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The Abercrombie Affliction: Subverting Choice Architecture

From the 125 possible drink combinations of the Coca-Cola Freestyle soda fountain to over 42 styles of jeans at Old Navy, we are a society of choices. Nearly all aspects of daily life come with available and plentiful options, forcing us to continuously make decisions. Yet, while we may feel in control of our choices, it might be that others are making these decisions for us, or at the very least, influencing them. In *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, co-authors Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler attribute this unknown control deprivation to “choice architects,” individuals who intentionally design and organize decision-scenarios in order to influence consumer choice, often nudging consumers in a deliberate direction (3). However, the intentions of these nudges are not always positive and bear potential for destructive ramifications. In particular, the nudge to conform to absurd beauty standards determined by the retail fashion industry delivers substantially detrimental consequences. In “Mike Jeffries wants no fat customers at A&F. Bad business?,” Schuyler Velasco, a staff writer for *The Christian Science Monitor,* reviews the controversial opinions of Abercrombie & Fitch’s CEO regarding his push for exclusively thin and beautiful customers. Adolescent minds experiencing these nudges to conform with Abercrombie’s portrayed look, in addition to other superficial standards, develop preconceived notions of how they should look. In a society where vanity trumps virtue, name brand clothing lines and models with supposedly ideal bodies are increasingly driving more young girls and boys to feel that their appearances are inadequate, resulting in low self-esteems and poor body images. Consequently, eating disorders are on the rise as these self-conscious individuals attempt to achieve desirable appearances. While recent scientific studies are crediting the development of eating disorders to genetics, this fails to account for societal nudges that bear a much heavier influence, proving the power of nudges and reinforcing the need to be conscious of them. Once cognizant of these nudges, individuals can reclaim authority over their choices and assert their individual worth, specifically through subversion by parody.

Regardless of how much control we assume we have over our daily decisions, there are ultimately other individuals, choice architects, influencing these choices and purposefully nudging us in particular directions, sometimes adversely. According to Sunstein and Thaler, “Small and apparently insignificant details can have major impacts on people’s behavior. . . The power of these small details comes from focusing the attention of users in a particular direction” (3). Sunstein and Thaler refer to this focusing of the attention as a nudge, and these nudges, no matter how minute or trivial they may seem, genuinely influence one’s thoughts and consequently, one’s behavior. For example, the food in a school cafeteria can be presented in a way that nudges students to select either the healthier or unhealthier options. “Simply by rearranging the cafeteria, Carolyn [a director of food services for a large city school system] was able to increase or decrease the consumption of many food items by as much as 25 percent” (1). In this scenario, choice architecture is capable of transforming the health of students, potentially revolutionizing global health if properly utilized. While nudges such as cafeteria design are well-intentioned, other nudges are tainted with crookery and corruption. For example, retail store Abercrombie and Fitch has received criticism in recent years for pushing its customers to emulate a certain ripped-jeans, ripped-abs look. An interview with Abercrombie’s CEO Mike Jeffries revealed that he “‘doesn’t want larger people shopping in his store, he wants thin and beautiful people’” (Velasco 1). Accordingly, the store does not carry plus sizes, running only from extra small to large and cutting off jean size at a 10. Small clothes sizes and models that showcase unrealistic body expectations are particularly persuasive nudges that prompt adolescent girls and boys to believe Abercrombie’s portrayed look is how they should look. Consequently, this belief leads to either feelings of exclusion or, more severely, behavior that is reflective of the extreme measures one will take in order to conform to societal standards of attractiveness.

When retail stores and the fashion industry push a certain look, susceptible consumers develop a notion of what is considered a desirable appearance and are nudged to comply with this perception. Yet, compliance inadvertently sacrifices a sense of individuality. The loss of self that stems from this mimicry consequentially strips surrounding experiences of their true worth. In “The Loss of the Creature,” essayist Walker Percy elaborates on the repercussions of submission to a preformed complex, noting how preconceptions hinder the quality of our experiences and the fulfillment derived from them. Exemplifying this concept with the Grand Canyon tourism industry, he explains: “the sightseer measures his satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed complex” (403). Essentially, if the sightseer has a preconceived idea of the Grand Canyon, he or she will be incapable of uniquely experiencing the geological phenomenon. Any preconceptions of the Grand Canyon, positive or negative, will obstruct the individual from an unparalleled, individual experience and consequently, from attaining authentic experiential value. Thus, feelings of inadequacy and discontent will follow. Similarly, if a consumer has a preformed complex of how he or she should look based on another’s appearance, any attempt to imitate will fail to measure up and cost the individual his or her contentment and sense of worth. When this superficial yet powerful nudge to comply with the preformed complex fails to satisfy, the consumer feels inferior. Feelings of inferiority lead to a low self-esteem as the individual views his or her appearance as not only inadequate but unacceptable. Dire measures are then taken in an attempt to parallel the preformed complex, often manifested in the form of eating disorders. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, “There has been a rise in incidence of anorexia in young women 15-19 in each decade since 1930” (NEDA). The rise in eating disorders is not only true for females but also for males. “‘What studies have shown is that, in the last 15 years or so, more men have eating disorders than ever before’…[While before only 1 in 10 eating disorders occurred in males], [newer research](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1892232/?report=reader) suggests that the real ratio is probably closer to 1 in 4” (Cruz 5). These statistics highlight the progressively destructive nature of negative nudges. In particular, the nudge to comply with the preformed complex of attractiveness, specifically the one created by Abercrombie & Fitch, is having an increasing influence on self-esteem and therefore is to blame for the escalation of eating disorders in recent years. Choice architects, such as the executives of Abercrombie & Fitch, can use the smallest of nudges to influence consumers in the most potent ways. Abercrombie’s nudges, which consist of slimly-cut clothes and images of models exhibiting absurd beauty standards, influence adolescent males and females to sacrifice contentment for conformity as they strive comply with the company’s beauty standards. As a result, these nudges drive customers to relinquish their identities to Abercrombie and submit to preformed complex of attractiveness that the company’s executives have devised. Accordingly, both physical and mental health suffer as eating disorders destroy the body, and the consequential loss of individual worth deteriorates the mind.

Yet, new research studies are questioning the legitimacy of external nudges and focusing internally for justification regarding eating disorders. According to The Washington Post article, “Scientists manage to give mice ‘eating disorders’ by knocking out one gene,” “researchers [have] created mice who lacked a gene associated with disordered eating in humans. Without it, the mice showed behaviors not unlike those seen in humans with eating disorders” (Feltman 1). This study suggests that nature rather than nurture is to blame for the development of eating disorders. Yet, while genetic factors may contribute to the development of these disorders, the study fails to account for outward nudges that bear a much heavier influence than genetics. For example, if eating disorders were primarily genetic, increasing reports from both genders would not be prevalent or as extreme. Within recent years, as the digital age has progressed, eating disorders have escalated substantially. This upsurge has been seen globally, with particularly drastic changes in Fiji. Until 1995, the Fiji Islands did not have television access. During this time, “Fiji had no reported cases of eating disorders, and a study conducted by anthropologist Anne Becker showed that most Fijian girls and women, no matter how large, were comfortable with their bodies” (Bodo 5). It was during this year that a single television station was introduced, broadcasting programs from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. “In 1998, just three years after the station began broadcasting, 11 percent of girls reported vomiting to control weight, and 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting during the previous months” (Bordo 5). The introduction of Westernized standards, as presented by the media, nudged these Fijian females to feel insecure and inadequate. Similarly, it has been observed that “as many Asian countries become Westernized and infused with the Western aesthetic of a tall, thin, lean body, a virtual tsunami of eating disorders has swamped Asian countries” (Bordo 5). Fijians and Asians are not the sole victims of Western nudges; more African Americans, Hispanics, and even males are experiencing substantial increases in reported cases of eating disorders. “The incredible spread of these problems to extraordinarily diverse groups of genetic populations, over a strikingly short period of time, and coincident with the mass globalization of media imagery, strongly suggests that culture is the ‘smoking gun’ that is killing people” (Bordo 8). This radical impact, seen globally, confirms the persuasive power of cultural nudges and undermines the credence of the genetics-based argument. Thus, the domineering force of Westernized beauty standards, propelled by masters of choice architecture, has left many feeling helpless within a system of invisible yet powerful nudges.

However, choice architects do not hold supreme power but rather the individual possesses the ultimate power to resist the architect and recover the sovereignty he or she surrendered to the preformed complex. Erroneously, choice architects are often attributed superiority without regard to the power within the individual. This fallacy is exemplified by Sunstein and Thaler as they accredit immense responsibility to choice architecture, even going as far to claim that there is “no way of avoiding nudging” (10). This misconception is dangerous because it leads individuals to believe they are helpless, prey to the influences of others. This helplessness results in submission to the preformed complex and thus, a loss of individuality and sense of worth. Yet, this loss is far from permanent and can be recovered in an array of ways, as detailed by Percy. He explains that the individual can emerge from his or her role as the consumer and reclaim authority over what was surrendered. For the consumer attempting to regain identity, Percy offers hope for recovery through methodical subversion. He illustrates this specific recovery method with the example of a tourist who engraves his initials in a public area, recognizing and claiming his own individuality and sovereign authority over the space. “He carves his initials as a last desperate measure to escape his ghostly role of consumer. He is saying in effect: I am not a ghost after all; I am a sovereign person. And he establishes title the only way remaining to him, by staking his claim over one square inch of wood or stone” (Percy 414). The tourist is able to subvert the ghostly role of consumer and recover his identity through the assertion of individuality. Comparably, Jes Baker, a female blogger in her early twenties, is able to use subversion by parody to resist not only her role as a consumer but the false identity that choice architects nudge her to embody. Cognizant of the nudges that retail stores like Abercrombie & Fitch press on developing minds, she speaks out against these negative influences with her body-positive campaign. As a size 22, Abercrombie & Fitch neglects to carry sizes for Jes. By titling her campaign “Attractive and Fat,” she parodies Abercrombie & Fitch with photos of herself posing as Abercrombie models would. In doing so, she escapes her role as the consumer and asserts authority over the choice architects who she reveals nudged her life towards conformity for years. Not only does she recover individual sovereignty, but her campaign, which has received large amounts of media attention, encourages other girls and boys who are being negatively nudged by Abercrombie & Fitch to reclaim authority in their own lives as well. Thus, each instance of subversion results in a partial dismantling of the preformed complex of attractiveness, and the increasing cognizance of nudges will ultimately result in the decrease of their influence.

Ultimately, the adverse nature of nudges in the retail fashion industry have resulted in low self-esteems and poor body images for many adolescent boys and girls who sacrifice their identity to the preformed complex of attractiveness. This preformed complex designed by choice architects nudges these adolescents to conform in an attempt to measure up to what they deem desirable. Worse yet, failure to live up to these expectations can result in a physical and mental suffering as eating disorders are acquired and both individuality and sovereignty are sacrificed. However, choice architects are fallaciously awarded far too much power over the individual, when in fact individuals have the ultimate power, capable of subverting the architects and recovering sovereignty. Awareness of these nudges is crucial to subversion and recovery. Once cognizant of the nudges that influence their daily decisions, and moreover, their wellbeing, individuals can assert their authority and restore their individuality, potentially restoring health and happiness as well.

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