American Eagle Campaign Final

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**The Problem**

On July 23, 2025, American Eagle launched a new advertising campaign featuring actress Sydney Sweeney (American Eagle, 2025). In the ad, Sweeney plays on the words "jeans" and "genes," referring explicitly to inherited genetic traits. One potential interpretation is that American Eagle jeans are of such high quality that they can be passed down for generations. However, many saw that the ad contained eugenic undertones. The ad ignited a social media firestorm, driving sales and stock prices up at a time when the American Eagle brand is struggling with its target audience (Rugaber, 2025). Public sentiment reflected a stark division, particularly along lines of gender, politics, and age. The older, male, conservative public, which is not part of American Eagle's target audience, enjoyed the ad at a higher rate than those who are younger, mostly female, and mostly liberal (YouGov, 2025). In the intervening three-plus months, American Eagle sales rose only 1%, while its sister brands like Aerie grew 11% (AEO, 2025).

The Sydney Sweeney campaign from American Eagle marked one of the most controversial and yet recognizable ads in 2025. Despite the achievement of a sales boost and stock appreciation in the short term, this marketing effort resulted in negative impacts on the overall reputation and sustainability of the American Eagle brand in the long term. The issue

highlighted significant gaps among the corporation's declared values regarding individuality and inclusivity. It also had a disconnect between youth cultural representation and the messaging perceived by the target market. The Gen Z market rated this campaign as 'repressive,' 'inauthentic,' and 'alarming,' based on surveys and focus-group analyses carried out in this report.

**Proposed Solution**

The new proposal recommends a data-informed repositioning strategy: "Your Jeans are Good Because They're Yours," playing again on the "gene" wording in a more positive and inclusive light. This marketing approach not only acknowledges the controversy but builds upon brand values while being more diverse within its campaign and taking accountability for the original ads' perceived messaging. The theme embodies the message that American Eagle jeans are made for everybody and every body. This inclusive message moves beyond outdated marketing approaches centred on one celebrity and focuses on more diverse everyday people and populations.

The report examines the target groups of American Eagle, research findings, competitive analysis, and strategic opportunities for the future positioning of American Eagle, based on a mixed-methods research approach that includes surveys and focus groups. This report concludes with strategic recommendations, including the positioning of the American Eagle brand with values attributed to Gen Z and utilizing storytelling to position American Eagle favorably in the cultural sector.

**Goal, Objectives, and Target Audience**

The main communication goal is to re-position American Eagle in the market as a genuinely inclusive and youth-oriented denim brand that understands and respects the values of Gen Z.

The main communication objectives are:

- Implement diversity and inclusion in all communications, with at least 80% of campaigns featuring diversity and inclusive messaging by the end of the year 2026. Track through quarterly consumer surveys
- Raise current positive awareness in Gen Z (15-25) by 25% in the first year through tracking poll research conducted both pre- and post-campaign.
- The negative links with the "Genes" campaign should be reduced by 50% in 12 months through the use of brand lift studies.
- Boost overall customer trust scores by 20% via surveys or questions about areas like authentication, accountability, and relatability.
- Increase repeat business in denim by 10 percent in the Gen Z segment with data from loyalty cards and CRM.

The main target audience is Gen Z, specifically females between the ages of 15 and 25. According to Renee Heim, AE's Chief Product Officer, the jeans brand is the top choice for women in that age bracket, and number two across all demographic subcategories (Young, 2024). Secondary audiences would include mothers and young professionals, mostly women (Young, 2024).

**Research**

The research methodology used was surveys, focus groups, and secondary research. In secondary research, prior to the Sydney Sweeney ad, American Eagle was struggling economically. Retail saw a significant decline in sales early in 2025, and consumer confidence continued to waver, even as employment numbers remained steady. American Eagle CEO Jay Schottenstein acknowledged that this economic insecurity hurts the brand's target audience specifically (Rugaber, 2025). According to a YouGov poll conducted in August of 2025, 59% of Americans viewed the Sydney Sweeney "Genes" ad as appropriate, a four percent increase from a poll taken two weeks prior. The ad's favorability split across political partisan lines, with 78% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats approving. The majority of both men and women found the ad appropriate; however, 29% of women were unsure, compared to 18% of men. Respondents' approval of the ad appeared to grow with age, while the share of those who found it inappropriate shrank as age increased. Across racial lines, fewer African Americans found the ad appropriate than Hispanics, Asians, and white respondents. Overall brand perception declined amongst Democrats, while increasing with Republicans. 39% of respondents thought the ad was clever (Economist/YouGov, 2025). The divisive ad campaign had a financial impact as well, with a 25% boost to American Eagle's stock price (Maruf, 2025).

**SWOT**

Listed below are the statistics from a situational analysis done for American Eagle.

- Strengths
    - American Eagle is a well-known and reliable brand (Young, 2024).
    - AEO Inc., American Eagle's parent company, continues to perform well financially despite headwinds (Maruf, 2025)

        - American Eagle has made itself culturally relevant due to the Sydney Sweeney ad campaign (TFL, 2025).
- Weaknesses
    - American Eagle's customers are primarily younger consumers (AEO, 2025).
    - The Sydney Sweeney controversy potentially created a disconnect from the brand's mission statement (Lopez Restrepo, 2025).
- Opportunities
    - Learn from the Gap/Katseye campaign by focusing on diversity and the authentic youth experience (Eldor, 2025)
    - American Eagle's worldwide presence provides a platform to engage with consumers globally (Young, 2024).
- Threats
    - Shifts in public perception due to the Sydney Sweeney controversy will potentially drive consumers towards our competitors (Lopez Restrepo, 2025).
    - Competing brands such as Gap, Pacsun, and Hollister have an opportunity to position themselves for a wider, more diverse audience than American Eagle can at the moment.
    - American Eagle's short-term financial success may be undermined by the culture war issues that damage longstanding brand perceptions (Furlano, 2025).

**Survey Results**

The survey had 109 respondents with an average of 80 respondents per question. 84% of respondents were female, while 14% were male. 62% of respondents were between the ages of

18-24, while 32% of respondents were between the ages of 25-34. 68% of respondents identified as white, 18% as black, 8% as Asian, and 18% as other.

The initial questions in the survey focused broadly on the relationship between the consumer, the brand, and the celebrity endorser or spokesperson. The goal was to assess whether attaching a famous face to a brand or product remains an effective marketing strategy. Respondents saw a list of celebrity and brand endorsements, including Sweeney and American Eagle.

- 44% of people were unsure that a celebrity brand ambassador would change their consumer behavior. 40% of people answered with some degree of certainty that a celebrity would not affect their purchasing decision.
- The most well-recognized celebrity-endorsed campaigns were:
    1. Sydney Sweeney with American Eagle (90% familiarity)
    2. Nicole Kidman with AMC (73%)
    3. Terry Crews with Old Spice (42%)
    4. Jeff Goldblum with Apartments.com (40%)
- Most respondents who were familiar with the campaigns presented said that the campaigns often did not affect their opinion of the brand. Outliers included the Terry Crews/Old Spice campaign, the Kidman/AMC campaign, and the Ben Affleck/Matt Damon/Dunkin campaign, which boosted brand perception in the eyes of respondents. Respondents overwhelmingly felt that the Sweeney/AE campaign hurt their perception of the brand.

- When asked what effect these campaigns had on their perception of the celebrity, respondents said the ads made them like Sweeney, Kevin Hart (with DraftKings), and Ryan Reynolds (with Aviation Gin) less.
- When asked why the celebrity or the brand affected their consumer behavior, 64% of respondents cited the quality of the advertisement as a significant reason. 54% also cited pre-existing feelings about the celebrity as a reason for the consumer behavior.
- 59% of people said they felt positively towards a jeans brand if it mentioned diversity.
    i. When asked to compare AE's campaign with competitors, such as Gap and Levi's, respondents said they preferred the ad campaigns from competitors.
    ii. Respondents overwhelmingly view both Sweeney and AE negatively, and consider the brand both inauthentic and regressive.

This next part looks specifically at respondents' sentiments towards American Eagle and the ad itself.

- ~69% like American Eagle less based on the ad
    i. This is significantly higher than other celebrities' and brand collaborations in the survey.
- ~75% less likely to buy American Eagle
    i. This was also significantly higher than others in the survey.
- ~63% strongly less interested in supporting the brand
- ~71%think American Eagle handled the controversy around the ad irresponsibly

- ~69% think the ad makes American Eagle seem out of touch with Gen Z values
    i. ex. Authenticity, individuality, and inclusivity
- 72% think American Eagle is out of touch
- 63% think American Eagle is inauthentic

When it came to competitor jean ads, the two highest-rated ads were an H&M ad that contained a large group of diverse people, none of whom were celebrities (Image 1), and a GAP ad that contained the singer group Katseye, which is a diverse group of female celebrities (Image 2). H&M was rated the highest by 32% of people, while the GAP ad was rated the highest by 49% of people. The lowest-rated ad was the American Eagle Sydney Sweeney ad (Image 3), with 78% voting it at the bottom. When asked overall how respondents felt when jean ads included diversity, 59% said they were very happy when it was included, which makes sense for the ranking of the advertisements.



**Survey Insights**

These results give two main insights when looking at all the data. One is: is all publicity really good publicity? 90% of people were familiar with the Sydney Sweeney ad, but stats also show that the ad made consumers view American Eagle in a strong negative light compared to other brands. So sales may have increased, but public perception decreased, creating a harmful long-term effect for American Eagle.

Another is that people are more inclined to choose brands that include more diversity and inclusivity within their advertisements. Based on advertisements, people were likely to rate those with a large group of diverse people higher than just one celebrity. To garner Gen Z support and stay culturally relevant, American Eagle needs to show more diversity in its campaigns.

**Focus Group**

When it came to the focus groups, two were conducted. The first group consisted of twelve people, with four being male and eight being female. The ages ranged from 18-25, all in college, and they were of all diverse races and backgrounds. The second group consisted of eight people, one of whom was male and seven of whom were female. For the second group, the age range was between 22 and 25, and included a range of Black and white participants. The main responses and quotes from both groups are below.

- American Eagle is seen as outdated and disconnected (Focus Group #1).
    i. "Tumblr era" was an expression used to describe the brand.
    ii. Less modern teen clothing
    iii. "Ugly" or "cheugy" were also used to describe the clothes
    iv. In contrast, Aerie still has positive brand perception, creating a contrast within AEO's portfolio.
- When asked about American Eagle in the context of the Sweeney campaign, participants' opposition to the campaign was rooted in values, not optics, referring to the campaign as "gross," "eugenics-coded," "disgusting," and "alarming" (Focus Group #1).
- American Eagle's initial response (or lack thereof) also upset participants, who felt it damaged their trust more than the campaign itself (Focus Group #1).

i. “The lack of response from the company made me feel like they just didn’t care.”

ii. “It just says a lot about American Eagle and Sydney Sweeney, too. I thought it was funny that they had the balls to do an ad like this, but not have the balls to address it after they received the backlash. Also, clearly choosing a good spokesperson is important cause look what happened in this situation. Sydney Sweeney’s ‘I did a jean ad’ did not help the case at all. Like it makes me hate the ad even more.”

- Participants said they were looking for the following from clothing brands, including American Eagle (Focus Group #1):
    i. Authenticity
    ii. Accountability
    iii. Diversity
    iv. Real people showing off the product instead of celebrities
    v. “If they’re going in this direction, then I don’t want to see anything from them, but I would like at least an acknowledgement of this ad being in poor taste or an apology.”
- Overall, most did not express any interest in shopping with the brand in the future due to their missteps and overall lack of connection with audiences (Focus Group #1).
    i. “I’m not going out of my way to shop there. It’s not really worth it, and I don’t wanna support a brand that supports eugenics.”

ii. “I never really shopped there in general, so not likely. I have much better options at the same price point without compromising my morals.”

- Sydney Sweeney was not a good person to be chosen for this campaign. (Focus Group #2)
    i. “ A lot of us said that American Eagle reminded us of elementary school and middle school. And I feel as though Sydney Sweeney is more targeted towards our generation, and we’re well beyond that. So I feel like if they really wanted to have more of an impact for teenagers, they should have had someone more relevant for that age group.”
    ii. “ Jeans just don't seem like her style. She seems like a person that wears athleisure wear or like leggings or something. So I just feel like it doesn’t feel personal.”
    iii. “ Sydney Sweeney is not relatable to a majority of people in America.”
- The campaign strongly affects brand loyalty and affects current, former, and potential customers. ( Focus Group #2)
    i. “ As a brand, if you can proudly show that you don’t care about customers’ opinion and their values, then why would I want to support you?”
    ii. “ Ultimately, I want to buy from brands that have integrity and care about their customers, and clearly that’s not the case for them.”
    iii. “ Honestly, I have not liked American Eagle for a couple of years, and this just solidified me not wanting to buy from them anymore.”
- The campaign fails to align with its target audience. ( Focus Group #2)

i. “ I just don’t think that this ad is very helpful at the age where you’re becoming insecure and realizing that you’re not seeing yourself being represented in certain spaces.”

ii. “ I’m trying to take into consideration that the target audience is anyone between the ages of 12-18, and I feel as though in order for it to be more successful, they could have definitely gone down the route of trying to get an influencer to be the face of their campaign.”

**Focus Group Insights**

The main insights gained from the focus groups were that there were ethical concerns that dominated the discussions of the ad. This shows that brands like American Eagle need to be very careful not just about the message they put out, but who they choose to represent them.

It also shows that accountability and transparency are paramount. The lack of response from American Eagle after the backlash seems to have left a lasting effect that has solidified many to never want to support the brand again.

Overall, diversity needs to be genuine. In responses, people emphasised that it is important that diversity doesn't come off like the brand is just trying to do damage control. The brand needs to feel authentic in its representation and convey that it truly cares for its audience.

Other research we found was that during the 2025 holiday season, American Eagle pivoted from Sweeney to Martha Stewart for their new ad campaign (Kiefer, 2025). With this pivot, American Eagle is attempting to expand their audience beyond Gen Z without alienating them. Stewart is increasingly recognized by Gen-Z consumers as well, and with her resumé, American Eagle positions itself as a legitimate outlet for holiday shopping (Kiefer, 2025).

**The Campaign**

All this research further emphasizes the importance of the new campaign, "Your Jeans Are Good Because They're Yours." The campaign turns the story around, emphasizing that every individual has "good jeans," regardless of identity or body type. That JEANS are made for individuality, not hereditary traits.

- Strategies
    i. Position American Eagle as an authentically inclusive, youth-aligned brand by shifting from celebrity-centred marketing to real people, real stories, real jeans.
    ii. Leverage social media with ads and engagement to promote a new campaign
    iii. Focus on diversity and inclusion
    iv. Include community engagement and involvement through pop-ups and challenges
- Tactics
    i. #GoodJeansStories: 30-second videos featuring real consumers in-store or through social media platforms talking about what "good genes/jeans" means to them.
    ii. Campus Denim Tour: Pop-up fittings in selected colleges.
    iii. Denim Lab: Workshops conducted on customized denim, inclusive sizes, sustainability, and other areas.
    iv. Interactive Billboard: Live photographs from all over the world are displayed on the billboard.

American Eagle has now reached a cultural crossroads. Although the Sweeney commercial got the attention of many consumers in the denim industry, this commercial has led to the loss of confidence in the industry's future generation of consumers. The 'Everyone Has Good Jeans' commercial reinstates the identity of American Eagle through data research and cultural insight. This commercial respects what Generation Z cares about regarding representation and accountability. This ad addresses the controversy without exploiting it or doubling down; it replaces ineffective celebrity marketing with relatable real people and builds long-term trust and relevance instead of short-term viral buzz.

Based on the research detailed in this report, we strongly recommend that American Eagle hire us to implement this campaign in order to restore trust and relevancy while ensuring future growth.

**Appendix:**

Full Survey Results

Focus Group #1 Transcript

Focus Group #2 Transcript

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