

# It's grrrl power vs. Abercrombie & Fitch

**Teenage girls take on the fashion giant to protest T-shirts with slogans they say are demeaning. They advocate a "girlcott" to pressure the retailer to change.**

By SUSAN ASCHOFF - Published November 5, 2005

A group of 13- to 16-year-old girls have something they want to get off their chests: Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts emblazoned with slogans they say degrade the girls that wear them.

They want young women across the United States to "girlcott" the popular clothing chain until it stops selling the attitude Ts.

Who needs brains when you have these? reads one.

I had a nightmare I was a brunette.

Or how about, for a generation of young women that outnumbers young men in college enrollment and degrees, You better make more than I can spend.

At a kickoff press conference a week ago at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, and in an appearance on the Today Show Tuesday, the girls asked their peers to stop disrespecting themselves and each other.

"We, as young women and girls, do not need to create extra competition between our ranks," said Emma Blackman-Mathis, a 16-year-old high school junior from Pittsburgh, in a phone interview after her television appearance.

Attitude Ts are not new. In 2001, St. Petersburg Times staff writer Dave Scheiber described his discomfort during a shopping trip at the mall with two teenage daughters and an array of store displays with shirts reading HOTTIE, Vixen and Maybe You'll Get Lucky. Manufacturers excused any lack of taste by noting that the shirts fly out the doors and that parents, not apparel companies, are the gatekeepers.

But this week it was the kids, not the parents, crying foul. After Blackman-Mathis and Jettie Fields, 13, spent a few minutes with Katie Couric, calls from the media peppered



Abercrombie & Fitch Co. headquarters in Ohio and the girls' nonprofit sponsors.

Abercrombie & Fitch issued a statement.

"Our clothing appeals to a wide variety of customers. These particular T-shirts have been very popular among adult women to whom they are marketed."

Their customers are overwhelmingly teenagers and college students. Apparently, they like what they see. In October, the clothing company reported net sales of \$189-million over four weeks, a 41 percent increase over the same period the previous year.

But Abercrombie & Fitch's penchant for using sex to sell has drawn criticism for years.

In 2003, the company pulled a catalog featuring photos of naked models and copy advocating group sex after critics threatened boycotts. The company said the action had nothing to do with protests; the catalog was pulled to make way for a perfume promotion.

Although the catalog had to be purchased and was sold to only those 18 and older, many charged Abercrombie & Fitch with purveying soft porn.

A year earlier, a T-shirt with the slogan Two Wongs Can Make It White was pulled from shelves after charges of racial insensitivity.

This week, the T-shirts pegged as particularly offensive by the teenagers' group were not on the company's Web site.

The Allegheny County Girls as Grantmakers, a group of 23 teenagers from different ethnic groups, neighborhoods and schools in the county, are behind the call for a girlcott. Newly formed and sponsored by several nonprofit women's organizations, they will award \$10,000 in grants this year to youth projects on women in politics, women in science and technology, and to efforts to combat bullying, cliques and stereotyping among girls.

Blackman-Mathis says the group got the idea to protest the T-shirts at one of its first meetings. She told the members that if she was proposing a grant project, she'd go after the Abercrombie & Fitch Ts. "All of the girls were like, "Let's totally do that.' "

This week she got a phone call from her mom in the middle of biology class telling her she was going to New York the next day to appear on Today.

Blackman-Mathis, whose blue-streaked hair obscured the pink-dyed strands under the television lights, said in a phone interview afterward that "we need empowering messages."

"They won't be taken seriously if they wear those kind of shirts," said Jettie Fields, 13, who also appeared on the morning show.

They want girls across the country to do three things: Stop shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch until the store stops selling the offensive Ts; e-mail the company's investor relations office to say why they're not buying anymore; and spread the word to other girls.

They realize publicity about their girlcott also publicizes the shirts. They know the messages are in some way reflections of a female viewpoint or girls wouldn't wear them. They admit no one forces a girl to buy a T.

"What we hope is that our girls' energy will be contagious, that whenever they see or hear something that makes them uncomfortable, (young women) will take a stand," says Heather Arnet, executive director of Women & Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania, one of the grant program's sponsors. The foundation received more than 100 phone calls and 400 e-mails in two days.

The shirts' messages are as bad for boys as they are for girls in perpetuating stereotypes, Arnet says.

Blondes are adored. Brunettes are ignored, says one.

"Rosa Parks was a brunet who was not ignored," Arnet says.

Girls want to feel pretty and sexy and beautiful, Blackman-Mathis says, but they shouldn't be slaves to fashion and pop culture.

How about, as another brunet once preached: R-E-S-P-E-C-T.