Fitch defined its slogan “Casual Luxury” on its website as

Ca•su•al lux•u•ry \ n, pl. –ries (1892) 1: A style identified and perfected by the lifestyle brand Abercrombie & Fitch 2: Passion for excellence in fabric, make, and wash 3: Use of finest cashmere, prima cottons, and highest quality leather to create the ultimate in casual, body conscious clothing 4: Implementing and/or incorporating time honored machinery and techniques (as antique denim looms and handcrafted wear and tear) in order to produce the most exclusive denim ever created 5: Pushing the limits to design/construct superior heavyweight fleece that is unsurpassed in comfort, quality, and original intricacy.

The use of “Casual Luxury” was most prominent in the product displays. The signs placed next to products on tables in the stores had “Casual Luxury” printed at the top with a following description of what made the product a “Casual Luxury.” For example, on the “Casual Luxury” product display for the woman’s Emily hooded sweater the following description was given

Super soft and unbelievably comfortable this exceptionally luxurious hooded sweater is the epitome of quality, not only does it fit wonderfully, but is built to keep you warm which will help on those chilly morning walks to school or the weekend tailgates before the big game an Abercrombie favorite, we’re sure you’ll love it too.

The signs continually gave verbal messages of why Abercrombie & Fitch clothing was the best and finest quality.

Products sold by Abercrombie & Fitch also send messages of luxury. During in-store observations no clothing was on sale at the Mall of America store, and a small table in the back of the store with a discreet navy sale sign was the only discounted clothing in the Rosedale Center store. No sales or coupons were used to draw in crowds for the day after Thanksgiving shopping. The product is also priced more expensive with jeans starting at \$69.95 or a cashmere full-zip hoodie for \$150. The model’s clothing also had the “Casual Luxury” look by wearing outfits such as t-shirts with blazers.

The Abercrombie & Fitch magazines and catalogs also communicated messages of luxury. The magazines were printed on higher quality linen paper, which alluded to a higher class than other retail magazines. Photo shoots for the magazine were at outdoor sites where many movies are shot, such as Hidden Valley, California.

Company logos even ranked luxury within the products. Abercrombie & Fitch clothing always had something to identify the person as wearing its product, such as the signature stitch on the back pocket to jeans, the words Abercrombie, Abercrombie & Fitch, or A&F, or their symbol the moose. The usage of word logos like A&F tended to be on the more relaxed clothing such as t-shirts, sweatpants, and sweatshirts; whereas the usage of the moose symbol was on the more luxurious clothing such as button up shirts and cashmere sweaters.

Abercrombie and Fitch worked hard to communicate messages about its company image. Part of those messages included what the Abercrombie & Fitch image was not. The company disassociated itself with certain items in order to maintain its image.

#### *Not making the Abercrombie & Fitch cut*

As mentioned in previous data results, Abercrombie & Fitch disassociated itself with unattractive and overweight people, mainstream items like pop music, and especially anything inexpensive or cheap.

Abercrombie & Fitch communicated messages of disassociation with unattractive and overweight people in several ways previously mentioned. One major way these messages were communicated was through the models. All Abercrombie & Fitch models are the stereotypical very attractive young adult males and females. There simply was never an overweight model in any venue. Additionally, employees were reflective of the models' look, and were neither unattractive nor overweight. The product also communicated disassociation with overweight people, by not providing the product in what is typically considered plus sizing.

Abercrombie & Fitch disassociated itself with mainstream item such as activities and music. This message is clearly displayed on the website under the "lifestyle" section. This section shows links to music and website, supposedly of the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle. None of the links, music or activities given are on what is typically considered mainstream Hollywood. In addition, Abercrombie & Fitch created short films for it's A&FTV, which tapes Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle people doing non mainstream activities such as wakeskating. Abercrombie & Fitch also disassociated with mainstream by not using mainstream Hollywood celebrities to endorse its product. The company also disassociates with mainstream by not advertising in on television or mainstream magazines such as *Seventeen*.

Abercrombie & Fitch also communicated messages of disassociation with anything inexpensive, especially sale items. The Rosedale Center store had a few discreetly marked sale items. In the Mall of America store no sale items existed. The Abercrombie & Fitch store at the Mall of America sent its sale items to the smaller Abercrombie & Fitch outlet store also located in the Mall of America. The outlet store had a stark atmosphere with bright florescent lighting, no comfy furniture, and only a few pictures hung on the walls. The place was always messy with piles of unfolded clothes on tables and in dressing rooms. The store was understaffed and even if the staff could keep up there was not enough space to neatly display all the sale products. A clear message that this clothing was no longer part of the Abercrombie & Fitch image was sent to consumers. The Abercrombie & Fitch image was not maintained for the outlet store.

The four emergent categories: the look of an Abercrombie & Fitch person, the one and only Abercrombie & Fitch, the Abercrombie & Fitch life of luxury, and not making the Abercrombie & Fitch cut, were messages used to form the Abercrombie & Fitch image.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research study revealed the messages Abercrombie & Fitch communicated to consumers about its image and how these messages were conveyed. As stated earlier, Abercrombie & Fitch abruptly ended a very controversial and sexual campaign after Christmas 2003. In July 2004 the company launched a new campaign; how Abercrombie & Fitch would keep its image was questionable. The previous campaign used sex appeal as a method of persuasion. Without the sex appeal, Abercrombie & Fitch needed a new method of persuasion. The new campaign which launched on the website, in stores, and in a magazine was called *Rising Stars*, and focused on stories of unique people viewed as rising stars in America.

#### *Abercrombie & Fitch Image*

Abercrombie & Fitch has always been a company that did not want to be viewed as attainable by all. The new campaign dissolved the use of sex to sell the product and focused on using the label to sell the product. Abercrombie & Fitch was previously thought by consumers to make a person more attractive if they wore the clothing. The new campaign does not denounce this idea, and allows consumers to still think of those messages when buying the product.

The efforts of the new campaign were focused on selling the Abercrombie & Fitch label as a look of unique luxurious perfection. Abercrombie & Fitch separated itself from other retailers by creating a label that many people would desire, but not all could attain. By pushing messages of uniqueness through playing non-mainstream music, supporting uncommon and extreme sports, writing stories about rising stars and not Hollywood celebrities, Abercrombie & Fitch sent a message of individualism.

### *Identification with Abercrombie & Fitch*

Researcher Kenneth Burke's theory of Identification explained the findings of this study. According to the theory, consumers identify with the messages of the Abercrombie & Fitch look, uniqueness, and luxury. Abercrombie & Fitch conveyed these messages through sources including catalogs, employees, gift cards, in-store brand representatives, logos, magazines, mannequins, models, poster displays, products, product display, shopping bags, store atmosphere and décor, and the website. Using multiple sources allowed Abercrombie & Fitch to reiterate its image and reach consumers that identified with this image. As mentioned before identification is most commonly created in three ways: experience, belief, and desire. Abercrombie & Fitch provided consumers with the opportunity to identify in all three ways. Identification through experience was from having experienced one of the extreme activities, or an experience one had when wearing Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. A person then buys the clothing because he/she identified with the experience that is associated with the A&F image. Identification through belief was created when a person believed Abercrombie & Fitch clothing made a person attractive, and bought the clothing to become attractive. The final method of identification was through desire. This method of identification was the strongest method used in Abercrombie & Fitch's persuasion. Abercrombie & Fitch's messages placed the label as something to be desired. Consumers desired to become the image of an elite Abercrombie & Fitch person. Consumers that identified with messages of the Abercrombie & Fitch image including the look, uniqueness, luxury, and what Abercrombie & Fitch is not were persuaded to purchase the clothing, and become part of the elite club. The desire to be part of this elite club is so strong that people who cannot be part of the current Abercrombie & Fitch look, are willing to shop at understaffed, undecorated, messy stores just to obtain the label that the company already disassociates with its image. Abercrombie & Fitch uses its employees, models, magazines, and loyal followers to persuade people to buy the in season clothing in order to stay in the elite Abercrombie & Fitch club. The new campaign was successful in eliminating the stark use of sex appeal, and still persuading consumers to purchase all their clothing from Abercrombie & Fitch every season.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Conducting content analysis research on Abercrombie and Fitch's advertising messages created several limitations. Reinard pointed out that a common limitation of content analysis is having difficulty finding representative samples (2001). While collecting data it was difficult to obtain and observe all of Abercrombie and Fitch's different venues of sending messages. The website was very large and messages may have been missed. Direct mail was another source that was difficult to obtain representative samples. Even though the researcher joined the Abercrombie & Fitch mailing list, it is possible direct mail was missed. Any messages such as email or direct mail sent to frequent Abercrombie & Fitch shoppers or credit card holders was missed because the researcher is not a frequent Abercrombie & Fitch shopper or Abercrombie & Fitch credit card holder. Another limitation pointed out by Reinard is content analysis is only descriptive research and cause and effect relationships cannot be drawn (2001). These results are the researcher's findings and interpretations of the messages being sent through the campaign. Conducting the exact same research could yield different results with another researcher.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Research can always be furthered in any field. Future research on Abercrombie & Fitch message communication could be conducted to examine several different areas. Surveys of Abercrombie & Fitch shoppers could be distributed to gain insight into what messages the typical Abercrombie & Fitch shopper receives about the Abercrombie & Fitch image, and what persuades them to shop at the store. Further research could also look into the advertising methods of Abercrombie & Fitch and the influence it has on the messages the company communicates.

The purpose of this research was to find out what messages Abercrombie & Fitch communicated to its consumers. The target market of this company is young adults, a highly influenced and influential group. Research was needed because the messages from the new campaign were expected to influence the target market. The research findings in this study predict the target market of young adults are moving away from activities, looks, and a lifestyle that is considered the norm. The consumers that followed Abercrombie & Fitch before the new campaign will participate and relate to activities that are not seen as mainstream, and tend to move away from the pop/sexual images era of people like Britney Spears.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research presented is a content analysis of the messages communicated by Abercrombie & Fitch to create its image. Research findings showed Abercrombie & Fitch communicated four prevalent messages in its new campaign: the look of an Abercrombie & Fitch person, Abercrombie & Fitch is a unique image, Abercrombie &

Fitch is a luxurious label not meant for all people, and what Abercrombie & Fitch's image is not. The research also revealed these messages are conveyed through numerous different venues including Abercrombie & Fitch consumers, catalogs, employees, gift cards, in-store brand representatives, logos, magazines, mannequins, models, poster displays, products, product display, shopping bags, store atmosphere and décor, and the website. Consumers were persuaded to purchase Abercrombie & Fitch clothing through identification with the company image. This research furthers knowledge in communication studies, by presenting an understanding to the messages a company uses to present and sell its image.

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