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Front Row

Who Are They, Indeed

By Eric Wilson



BEAR GRIP? Another retailer tries to grab the teenage shopper

The latest teen-fashion-focused store to set up shop on the block of 34th Street east of Macy's, the one that is quickly becoming Manhattan's version of the Mall at Short Hills, is called WHO.A.U. That's text-ese for "who are you?" — which is surely what a lot of people must be thinking when they see a giant stuffed bear wearing patchwork madras shorts in the window. Inside, there are witty logo T-shirts, loose cargo pants, bright ruffled tops, denim miniskirts and sweatshirts bearing the legend "California Dream, 1849."

Perhaps it is fitting to associate the year of the Gold Rush with WHO.A.U. It is a new retail chain dreamed up by a South Korean clothing conglomerate that seeks to sell California-casual sportswear in an environment that looks and sounds, with earsplitting dance anthems, exactly like the inside of a Hollister. The prices of several items, like men's jeans for \$59.50 and women's denim hot shorts for \$39.50 and T-shirts for \$24.50 are identical to those at Hollister.

The owners must have sensed there was gold in them thar' hoodies.

WHO.A.U. was started 10 years ago by E.Land Group, which makes clothing under 90 labels sold in hundreds of stores in South Korea and China and has sales of about \$6 billion. Its first store in the United States opened in 2007 at the Stamford Town Center in Connecticut, followed by a second at the Garden State Plaza in Paramus, N.J. But the company had been quiet about its plans until opening its Manhattan store last week.

"You need a lot of courage to cross over from the East to the West," said Daniel Pang, the North American president of WHO.A.U.

While sales have been slower than expected, Mr. Pang said there is an opportunity for a new brand that comes up with just the right look to catch on with kids today. "Teenagers are funny," he said. "They all want to be different, but they don't want to be alienated from their peer group."

To that end, almost everything about WHO.A.U., from the name to the styles on the floor, he said, has been tested in market studies and focus groups to determine just what that fickle target audience wants.

Hmm. That could explain the similarities to Hollister.

* The South Korean teen retailer Who.A.U opened its first New York flagship store at 22 West 34th Street. Who A.U. is exclusively represented by the real estate leasing team of **Faith Hope Consolo** and **Joseph Aquino** of **Prudential Douglas Elliman Retail Group** in New York City.