

## **Making Kids Sexy: Sexualized Youth, Adult Anxieties, and Abercrombie & Fitch** by Stephen Gennaro

### **Introduction**

Even the least critical consumers of media images must admit that there is something different to how Abercrombie & Fitch does business. While many companies over the last century have used sex and innuendo to enhance the desirability of their products and increase sales, Abercrombie & Fitch at times appears to be selling the sexualization of youth itself, with its clothing lines as the simple run-off or side effect of consuming the lifestyle associated with their products. Whether it is in their magalouges, at their clothing stores, or on their company website, the connection between Abercrombie & Fitch and sexualized youth is difficult to ignore. Abercrombie and Fitch is not a small company, producing images and representations of youth and sexuality in isolation. The company itself is over 115 years old, and in the 2007 fiscal year, Abercrombie & Fitch posted \$3.8 billion in net sales. Therefore it falls under the same economic principles and factors that affect other major corporations in the marketplace. Its actions and goals are always influenced by its priority, which is to make money. However, because of its sheer size and its saturation in the marketplace, their advertisements also maintain a social role (and not necessarily by choice). Because Abercrombie and Fitch is a business, it is under no obligation to respect the social role that it plays and therefore create unbiased advertisements. And since ads don't happen by accident, consumers cannot lose sight of the fact that advertisements are ideological texts. Ideological texts always come with a bias and an unequal power dynamic. Remembering that ideology works on both explicit and implicit levels, images and representations of youth at Abercrombie and Fitch have tended to focus at the explicit level on a romanticized, sexualized, and innocent youthfulness. This nostalgic representation of youth presents youth not as a biological stage in life, but as a lifestyle and a feeling, no different than happiness or wealth, and something to which everyone should aspire. However, implicitly, representations of youth in advertisements have tended to draw on the deeper psychological motivations of adolescence that, it was suggested by discourses in adolescent psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are to be experienced by everyone, namely the competing sexual identities and desire for approval from the peer group.<sup>1</sup>

A quick visit to the Abercrombie & Fitch website ([www.abercrombieandfitch.com](http://www.abercrombieandfitch.com)) can reveal a significant amount about the companies' focus in marketing and in the reasoning behind the media publicity over the last decade surrounding Abercrombie & Fitch's sexualization of youth (see <http://www.abercrombie.com>). When a visitor to the Abercrombie & Fitch website views the images under the category of "mens" or "womens" and clicks on the subheading of *A&F Book* (see <http://www.abercrombie.ca/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/Gallery?storeId=11306&catalogId=10901&langId=-1>) they are immediately introduced to representations of adults in youthful scenarios, engaging in youthful activities, and in all cases framed with an overly-sexualized youthful exuberance. Even the models themselves are staged to appear adolescent and pre-pubescent; note the extremely petite body frames and the complete absence of body, facial, and pubic hair, even though the lower midribs of the models are exposed. Here the ideas of youth are closely connected to a romanticized and nostalgic representation of youth as witnessed through the positive feeling associated with a highly

sexualized identity. However, absent from these over-sexualized images of an innocent youthful sexuality is the struggle and tension characteristic of the *Sturm und Drang* of adolescence and the competing sexual selves that psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Sigmund Freud posited were universal to the experiences of youth.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time as the images of adults in the “mens” and “womens” sections of the Abercrombie & Fitch website are framed and sold to the consuming public as sexualized youth, the images in the gallery on the Abercrombie and Fitch website under the category of “kids” (see <http://www.abercrombiekids.com>) are famed in exactly the same fashion as the adult advertisements. This is reminiscent of the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence, which suggests that the representation of “youth” (as both a category of distinction and as a life-style commodity itself for consumption) have created a marketplace where the traditional markers of delineation between adolescence and adulthood have been erased (Gennaro, “Purchasing” 120).<sup>3</sup> The result of this blurring of lines and boundaries is the removal of youth as a category connected to biological growth and is instead replaced with youth as a feeling or lifestyle available to all for purchase.

Given the current media attention surrounding the sexualization of youth (both in the presentation of children as sexualized beings and in the representation of youthfulness as a desirable commodity and focus of gaze), this paper will address perpetual adolescence in the context of youthful sexuality, and especially how it speaks to contemporary anxieties about the issue. The questions this paper seeks to explore are: where, if at all, does sexuality figure in this discourse, and furthermore, does the notion of perpetual adolescence defuse or exacerbate the contemporary panic about the marketing of sexualized sexuality? To address current anxieties about sexualized youth in advertising it is important to examine the discourses surrounding youth and how these discourses, which have a longer history than first glance would suggest, play such a critical role in the current representations of youth and the fears, hopes, dreams, and concerns of adults that these representations so profoundly inoculate.

A case study of Abercrombie & Fitch’s highly controversial catalogue, which was taken out of print by the company in 2003 but returned to after a five year hiatus, is looked at to further explore the connection between sexualized youth and adult anxieties in contemporary North American society. It is important to note that this paper is not analyzing the representations of sexualized youth in Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements in order to place judgment on the morality, social consciousness, or artistic and aesthetic value of the works. This paper is not interested in the debate of whether or not Abercrombie & Fitch should be making these ads and displaying them in public places where young people have access to them. Instead, this paper is interested in how representations which frame youth as overly sexualized, care-free, nostalgic, and at the same time innocent, fall in line with over three centuries of representation, and continue to speak more to the fears, anxieties, hopes, ambitions, and ideals of adults in society than to the children they claim to represent.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, inside the discussion of Abercrombie & Fitch’s representation of youth in both adult and kids advertisements found in the 2008 catalogue, in stores, and on the company website are two sides to the current debate surrounding the sexualization of youth and its connection to perpetual adolescence: namely, the continuation of the Romantic and Puritan discourses of childhood, and what Lawrence Grossberg termed the *peda-philic* (child-loving) and *peda-phobic* (child-hating) representations

of children in the media (4).

Two of the current discourses about children – the romantic, and puritan – can be traced back almost 400 years in Western culture. A closer look at the romantic and puritan, discourses about childhood reveal a significant amount of information about the power relations between children and adults, and the social role(s) of children at any given point in modern western history. The social construction of childhood found in both the romantic and puritan discourses about children have influenced the current construction of “childhood” as a category of distinction, and can best describe the anxieties around the sexualization of children that are so prevalent at the current moment. They position children as different from adults and often represent children as adults in training or as innocent, naïve youngsters in need of protection.

Both the Romantic and Puritan discourse about childhood tend to be viewed in discussion with John Locke’s ideas of children as blank slates. John Locke, in his chapter “Of Ideas in General” posited the notion that we are all born *tabula rasa*, as a blank slate, and learn through our sensory perception of and experiences in our surrounding environment. Building on the idea of *tabula rasa* in his 1692 piece “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” Locke wrote that children were a blank slate upon which a society instructs, informs, and educates young people to meet the expectations and desires of that particular society. Locke’s advice for educating children was simple: “[w]e must look upon our children, when grown up, to be like ourselves, with the same passions, the same desires” (3:41). As such, Locke argued for “parents and governors always to carry this in their minds, that children are to be treated as rational creatures” (Locke, 3:54). Although Locke did fundamentally believe that children were rational beings and should be treated in similar fashion to adults in terms of education and discipline, his argument outlined how the focus of education should be to model the appropriate behaviour for children so as to mold them into the types of healthy functioning citizens based on the desires of the adult.

What makes Locke’s ideas problematic is his linking of the notion of the blank slate and the child to innate childhood innocence. For instance, when discussing why an adult should not lie to a child, Locke wrote, “[w]e are not to entrench upon truth in any conversation, but least of all with children; since if we play false with them, we not only deceive their expectation, and hinder their knowledge, but corrupt their innocence, and teach them the worst of vices” (Locke, 4:120). This notion of childhood innocence is problematic because it presupposes that adults know what is best for children and that therefore it is in the best interest of the child to have the expectations of their behaviour dictated to them. The notion of innocence – and its potential loss and corruption by adults – would lay at the heart of the Romantic Movement, where artists such as Rousseau would construct a romanticized notion of childhood that remains central to our understanding of children today.

### **The Romantic Discourse of Childhood**

The romantic discourse is most closely tied to Rousseau and his work *Emile*, where he speculated that the best way to educate a male child, like Emile, was to remove the child from social pressures and allow them to be free from guidance and discipline in the first several years of their lives. The individual, according to Rousseau, would learn best from an opportunity to experience nature for themselves without regimented and forced expectations: “The help that

one gives them should be limited to what is real utility, without granting anything to whim or to desire without reason; for whim will not torment them as long as it has not been aroused, since it is no part of nature” (1: 172). Rousseau’s ideas were further emphasized by others in the Romantic movement, in poems like William Wordsworth’s “Ode” and William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience,” which suggested that childhood was a more pure time where the individual was uncorrupted by the evils of an industrialized society. The Romantics viewed the child as closer to nature and closer to God, and viewed childhood nostalgically as a greater time in one’s life. There are several dangers inherent in this type of discourse, most notably the nostalgic ideals that are attached to youth, and the essentializing of childhood, which then suggests that a positive childhood is a time that is universal to all. By suggesting that everyone experiences childhood in the same fashion, the nostalgic ideals of childhood that are linked to the construct of a universal child hide the unequal power relations between and adult and child at the same time they create an artificial and therapeutic felling around the happiness experienced in childhood. Today, such romantic discourse is seen in the focus on youth and youthful sensibilities by companies such as Abercrombie & Fitch seeking to connect adult consumers with a happiness that is nostalgically associated with universal childhood experiences (see <http://www.abercrombie.com>). For example, in each of the adult advertisements taken from the Abercrombie & Fitch website, the adult models are framed in youthful scenarios (i.e. holding a football), against a pastoral or romantic back drop, and with accompanying text that “de-ages” the advertisement’s readers and potential customers by suggesting, for example, that “young love is a flame” and is “fierce” much like those who purchase and wear Abercrombie & Fitch fashions (see <http://www.abercrombie.ca>).

The construct of the universal child refers to the institutionalization of childhood, so that childhood can be seen a distinct category in the lives of all people, in which all people have similar experiences. As Harry Hendrick points out in his essay “Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1880 to the Present”:

In 1800 the meaning of childhood was ambiguous and not universally in demand. By 1914, the uncertainty had been resolved and the identity determined, at least to the satisfaction of the middle class and respectable middle class. A recognizable “modern” notion was in place: childhood was legally, legislatively, socially, medically, psychologically, educationally, and politically institutionalized (7).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ideology of the universal child became crystallized in Western culture, so that by 1914 a definitive portrait of the innocent, naïve, and playful child in need of protection had become the dominant representation of what it meant to be young. This is important to my discussion, since it is the images of the universal child that the culture industries would use to first segment the marketplace and later fragment the segmented markets in an attempt to sell “youth” itself as a commodity. The construct of the universal child in an American context is what Nicholas Sammond in *Babes in Tomorrowland* calls “the generic American child,” one that was “white (largely male), Protestant, and middle-class” (2). This generic American child surfaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the emerging social scientific and psychological discourses about adolescence, in addition to the rise of mass consumerism and continual advancements in information and communication technologies. For both Hendrick and Sammond, the construction of a universal or generic child suggested that one representation

of children's behavior, childhood expectations, and childhood experiences eventually came to not only signify, but define, what it meant to be a child in the West. For Abercrombie & Fitch, the images of "adult" and "child" in their advertisements define their "the ideal customer by suggesting that it the universal child that personifies the "youth" Abercrombie & Fitch inherently sells with its products.

Of course, one of the largest problems with the construct of the universal child is who is left voiceless or absent from representation within such a totalizing discourse and how are issues such as gender, sexuality, race, or class obfuscated by a discourse that privileges white, male, and middle-class as normal. Furthermore, for companies such as Abercrombie & Fitch who are selling a notion of youth that is framed through this construct how do they deal with these absences? This is not a new critique of Abercrombie & Fitch, who "in 2004... agreed to pay \$50 million to settle a lawsuit that accused the company of promoting whites over minorities and cultivating a virtually all-white image"(MSNBC.com). And while the company was able to quiet the critique of its privileging of a universal construct of youth in its advertisements, little has changed since 2004 (see <http://www.abercrombie.com>). For example, in examining the advertisements of Abercrombie & Fitch found on their website, all of the ads to be viewed portray only white, middle-class models, while at the same time portraying a distinctly romantic and nostalgic sense of youthfulness (i.e. playing football, or rolling in the hay, ) that is framed as being experienced by all.

### **The Puritan Discourse of Childhood**

Opposing the romantic discourse of childhood, the puritan discourse was largely a construction of an 18<sup>th</sup> century moral panic about children, although it was tied to the evangelical movements of the puritans in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century in both England and the United States. According to the puritan discourse, children are born inherently evil because of the Christian notion of original sin; therefore, the child needs to be punished for its sins. The child needs guidance and protection not only from itself, but also from evils and perils of society, to ensure that its soul can be saved. Children's literature at the time reflected this moral panic: writers such as Maria Edgeworth in works like "The Orangeman," or Hannah More in "Betty Brown," warned children (usually in fairly graphic fashion) about the dangers of acting in a socially unacceptable fashion through didactic stories, which stressed the religious values and Protestant work ethic of the surrounding society. The endings of stories like "Betty Brown" provide an example to the reader of how the child in the story learns through their error and subsequent punishment that the path to success and happiness can only come through a continual focus on hard work and increased focus on morality.

Terminology commonly associated with the puritan discourse portrays children as inherently evil, angry, violent, and dangerous; it therefore positions children as being in need of structure and guidance. The danger of the puritan discourse is that it suggests that childhood has universal negative qualities to be found in all children at all times and places, although the discourse itself draws from a specific historical Christian doctrine. Furthermore, it suggests that the child is in need of an ideological construction of actions and behaviour and should not be given any access to power or decision making of his or her own. Today, the puritan discourse can be seen in the focus on the protection of the child and it is precisely this evangelical

construction of the child that parent groups opposed to Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements continually return to in their protesting and boycotting of the company. Whereas the romantic discourse was built upon a universal construct of the generic child, the puritan discourse of childhood is built underpinned by the ideas of development and progress in adolescent psychology that suggests that there are key stages of a child's (physical, emotional, and mental) evolution common to all, which are associated with a successful childhood and the creation of a healthy adult who can be productive in (Sprinthall & Collins 24). An understanding of the ideas of adolescent psychology are essential both to the discourse of perpetual adolescence and to more clearly understanding the current debate surrounding the sexualisation of youth as best witnessed in the discussion of Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements.

### **The Creation of the “Adolescent” and its Connection to the Market**

There are a series of ideas surrounding the development of children that are the basis of study for the field of adolescent psychology and to which the field of psychology is in general agreement. Usually the discussion of adolescence revolves around (or can be grouped into) the development of adolescents in five main areas: physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural development (Sprinthall & Collins28). And in much the same way that the image of the universal child or generic American child has become a stand-in for all children in media representations of youth, so too have the ideas expressed in adolescent psychology become a stand-in for what is considered the normal transpiring of all adolescents:

Adolescence is, among other things, an organized set of expectations closely tied to the structure of adult society. It stands out from the other stages of human development as a period of preparation rather than fulfilment. ... But Adolescence is a phase of imminence that is not quite imminent enough, of emergent adult biology that is not yet completely coordinated with adult roles, of hopes that are not yet seasoned by contact with adult reality, and of peer culture and society that mimic those of adults but are without adult ambitions or responsibilities. Adolescents are in a state of preparing themselves for adulthood by experimenting, studying, resisting, or playing. (qtd. in Sprinthall & Collins 3)

Our current understanding of the term adolescence has emerged out of the field of psychology and its understanding that adolescence is a stage in natural human development. According to psychological discourses about children, adolescence is an “in-between” period that separates childhood from adulthood. In viewing adolescence as a separate period, its participants (adolescents) are seen as having a series of actions, feelings, and self-understandings different from those who have yet to enter this stage and those who have successfully completed it. Psychologists claim that adolescence is as a period of change, where the individual experiences changes physically, mentally, ideologically, emotionally, and sexually. Partly, this change is necessary both to enter into this stage, usually around the age of 12 (with the onset of puberty), and for the completion of this period (to which psychologists cannot agree on an age, but which is usually seen to be sometime in the late teens or early 20s) through the mastering of those changes. Following in this train of thought, adolescence is not an option; it is a stage that everyone must pass through, and is as natural as birth and death. However, each culture creates the restrictions and expectations for adolescence based on the anxieties, aspirations, and desires

of its adult population. It is against these restrictions and expectations that youth are forced to endure the training period of destabilization that psychologists have termed “adolescence” where they become the focus and subject of the projection of these adult anxieties and desires. The marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence suggests that the processes of adolescence still begin in early puberty but no longer end at (and indeed, they extend into) adulthood. Therefore, childhood as a social construction and adolescence as a medical discourse is the starting point for the discussion about how the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence entered into the advertising agency and came to be the dominant practice of representation in advertisements in the new millennium.

The internal structure of the Abercrombie company itself is set up much like the psychological discourses of adolescence that aim to breakdown and segment “growing up” into distinguishable, identifiable categories:

Valued at \$5 billion [in 2006], the company now has revenues approaching \$2 billion a year rolling in from more than 800 stores and four successful brands. For the kids there's Abercrombie, aimed at middle schoolers who want to look like their cool older siblings. For high schoolers there's Hollister, a wildly popular surf-inspired look for "energetic and outgoing guys and girls" that has quickly become the brand of choice for Midwestern teens who wish they lived in Laguna Beach, Calif. (Denizet-Lewis, *Salon.com*).

However, the stages of adolescent consumerism don't end with the teenage years for the Abercrombie Company.

When the Hollister kids head off to college, Jeffries [referring to Michael S. Jeffries, Chairman and Chief Executive at Abercrombie & Fitch] has a brand -- the preppy and collegiate Abercrombie & Fitch -- waiting for them there. And for the post-college professional who is still young at heart, Jeffries recently launched Ruehl, a casual sportswear line that targets 22- to 35-year-olds (Denizet-Lewis, *Salon.com*). For companies like Abercrombie & Fitch, youthfulness is a marketing strategy employed for the selling of commodities. The company has neatly sectioned off its audience into smaller markets, and for each market there is a distinct strategy of advertising. However, common to all of the Abercrombie & Fitch stores and clothing lines is a regular framing of youth and youthfulness as an inherent by product to all the items for sale. Therefore, tied into each symbol or representation of youth is an economic equation, thought out in advance, preplanned and packaged for consumption, which hides all the unequal power relations of capitalism inherent in the commercial production of childhood. In the same way that Charles Sarland argues that because children's literature is primarily written, published, and produced by adults for children (Sarland 1), it cannot be viewed as innocent or without ideological bias, advertisements for Abercrombie & Fitch are also texts and therefore are ideological; and ideology can never be separated from its economic base or power relations.

With regards to the representation of sexualized youth in the production of Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements, the rationale behind the production of the ads is similar to the ideas of niche and segmented marketing. For each product class, advertisers determine precisely the target clientele of that product class, and then pinpoint the psychological needs that are of the greatest importance to that specific target market and highlight them in the product's

advertisements. The marketplace is segmented into thousands of smaller niche markets, with each product targeted to the desires of a specific niche. For example, in analyzing the market of customers over 55, the mature market, George P. Moschis posits how the segmented mature market in America can actually be subdivided into four smaller niche markets, based on the dominant psychological needs of the consumer:

The 53 million adults age 55 and over can be grouped into four segments [niche markets]: 1. healthy hermits, 2. ailing outgoers, 3. frail recluses, and 4. healthy indulgers. The results suggest that the model is more effective than some commonly used approaches not only in identifying prime segments for products and services, but also in suggesting viable marketing strategies for reaching specific segments of older consumers. (Moschis 17)

There is a difference between segmented markets and niche markets, as Shani and Chalasani explain, market segmentation:

is the process of breaking a large market into smaller and more manageable submarkets. The objective is to identify homogeneous submarkets which are significantly different from one another. The organization picks one or more of the identified segments and treats each as ‘a small mass market.’ Whereas niche marketing “is the process of carving out a small part of the market, the needs of which are not fulfilled. By specializing along market, customer, product, or marketing mix lines, a company can match the unique needs. (Shani & Chalasani 58)

This is why the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence is so prevalent in advertising. Companies like Abercrombie & Fitch use representations of sexualized youth for the selling of adult products in an attempt to reunite segmented markets by tapping into the discourses of adolescent psychology, like those that Hall and Freud deemed to be universal psychological struggles everyone experienced in their evolution from child to adult; thus, creating one all-encompassing niche market. For Abercrombie & Fitch, both niche and segmented marketing are cornerstones to their marketing strategy that is *really* selling a lifestyle and not necessarily a clothing line. In a 1999 interview Abercrombie & Fitch Chairman and Chief Executive Michael Jeffries explained “we’re a life-style brand, projecting inside the store and outside the store the life style of a very specific target customer, the 18-to-22-year-old American college student.” And in addressing how many customers are in fact older than this target age bracket, Jeffries responded that “college was a very wonderful time of life for most people” and that “we live in a society where everyone aspires to be young” (qtd. in Elliot, *New York Times*). Therefore, if this evolution (from child to adult) can be delayed, then the marketplace of consumers who share similar psychological needs can be extended and the product class that advertisers need to focus on in order to influence consumer behavior can be a significant portion of the marketplace rather than a smaller, segmented, niche market.

### **Perpetual Adolescence at Play? Abercrombie and Fitch’s “Magalouge”**

The marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence suggests that the processes of adolescence still begin in early puberty but no longer end at – indeed, they extend into – adulthood. The topic of a

prolonged adolescence appears to have been an area of study for psychologists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1923, in “A Typical Form of Male Puberty,” Siegfried Bernfeld first introduced the term “prolonged adolescence” when examining European youth movements in the aftermath of the First World War. Bernfeld observed that “members of these groups presented a strong predilection for intellectualization and sexual representation, thus delaying the resolution of adolescent conflict and, in consequence, the personality consolidation of late adolescence.” (qtd in Blos 38). Fifty years later, psychoanalyst Peter Blos took up the topic of prolonged adolescence in his 1979 work *Adolescent Passage*. Blos examined prolonged adolescence in two eras: the years leading up to 1955, and from 1955 to 1977. Blos examined male adolescents in American, middle class families who were between the ages of 18 and 22 years old; he found that most of his subjects in both eras (although at higher levels during the second era) had delayed the entrance into adulthood either through a longer attendance in schooling or through living at home and remaining financially dependent on their parents for a longer period of time. According to Blos, “instead of the progressive push, which normally carries the adolescent into adulthood, prolonged adolescence arrests this forward motion with the result that the adolescent process is not abandoned but kept open-ended” (39). Blos’ findings suggest that prolonged adolescence was dangerous because “[t]his dilemma leads to the contrivance of ingenious ways to combine childhood gratifications with adult prerogatives. The adolescent strives to bypass the finality of choices and options exacted at the close of adolescence” (39). The works of Bernfeld and Blos highlight one of the core arguments of this paper: that discourses about what it means to be young and old are social constructions, that they are always in the process of being defined and redefined, and that media representations of youth over the last half-century have made the markers agreed upon in adolescent psychology as end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood no longer a standard against which we can judge who is young and who is old.

The content of Abercrombie and Fitch’s customer magazine, *A & F Quarterly*, serves as an excellent example of adult anxieties about youthful sexuality and the representation of these anxieties through the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence. The “Magalogue,” the term associated with the *A & F Quarterly* after 1998 (since it was a combination of youth magazine and catalogue), “featured articles on a wide range of youth popular culture and lifestyle topics... Articles included advice, music and movie reviews, and profiles and interviews with celebrities” (Duke University Library). In fact, the 2008 re-issue of the magalogue contains almost 200 pages of photographs and articles without any product placement or advertisements for Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. This is a continuation of the format used in the 2002 magalogue (see <http://www.nerve.com/Regulars/Quickies/AbercrombieIndex/>) where according to Dan Reines, the “approximate number of nude or partially nude models pictured in the first 119 pages of *A&F 2002* (including cover): 49” and “Number of those pages which do not appear to feature any Abercrombie & Fitch products at all... 12” (Reines, *Nerve.com*) The catalog was actually first published in 1909, but it was only after the company re-tooled its approach to consumers in 1992, by shifting away from the sporting goods, outdoorsman market to a focus on upscale youth that the contents inside the catalogue also shifted. In 1997 the first *A & F Quarterly* catalog was printed, and by 2003 when the publication was stopped, in large part due to consumer pressure, Abercrombie & Fitch was selling over 200,000 copies of each issue at a price of \$6 per magalogue (Bhatnagar, *CNN.com*).

On 27 March, 2008, page six of the *New York Post* reported “IT can't be pornography if it's art, right? Abercrombie & Fitch is releasing a new catalog by Bruce Weber full of even sexier shots of scantily clad teen models - but this time, it will be sold only in London and priced at close to \$200, "like an art book” (Johnson, *New York Post*). The images of the magalogue, were taken by photographer Bruce Weber, under the creative direction of Sam Shahid, both of whom had previously worked on advertising campaigns for clothing companies, including the controversial Calvin Klein campaign in the 1990s , which also came under fire for an over sexualization of younger models (Bhatnagar, *CNN.com*). A 2008 report in the *International Herald Tribune* suggests that the 2008 magalogue operates with a budget of £150,000- [approximately 300,000 US] an issue (Britten). The return of the Abercrombie & Fitch magalogue with a price tag of close to \$200, further illustrates how the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence underlies advertising ideologies at Abercrombie & Fitch (since the price tag suggests an adult consumer, even though the images and representations inside the magalogue centre on youth and youthfulness) and is directly tied to the social environment and adult anxieties surrounding sexuality and youth in 2008. The images of the 2008 magalogue were much like the images found in earlier versions of the *A&F Quarterly* (see <http://www.nerve.com/Regulars/Quickies/AbercrombieIndex/>) where adult models were positioned as heavily sexualized, while playing on a youthful, nostalgic, and romantic representation of youth. For example, on the cover of the 2008 magalogue (see <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/new-af-quarterly>) the cover photo is of an adult model, staged to look young and innocent so as to position himself as both child and adult. The backdrop to the photo is pastoral and plays to a romantic notion of the innocent child. Furthermore, the model himself is not clothed and although the photo is taken only shows the top half of the models body, there is the option for the viewer to believe that the model is wearing no clothes at all. In addition to the advertisements, the advise-style columns of the magalogue work to destabilize youth by suggesting that completion of adolescence, the acceptance of peers, and the self-acceptance of a coherent sense of self are all still works in progress.

The discussion surrounding the Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue that led to the discontinuation of *A & F Quarterly* in 2003, by parent groups, religious organizations, and media watch-dogs, and that have recently resurfaced in public discourse since the return of the catalogue in spring 2008, have tended to paint a much less positive representation of youth. Here, under the umbrella of a moral panic and the demise of family values in current culture, youth is portrayed as vulnerable, innocent, and in need of protection. The discussion surrounding the magalogue in 2003 prior to its pulling speaks a great deal to the Puritan discourse of childhood, and the fears of adults surrounding the over-sexualization of youth. Many of these concerns still exist and continue to be voiced against current advertisement used by Abercrombie & Fitch on their website (see <http://www.abercrombie.com>) that tend to suggest through images and copy that being young, being sexual, and wearing Abercrombie & Fitch products are all intertwined. The Puritan discourse of childhood and its need for the protection of children because of their innocence is heavily connected to John Locke’s idea of the “blank slate” and the discourse of the blank slate can often be linked to parents groups interested in censorship. Here the argument of parent groups suggests that children viewing images of people in sexually suggestive scenes will desire to remake those advertisements in their own lives and participate in similar sexual activities. The logic of this type of argument suggests that young people are blank slates on which social images, discourses, and representations, write and create the behaviors of

people. Therefore, since the child is innocent and easily manipulated, it is the duty of parents and community groups to protect the child from engaging with the evils of the surrounding society. This is precisely the type of argument that was cited in the boycott against Abercrombie and Fitch in 2003 because of the nudity and sexually suggestive images found in *A&F Quarterly* (see <http://money.cnn.com/2003/12/09/news/companies/abercrombie/index.htm>). For example, Kevin McCullough, argues:

In a day in which more parents than ever are concerned about the likelihood of their daughter getting pregnant, their child being sexually active long before they are mature enough to handle the consequences or the rampant spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the "younger than 20" demographic today – it's time to stop Abercrombie & Fitch. (McCullough, *worldnetdaily.com*)

McCullough claimed that the 2003 Christmas edition of *A&F Quarterly* contained over 45 sexually explicit images in the first 120 pages, before any advertisements for clothing even appeared. The dangers according to McCullough and parent groups who had been protesting against the over sexualization of youth in Abercrombie and Fitch ads since 1999, was that magazine/catalogues like *A&F Quarterly*, although targeted at a more “mature” audience, contain clothing and products for their kid lines, suggesting a younger readership. Since writers like McCullough and concerned parent groups viewed the child as a blank slate that was both innocent and desexualized, the openly sexualized depiction of youth appeared problematic to them and spoke directly to the fears and anxieties of parenting.

In response to the public backlash against his company, CEO, Michael Jeffries, took a stance much closer to the discourse associated with a romantic notion of childhood. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s ideas of the Romantic child *Emile* have been tied to terms such as “innocent,” “pure,” and “naïve.” In Book 2 of *Emile*, Rousseau writes:

[I]ove childhood, promote its pleasures, its lovable instincts. Who among you has not sometimes missed that age when laughter was always on our lips, and when the soul was always at peace? Why take away from these innocent little people the joys of a time that will escape them so quickly and gifts that could never cause any harm? Why fill with bitterness the fleeting days of early childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you (213)?

In a 2006 interview, when responding to the criticisms associated with the magazine Jeffries was quick to rebut "That's just so wrong!..I think that what we represent sexually is healthy. It's playful. It's not dark. It's not degrading! And it's not gay, and it's not straight, and it's not black, and it's not white. It's not about any labels. That would be cynical, and we're not cynical! It's all depicting this wonderful camaraderie, friendship, and playfulness that exist in this generation and, candidly, does not exist in the older generation" (Denizet-Lewis, *Salon.com*). For Jeffries, the purchasing of Abercrombie & Fitch is not about the products as much as it is about the lifestyle associated with the products. His defence of Abercrombie & Fitch ads is about protecting the niche and segmented marketing practices of the company and the brand image that the letters *A&F* have come to symbolize.

Herein lies the contradiction between the two adult discourses about youth and how adult notions of youthful sexuality position each of these discourses in society. On the one hand, adults view youth as sexually “at risk” and objectified, falling in line with the Puritan discourse of childhood and at the core of the pederphobic protesting of sexualized youth in advertisements. On the other hand, adults view youth as sexually “at play” and eroticize the youthfulness of a more carefree time in their lives, falling in line with the Romantic discourse of childhood and the pederphilic desires that underpin the nostalgic representations of youth in ads. However, neither of these adult views of youth are in fact truly representative of children and instead speak much more to the anxieties, fears, hopes, and desires of adults. In his discussion of America as pederphilic (child-loving) and pederphobic (child-hating) Lawrence Grossberg used youth as a way to examine a larger social phenomenon, namely, differing conceptions of modernity in American history and society and therefore one possible explanation for the divide between the American political right and the American political left (109-196). For Grossberg, kids have been the arena of political discourse over the last quarter century, and it is through discourse about children that all other political debates have been waged (8). Unfortunately for children, the debate surrounding children, in fact has very little to do with children themselves, and instead discussion about the future of America has been channeled through the discussion about how Americans should raise their children. This gives rise to the competing myths of childhood, where on one side see the child as innocent and the source of all that is good in America; the child is something that needs protection from society. The other side sees children as the source of crime and all that is wrong with society; children become something that society needs protection from. However, as the debate surrounding Abercrombie & Fitch has illustrated, it is not only the myths that we privilege in the representations of youth in our society, but also the cultural backlash or response to these representations that illustrate the -pederphilic and/or pederphobic tendencies of a society.

When Grossberg’s ideas on the war on childhood are connected to the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence and advertisements of sexualized youth at Abercrombie & Fitch, two things become visible about the cultural production of youth. First, the power brokers of the economy, most notably the culture industries and not those in politics are the driving cultural force in American society and therefore any change in the concept of childhood will ultimately start and end with media representations. Second, in acknowledging that the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence in advertising is in fact a strategy of distinction, which seeks to use artificial desire as a way of convincing adults that they need to be youthful, a more simple answer appears as to why there are conflicting pederphilic (child as sexually at play) representations of youth and pederphobic (child as sexually at risk) discourse in ensuing debate. After all, it is through the discourses of childhood, best represented in media that America continually redefines what it means to be a child, an adult, an individual, and a member of a family, a community, and a society.

## **Conclusion**

Childhood is a social construction however, discourse and representations of youth have real consequences in society. Adolescence is a category of discrimination in that a person’s age and life positioning immediately reveal a whole category of subjective beliefs or stereotypes in the same way that a person’s gender immediately implies a whole set of power relations. And

although childhood is different from other social variables because it is a temporary space, the extension of this temporal space to a lifelong process is precisely the objective of the culture industries in the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, adolescence and childhood become socially constructed categories of distinction where relationships of power, domination, and inequality are continually contested. As Henry Jenkins suggests, “[t]his marginalization affects not only how we understand the child, its social agency, its cultural contexts, and its relations to powerful institutions, but also how we understand adult politics, adult culture, and adult society, which often circle around the specter of the innocent child” (Jenkins 6). If this is true, the larger question is why? Why expand childhood? Why delay adulthood? What are the benefits to a society for doing so? The sizeable grasp of economics and capitalism in Western societies plays a significant role in answering this question. By connecting the scientific and medical discourses of adolescent psychology to the advertising agency, we see that the “destabilization” of adolescence is a powerful marketing tool that allows for the selling of consumer goods and lifestyles, and that it is in the best interests of advertisers and the culture industries to keep the stress, duress, and anxieties of adolescence alive in all people, because this is what helps to trigger their desire to purchase consumer goods. The idea of segmenting children’s lives into distinct categories, periods, or compartments to be analyzed and studied is in fact a marketing discourse that has become naturalized and invisible through its continual valorization in the media and in the medical and academic disciplines of adolescent, behavioural, and social psychology.<sup>6</sup> Explicitly, youth is represented as romantic, innocent, pure, nostalgic, and something to be desired by all. Youth is represented as not only safer, stronger, more alive, and freer, but also as more powerful. Youth is no longer something directly tied to the biology of age. Implicitly tied into these representations of youth are discourses of adolescent psychology and social psychology, which have suggested that adolescence is a destabilizing time of struggle where individuals rely on their peer group to formulate an identity and outwardly express their inward self in a fashion that is both socially acceptable by adults and approved by peers. This affection and acceptance could only be gained and attained (as promised in advertisements) through the continual purchasing of newer, flashier, and prettier consumer goods. This is how perpetual adolescence starts, and why it never ends.

The point then is *not* to suggest that advertising is manipulative or that we have no choice in consuming products and that we are merely sheep being herded by the culture industry. Likewise, the point was not to provide credence to Neil Postman’s 1994 claim that childhood has disappeared.<sup>7</sup> Instead this paper looked at the representations of sexualized youth in contemporary culture, and in particular in advertisements by Abercrombie & Fitch. What was discovered was that it is the fears and anxieties of adults in a society that are reflected in discourses about childhood and it is the hopes, dreams, and desires of adults in a society that are reflected in the advertisements of youth. We still can’t get past the romantic/puritan dichotomy in representing youth in the media and that has its roots as far back as John Locke and his discussion of the blank slate in the 1690s. Discussion surrounding advertisements of Abercrombie & Fitch continue the debate as to whether we are a society that is in love with our children or at war with them. The consequence of our inability of moving past this debate and dichotomy of representation of youth is the continual practice of the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence and the continual denial of the civil and political rights of children and adults. The marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence denies children civil and political rights by either suggesting that they are incapable of being active participants in politics and in

need of protection, or that that they are innocent and should not be taken away from childhood to deal with what are considered adult matters. Equally disturbing is how the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence denies adults civil and political rights by placing the emphasis of adult life on either the consumption of youthful sensibilities or the protection of children from adult evils instead of the larger issues of injustice and inequality in the world.

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## Notes

1 The research for the article began as a part of my doctoral thesis, and as such, a portion of this article first appears in Chapter 2 of Gennaro, S. *Selling Youth: How Market Research at the J. Walter Thompson Company framed what it meant to be a Child (and an Adult) in 20th Century America*. Diss., McGill University, 2008. Montreal: 2008. Print.

2 Adolescence was deemed by psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Sigmund Freud to be a time of turbulence, where competing selves needed to be re-organized, where a young person came of age, and where competing sexual urges needed to be controlled in order to function properly in society. With this, adolescence became defined as a period of destabilization and adolescents became categorized as individuals in need of guidance.

3 The term, perpetual adolescence, describes the ways that the contemporary American culture industry trains both young and old to be consumers of “youth” in a marketplace that privileges adolescence over adulthood. By doing so, American society has effectively erased the traditional lines of distinction between adulthood and adolescence.

4 Although terms such as adolescent, child, teenager, and youth have been used in academic disciplines, corporate plans, and medical fields to refer more directly to a category of individuals who have a specific set of attributes and functions, The United Nations defined children in its 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child as anyone under the age of 18. Therefore, terms such as adolescent, child, and youth are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

5 Here, the term “culture industries” is used in a similar fashion to how Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer use the term in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* .to refer to all of the industries involved in the appropriation and de-politicizing of art, through its mass production and selling for profit.

6 The categories of age and development that such terms associate with childhood are social constructions that have become so widely used and represented that they have become what Stuart Hall would call “naturalized codes.” Following Louis Althusser’s ideas of “obviousnesses” and Antonio Gramsci’s explanation of how ideology is most dangerous when it becomes invisible, such that it is seen as normal, silly, or stupid, Hall uses the term “naturalized codes” to refer to the representation of an ideology that has become so widespread in our culture that we no longer process and analyze the symbol and instead simply accept it at face value. Under this schema, terms like adolescent, teenager, child, and youth all represent an implicit ideology that has become so normalized that we no longer see the dangers inherent in them, the

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structures of power they contain, and the ways in which they not only colonize children but deny them any access to channels of power.

7 In *The Disappearance of Childhood* Postman stated that “American adults want to be parents of children less than they want to be children themselves.”(Postman, 138) According to Postman, advancements in information and communication technology in second half of the twentieth century has caused a re-organization of the life-stages proposed in adolescent psychology. For Postman, “in the television age there are [now only] three [stages]. At one end, infancy; at the other, senility. In between there is what we might call the adult-child”(Postman, . 99).

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