

🎬 White Hot: The Rise & Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch – CULTure Case Study

Course: Marketing Strategy & Brand Ethics | University of New Haven
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🧭 Why CULTure in the Classroom

Brand power is not just built by image; it is shaped by values, cultural intelligence, and the ability to adapt. I use the CULTure framework to help students explore how brands **Connect, Understand, Lead, and Transform** — or fail — when navigating shifting cultural and consumer expectations.

Through the lens of *White Hot: The Rise & Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch*, students examine how a brand that dominated the early 2000s youth market fell from cultural relevance due to exclusionary marketing, toxic workplace culture, and a failure to evolve.

🌍 The CULTure Framework

Connect	Understand	Lead	Transform
Build inclusive relationships	Decode shifting cultural norms	Model ethical leadership	Create sustainable, values-driven legacy

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👕 Why I Use This Film in Marketing & Brand Ethics

The documentary traces how Abercrombie & Fitch rose to prominence through a highly curated, aspirational image — and how that same strategy became its downfall when cultural and legal scrutiny exposed discriminatory hiring practices, lack of diversity, and rigid adherence to outdated ideals of beauty.

We use this film to explore:

- How brand identity can be both a strength and a liability
- The role of leadership in shaping — or damaging — company culture
- How cultural intelligence impacts brand resilience
- What it takes for a brand to recover trust after public backlash

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💡 Teaching Prompts & Discussion

- How did Abercrombie's brand strategy succeed early on, and why did it fail to evolve?
- In what ways can exclusivity damage a brand's long-term equity?
- What role does leadership play in preventing or perpetuating cultural blind spots?
- How can companies embed inclusivity without losing brand differentiation?

✍️ **Student Reflections – Marketing & Brand Ethics Class**

- “This case showed me that cultural intelligence is a brand’s survival skill.”
- “A strong image can’t protect you when values and culture are misaligned.”
- “The fall of Abercrombie proves that leadership sets the tone for both success and failure.”