Autoethnography : Behind the Shopping

I did not expect to get such an interesting experience from working at a retailer. There is so much that goes on in clothing stores that we, as customers don't realize. Each retailer has it's own language, marketing strategies, ideology, etc. Everything is centered around us, and we don't even notice or realize it! Furthermore I had an especially interesting experience working for a very controversial retailer who, let's just say are quite selective of how their store is run and who their cliental is. Through this experience I transitioned from a complete outsider to an insightful insider of a clothing store known as Abercrombie and Fitch.

The smell of the stores signature perfume lingers a couple yards before the entrance of the dimly lit store. Right as you enter you are slapped with a gigantic image of a man’s lower torso. The black and white photo emphasizes his v-lines and his white boxers peaking through against his tanned skin.    
            To the left, women mannequins welcome you to the women’s side and men mannequins on the men’s side on right. Each mannequin stands proud with their idealistic bodies and their clothing perfectly fitted around their bodies, the folds and creases in exactly the right places. Even their height is perfect and exact. Each room has tables and closets stacked with clothing strategically arranged. Each shirt, blouse, pant is folded neatly and stacked directly on top of the first. The tags are perfectly aligned to allow customers to easily find their sizes. Racks are distributed around the store with all the extra small sizes facing the front of the hung clothing.   
            Large fanning potted plants are arranged around the room to give the store a very urban feel. Black and white pictures of young and happy men and women pose barely clothed on the wall.

 After working for an entire summer in this environment, I began to realize how odd the concept of clothing stores are. They transport it’s customers into an idealistic world where their clothes are the center and a complete must-have. After weeks and weeks of coming to this foreign world and looking at the same clothes for days I started to feel it’s transforming effects. I would always scan the room and decide what to try on at the end of my shift. I would always make mental notes about which blouses would look well with the new belts in the front or the dark wash skinny jeans. I would even smile to myself when all the clothing on a table was perfectly folded.

Now, after a couple months after quitting my job and starting school, I was able to analyze the store a little more closely. The store gives off a powerful trendy, clean cut, young, and classy mood as if wearing their clothing or shopping at the store will somehow rub off on you. It's colorless rooms strategically highlights the colored clothing. The music, so loud you have to shout over each other, discourages socialization and into a concentrated shopping mood. The size 2 mannequins were the perfect models to show off the stores latest fashion. It all made sense now, and I wanted to learn more.

I began my research through a couple interviews and decided to interview two of my coworkers: Minnie and Jordan. Minnie is one of my best friends that started working right after me. I offered to my manager's that she was looking for a job and they set her up with an interview. Lucky for them she was the perfect visual of an Abercrombie Model.

When I asked Minnie if I could interview her, she was just starting college in Northern Arizona University so we decided to Skype. Her face entered my computer screen. Her blond hair was thrown into a bun and an old t-shirt drapes her thin body. She grinned her white, pearly familiar smile as she sat in her poorly lit dorm. One Direction posters covered the wall beyond a bunk bed with its purple floral comforter tossed aside. Her bright green eyes look excited to see me.

“TELL ME HOW YOU’RE DOING,” she shrieked.

“OH MY GOODNESS! I have so much to tell you!” I said, and right away we began literally an hour and a half long conversation about our transitions to college.

“Okay, okay. Minnie, now I need to ask you some questions about your experience working at Abercrombie.”

Minnie rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. “I feel like we’ve talked about this a billion times.”

“I know, I know. But it’s been almost month since we’ve left so maybe we’ve had a long time to reflect… So. First question. I looked at my list of interview questions. 1) Were you recruited? I had gotten Chloe her interview right after I was recruited. I moved on. “Did working at this retailer boost your confidence?” I asked.

Minnie began stroking her hair. “Well…” she said. “You are called a “Model”, and you get hit on by the other models and a ton of customers. Plus,” she added after a slight pause, “Brad told me I really had a chance to be a cast member on the posters. Managers get more money if they hire models that get casted so basically, yes, it is a huge confidence boost.”

“Yeah, I agree. So did you think working at Abercrombie was trendier than another retailer at the mall—say Gap?”

“I think people make it out to be like that. You get an idea that it’s so cool working there, but you’re really not. Abercrombie just has a more pedicured look but you still have to pee in a nasty looking toilet and get sweaty mopping the floors every morning.”

“So true,” I said, remembering back when I would have to sweep all the dust bunnies onto the carpet until they were swarmed around me like flies.

I move on. “After working for a while, do you find yourself buying and liking the brand more? Or less?”

“I didn’t mind the clothes at all. I bought more of their clothes after working there. Before I worked at Abercrombie I thought it was a little kids store. Like I shopped there a lot when I was in my preteens. I always went for the stuff with the brand name on it or the logos. But when I was working there, I leaned towards the stuff where the logos were hidden. What I didn’t like was how strict the dress code was. Brad was really into the “Look Book”.

“Brad was kind of ridiculous, though,” I noted.

“His life revolved around Abercrombie; he literally said ‘every piece of clothing I own is Abercrombie’”.

“I know!” I chimed in. “He was so proud of himself and I was thinking umm, that’s embarrassing.”

“Yeah, Abercrombie wants to think that only attractive young adults buy their clothes, but in reality its not true.”

“Who does buy their clothes?” I asked.

“Like I said, I thought there were just a bunch of preteens who shopped there, but there’s also a lot of European and Asians foreigners who shop there. I think Abercrombie wants to think that only attractive people want to buy their clothes but in reality, it’s not true. I mean, it might be true in Europe and Asia, but definitely not here for the most part.”

“Totally, totally,” I agreed. “So. What do you think are some major differences between the managers and the models?” I asked.

“Well educationally, the models are probably smarter than some of the managers. Brad was kind of a dumb shit. Like, the models-- They have bigger goals in life versus the managers who are kind of stuck. I’ve asked Andrew, ‘do you want to do more with your life than Abercrombie?’ I literally asked him that and he said he didn’t know.”

“I totally get what your saying,” I chimed in. “Like for us it was just a part time job to earn extra cash for college, but managers are full time. And it’s weird cause they’re all so young—even the regional managers.”

“Yeah I can’t tell if they get so sick of their jobs that they quit really early or if Abercrombie fires them one they hit 30!” We both start laughing, but I think we both were actually curious which it was.

“I think that was a perfect way to wrap this conversation up!” We then continued talking about Minnie's cute RA.

A couple days later I called up my friend Jordan. Jordan and I knew each other from school, but we became friends after I started working at A&F. He had been working there for about 6 months when I started working. When I asked him to interview him agreed and he FaceTimed my computer from his phone.

As I sit in front of my computer FaceTiming with Keith, I think getting him into a comfortable interview won’t be as easy as Minnie’s, so I start off by asking about his classes, school, etc. Finally, I introduce the topic of Abercrombie slowly.

“So tell me, Keith, how do you like working at Abercrombie?”. I notice right as I said that that Keith has on a familiar green t-shirt with a year printed in large letters—one that I’ve folded a million times.

Keith gives a loud sigh. “The pay is crap,” he starts out and immediately bursts into laughter. “It can either be really, really stressful,” he continues. “Lately has been really, really stressful, and I think it has to do with the management. Cause before when I worked there, I was only working on weekends. But I was an impacter. So I would just come in, hang out with people and listen to music in the back—which was awesome--.”

“Yeah I seriously would love to be impact.” I agree. Wow, I thought. He really didn’t need any easing into.

“But, like, now that I’m a model… Oh! I remember when I became a model, you remember Katharine?” He asked.

“No.”

"Well I used to be in the back and they said [In a high pitched, snooty voice] ‘You cant be back here you’re a model now’, when I first changed over and I’m like….’aren’t we still cool?” And she’s like… ‘The only reason why your out there is because you’re ‘Abercrombie Pretty”’ …like models are supposed to be stuck up or something…and honestly… a lot of our models aren’t even that hot. You were!”

I laughed out loud shyly. That was a good save, I thought. “I’m confused. When did you get switched from an impact to a model? Or how? And why?”

“Arty just texted me one day and said ‘you’re a model. Thanks.’”

“Fair enough.” I said. “Okay, next. Does working here boost your confidence?”

“It felt the same,” said Keith. “It didn’t feel any different but people treat you different. They feel like there’s sort of a hierarchy between models and impacters but I don’t—I’m not into that.

“Yeah, I feel you—it’s awkward.” I added.

“I mean we’re all getting paid minimum wage, so. Like oh wow you’re in the front. You’re better than me?”

“Yeah exactly! On the floor you listen to the same songs that loop every, what, 45 minutes? And you have to tag every single freaking customer.”

“Oh yeah, so amazing.. But like. There is kind of a tension between models and impacts. Like sometimes I would be talking to Katherine, who’s an impact, and I’ll be like stressed out and she’ll be like “Oh my god It must be so hard for you working out here greeting people and folding clothes…”

“What? That’s so rude!”

“--And I’m like… what do you guys do over there? Listen to music and fold clothes? At least you don’t have to listen to our shitty music. Cause like really it’s horrible. You could just plug your iPod in back there.

“I KNOW!” I exclaimed. “It’s so frustrating! “I noticed you’re wearing an Abercrombie t-shirt. Since you’ve been working there, do you find yourself buying and liking the brand more?”

There was a long pause before Jordan responded. “That’s tough. I don’t know if I’m really more attracted to it…It’s just become a part of what I wear plus I get their clothes for cheap so… might as well.”

“So if you weren’t working there would you go to the store and buy some clothes there?”

“Yeah…” He starts to laugh, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry it seems to happen to all of us!” I assure him.

“I just bought this vest, and these shirts and some sweaters.”

“Oh from the new line?”

“Yeah.

I continued, “Do you think being an employee at this clothing store is ‘trendier’ than working at other retailers?”

“NO?!” Keith exclaimed. “It’s a joke! A grunt worker is still a grunt worker no matter who he works for.”

“You said it. Fair enough. So what do you think are the major differences between managers and models?”

“Work ethic. Specifically Brad. I think his technique is to bitch at you for what he hasn’t accomplished yet. He literally stresses you out from him being stressed out! Like he comes into work and he’s like OH MY GOD I have to get all this done! And I’m like how the fuck is this my fault? I wasn’t here last night

“I KNOW! And then he’s like “Sorry you can’t go on your break because I’m behind.”

“Wait,” I paused. “Aren’t they obligated to give everyone a break?”

“Yeah I think it’s a legal issue, but I’ve never really pushed it.

“Yeah… you should look into that because that’s really annoying. Anyways, do you think that they care more about the Abercrombie policy than the models did?”

“Brad takes it seriously!! Nobody else does. For Brad it’s like his LIFE. He still tries to bang every single associate. Like every single girl associate.”

Wrapping up the interview I asked, "Anything else you want to add? Likes? Dislikes?"

"I don’t like the amount of sexual harassment."

“Are you being serious? Or are you talking about Brad?”

“Yeah”

“Yeah he is a weird guy. Do you think that’s only at our Abercrombie or like everywhere else?”

“I think it’s everywhere!”

“Yeah you’re looking for attractive people to hire so you're going to be attracted to them. “Yeah I agree it’s very... unprofessional.” “Yeah its just...weird.”

"Well I think that's good enough for now!" I said.

During my interviews, I was curious to find how differently the views of my interviewees were about Abercrombie's marketing methods. Abercrombie uses vary unique marketing methods that make Abercrombie Abercrombie. This all varies from the color scheme of their clothing to the “soft” nudity on the walls. Marketing is what gives clothing stores their mood, their vibe. It allows different stores to attract different customers. What sets Abercrombie apart from most other retailers is that they almost openly exclude untargeted customers. Abercrombie CEO openly discourages, “unattractive, unpopular, and overweight customers from shopping at Abercrombie”. The store does carry sizes for overweight customers for both men and women. In addition they burn their “damaged” clothing used on mannequins instead of donating it to charity. Despite these facts Abercrombie is still a successful company because of their marketing methods. I asked both interviewees how they felt working underneath such controversial marketing methods and I got very interesting answers.

When I asked Minnie I said, “Abercrombie has very unique marketing strategies. Do you think they are effective?”

“I think they work. They try to draw in people with their perfect and attractive, black and white, classic look. Like sculpted, cheekbones, abs. Very classy. They all look really well put together. They want to make customers think that being an Abercrombie shopper indicates you’re an attractive, classy, put together person.”

“What about their other forms of marketing?”

“Like what?” Minnie asked.

“You know the layout of the store.”

“Oh yeah like how everything has to be measure to a tee. Like the clothes have to be stacked exactly flush and the secret shoppers mark you down if there are 5 unfolded items in the room. Or how there has to be a “face out” hanger with the smallest size shirt facing the front of the rack of clothes like the only people that can fit those sizes are babies. —Oh my god! Did you write about the male mannequins, Kali?”

“Not yet!” I laughed.

“Well basically we literally have to stuff the “junk” of the male mannequins with trash bags and it is just stupid and so, so awkward to do.

“Honestly, that’s taking it too far.”

“Totally,” Minnie agreed shaking her head. “There are just so many weird things Abercrombie does that I just absolutely do not understand.

“How do you feel about being apart of all of their odd controversial methods?” I ask.

“Obviously I don’t like it!” she answered as if it needed no questioning at all. “I think the Abercrombie Corporation are just completely--*nuts*. It’s just weird how open they are about it. Like I would be ashamed to ask my workers to stuff the male mannequin’s junk. That’s why I would never be a manager there.”

When I asked Keith during his interview, he had a slightly different take.

“Keith, how do you feel about the company’s marketing methods? Do you think they’re efficient?” I asked a little excited to get to this part.

Like his other questions there was a slight pause before he spoke. “You want to attract more attract more customers so you show attractive people wearing their clothes so it works.”

“Yeah go on.”

“A Lot of people do like their clothes and buy their clothes so… it’s working.”

“Do you agree with it? Would you run your business that way because it works? Or do you think it’s unethical.”

“Unethical to what? “

“Like hiring and showing pictures of attractive people.”

“Do you really want me to give you my real opinion?”

 “Yes I do this is a no judgment interview!” I was very quite at this point.

“Honestly I think a business can do whatever they want. If you cater to a certain cliental than that cliental is what you’re going to get. Lets say for example. There’s a restaurant near the transit center called Humpy’s and there’s this rule that you can’t kick bums out and it kicks down service because you can’t kick bums out so they have bums that sit at their tables. But now think about a restaurant like a higher end one where you have to wear a dress shirt and tie. You’re going to be attracting a lot more wealthier customers and be bringing in a lot more money just from being selective.

“So at Abercrombie being selective is not providing clothing for all size types. There are no XXL’s for women for example.”

“So it’s like a mindset. If I’m able to fit Abercrombie than I must be skinny. It’s a status thing; that’s what it is. It’s like going into a fancy restaurant. Oh I’m able to because I have this Mark Anthony suite or whatever the hell haha uhh Louis Vuitton? I don’t know. I don’t pay attention. But that’s what it is. It’s money making. It’s marketing and it works.”

“So you’re fine with it.” I asked as a reassurance.

 “From a management standpoint it works, and many companies do it, so yes.

“Have do you feel about branding? As a marketing method.”

“I think logos are a huge marketing method. It’s fun, it’s fair.. Like if you were a company you’d want people to wear your logo. I mean that’s the whole entire point to get big and make money and you do that by having stuff with your logo. It’s not like its better quality than a regular t-shirt—well in my opinion it is because its softer—but I think that’s the whole entire point of being a company. Like why would you go all out and be a company and be selective and then don’t even put your logo on it. I mean think Beats By Dre. Or like Nikes. So Logos can be misleading in quality but I don’t think that’s true in Abercrombie’s case.”

It was interesting to see the different viewpoints of the two Abercrombie employees. It raised a couple of questions. Did their different of opinions had to do with how long they both worked there? Perhaps their gender? Or just naturally different opinions.

What I did conclude from their interviews was that Abercrombie was no doubt a heaping ball of controversies. The main ones that were raised in the interviews, and not to mention my own experience, were the methods of model recruitment Abercrombie has brought up, their uncomfortable “Look Policy”, and their sexual advertising.

I remember my first encounter with Abercrombie’s model recruitment tactic. I dressed particularly well that day. I spent a little more time on my makeup and hair. I grabbed my purse and a couple copies of my resume and I drove over the 5th Avenue Mall for a scheduled interview at Sullivan's. I walked into the mall--45 minutes early. I was nervous; it was my first interview. I'll just walk around for a bit, I thought. I came across an Abercrombie store with a sign on the outside that read "Shorts 50% off!" I'll need shorts for when I go to Emory, I thought, and walked into the store. I grabbed a couple of shorts and asked for a dressing room. When I got out a man was standing there in polo, jeans, and sandals. "Hey, my name is Brad. I'm a manager here at A&F. I was wondering if you'd like a job here." I remember immediately thinking about my rolled up resumes in my purse and how unimpressive they were. 'Yeah sure! That sounds awesome!" I replied. Little did I, know I was a part of an elaborate recruitment process.

Manager's are required to hire their staff, but what make's them hire selectively is the "Casting Call". New Model's have their pictures taken and sent in to the A&F headquarters and the hiring manager benefits if the model is "approved". In addition, if the model is casted, the manager is also rewarded. This creates a workspace of attractive workers that Abercrombie is known for.

Impact workers are Abercrombie employees that work in the backspace of the store behind closed doors. They are responsible for stocking shelves, folding clothing, etc. Because these workers aren't out in the open of the store, managers are less selective of who works these positions. The irony of the job title is that being a "Model" at Abercrombie is far from glamorous. As a model, I've spent hours vacuuming dust bunnies, mopping the store floor, and most of all spending several hours at a time folding stacks and stacks of clothing.

From the way Abercrombie recruits it’s employees it is needless to say Abercrombie uses sex appeal to advertise it's company. Many families forbid their children from going into the clothing store due to its nearly pornographic photos. Its advertisements are often considered "soft porn" and have quite serious effects on its customers. Interest groups such as Focus on the Family, National Coalition for Protection of the Children, and Concerned Women for America have frequent protests and boycotts with Abercrombie. Many customers argue that what Abercrombie targets to its college students are actually being targeted to young teens.

In 2003 Abercrombie issued a 280-paged Christmas magazine called the *Quarterly*full of nude men and women.  There was a high reaction of protest and before Thanksgiving the magazine was removed. In addition Abercrombie denied saying the magazine's removal had to do with the protests.

The final hot Abercrombie controversy is the “Look Policy. This controversy has bothered me since day one when the manager that hired me tried to *shop* for me. He started off by saying, “So I’m going to need you to take off your green nail polish when you come in tomorrow. It's the look policy, sorry. Actually you can't have finger nail polish on unless it's clear. And you can only have toenail polish if it's pink or red. ...Looks like yours is purple so you're going to have to change that, too." I was unaware of the “Look Policy” before I started working. My manager instructed me to come in with flip-flops, leave my hair down, and not wear heavy makeup. He then took me around the store grabbing clothes for me to try on. I remember trying on a dress that just barely fit over by butt. "Come out of the dressing room so I can see how that dress looks!" my new manager Brad called. I immediately panicked, pulled the dress as low as it could go, and took a baby step out of the closet. "This does not fit. It's way too short." "That's the style; it's supposed to look like that. Here, it's in the "Look Policy. See? Her dress looks like its the same height as yours. This fits you perfectly!" He brings me to the cash register and I look down at the clothes. "I think I'm going to just buy half of this for now. I'll get the dress and these later on...when I have more money," I lied. I look down at the clothes I just purchased thinking I have to spend $80 on clothes that I don't even like...and I haven't even started working.   
Abercrombie's look policy states that employee's must follow a seasonal look book. Employees must keep up with the seasonal looks so they are constantly buying new clothing to fit the look book guide. Employee's aren't obligated to wear brand clothing, but they are forbidden to wear brands of competitors (i.e. American Eagle, Aeropostale). Abercrombie does not sell clothes in black and purple. Employees are required to wear colors within Abercrombie's color scheme such as grey and navy blue.

After my summer job at Abercrombie was over, I concluded that company is ran by a bunch of obsessive compulsive, pompous a\*\*holes. However, after interviewing two of my coworkers and researching the company, I still believe it's ran the same a\*\*holes, but I would add "ingenious" and "deceitful" to their list of adjectives. Through all their risqué photography, ridiculous "look policy", their recruitment methods, and their over-intense store, they have successfully made a name for themselves along with an incredibly strong cliental. Their tactics of exclusion and line-crossing management has kept the store in hot topics of discussion and frequently in the center of media attention. Personally, I don't agree with everything the company does, and I hate to say what they do *works*..

 I think it is safe to conclude Abercrombie, whether purposefully or not (but probably purposefully), has used the same strategies pop stars use when it comes to investing in incredible trend and fame that will knowingly fall after a short period of time. For example, artists like Lady Gaga, Madonna, and even now, Miley Cyrus have all shocked the world with their completely out there attire, trends, etc. which arouses their audiences and skyrockets their popularity and eventually settles down.  Abercrombie used the waves of popular culture to its advantage and made an incredible fortune. No matter how much we hate it, we can't help but admit the outcome was incredibly successful.