

Kara Thomas

Dr. Bednar

Research Methods

November 12, 2025

### Final Paper

In recent years, TikTok has become a dynamic space where media texts are not simply consumed but actively interrogated, remixed and contested by audiences. This paper examines the public backlash and discursive response to American Eagle's "Great Jeans/Great Genes" campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney. Rather than threatening the advertisement as a static text, my research focuses on the digital discourse it generated particularly on TikTok, where users deconstructed its linguistic and visual rhetoric and mobilized humor and irony to critique its social implications. The campaign paired the slogan "Great Jeans" with a pun on "Great Genes" presenting Sweeney, a blonde, blue eyed woman in denim. Intended as playful wordplay, the ad instead sparked widespread criticism for echoing eugenic ideologies, promoting exclusionary beauty standards and reproducing whiteness as an unmarked norm. TikTok users produced duets, commentary videos and viral posts exposing how the campaign supported racialized hierarchies and the male gaze, transforming what was meant to be lighthearted marketing into a site of culturing contestation. By centering TikTok discourse as the research object, the analysis positions audience reactions not as peripheral commentary but as active rhetorical engagement that reshapes the meaning of corporate branding. The responses illuminate how participatory media functions as a platform for social critique, holding brands accountable while revealing the complex entanglements of celebrity influence, commercial messaging, and cultural ideology.

This paper argues that TikTok user's interventions demonstrate the power of digital audiences to transform advertisements into forums for critical reflection on race, beauty and social norms.

### **Lit review**

Scholars position whiteness as an unmarked yet visual logic that shapes advertising ideological terrain. Morris and Kahlor (2014) argue that whiteness functions as a “normative racial ideology” embedded in advertising discourse. Their study links individuals' racial beliefs to their attitudes toward ads, showing that whiteness in advertising is often rendered invisible and unmarked yet simultaneously central to the construction of disability and credibility. This dynamic allows consumers to perceive white coded advertisements as neutral or universal while marginalizing none white identities. Morris and Kahlor's work provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing how American Eagle's “Great Jeans/Great Genes” campaign visually encodes whiteness. By featuring Sydney Sweeney, a white, blonde, blue eyed celebrity, the campaign implicitly invokes long standing associations between whiteness, purity and normative beauty. Although the campaign's wordplay celebrates heredity and playful metaphor for fashion, its visual rhetoric relies on racialized semiotics that audiences readily recognize. TikTok users' reactions , particularly those linking the ad to eugenic imagery reflect an interpretative awareness consistent with the patterns Morris and Kahlor identify.

Meideros (2018) expands this argument by tracing how early 20th century brands such as Pepsodent, constructed whiteness through metaphors of hygiene, modernity and purity. His historical analysis illustrates how visual branding naturalized racial hierarchies by associating whiteness with normative desirability and Blackness with lack. When contemporary viewers identify echoes of eugenic or purity rhetoric in modern campaigns, they are responding to a long history of associating heredity, beauty and social value with white embodiment. These insights

illuminate why audiences might connect American Eagle's "genes" pun to racialized historical narratives even if the campaign offers no explicit racial claims.

Richard Dyer's (1997) work further emphasizes that whiteness operates both as a racial position and as an aesthetic strategy, one that reproduces itself by appearing invisible. Applying Dyer's framework clarifies why a simple visual composition anchored by a white celebrity participates in racialized meaning-making.

All together, these scholars establish how racial ideology circulates visually making it possible for TikTok users to read the "Great Genes" messaging against broader genealogies of purity rhetoric even without assuming advertiser intent.

#### Visual Branding, Authenticity and Consumer Response

Phillips et al (2014) further elaborate how visual brand identity shapes consumer response by constructing emotional and cognitive associations. They contend that consistent visual identity creates brand meaning at a subconscious level. Their findings show that visual identity not only differentiates a brand but also conveys values such as authenticity, modernity, and inclusivity. But when visual identity aligns too narrowly with a single racial or cultural type, it risks alienating audiences who perceive exclusion or insincerity. Applying Phillips et al's insights to the American Eagle campaign suggests that the brand's attempt at simplicity and cohesion may unintentionally re centered whiteness as the default embodiment of "good genes". Intertwining those frameworks with these campaigns rhetorical failure lies in it, the verbal pun invites genetic interpretation, the visual design naturalizes whiteness and together they produce a semiotic field primed for critique. Visual rhetoric theory helps identify the mechanics of this while visual identity analysis clarifies how viewers read brand values into aesthetic choices.

Campbell et al (2025) extends this conversation by describing "performative inclusion" in which diversity becomes an aesthetic gesture rather than a substantive commitment. Their findings show that misaligned or incomplete representational strategies can generate backlash by exposing discrepancies between brand ethos and public expectations. This aligns with TikTok users' critiques which often frame the ad not merely as aesthetically misguided but as symptomatic of a shallow brand rhetoric of inclusivity.

Gamson's (1994) work on celebrity culture strengthens this line of inquiry by arguing that celebrities function as flexible symbols whose meanings shift depending on cultural context. Sydney Sweeney's celebrity persona shaped by her roles, public image, and media framing inevitably influences how audiences interpret the ad. Rather than assuming the brand selected her for ideological reasons, applying Gamson's framework clarifies that celebrity bodies carry cultural coded meanings that viewers actively negotiate.

### Visual and Verbal Rhetoric in Advertising

To analyze how such meanings are produced, visual rhetoric scholarship examines how advertisers integrate image, text, and composition to persuade audiences. Stathakopoulos et al (2008) argue that advertising communicates through a deliberate interplay of visual and verbal rhetoric. Their analysis shows that rhetorical coherence often depends on shared cultural assumptions between producer and audience, a condition the American Eagle ad campaign misjudged. Applying this framework, the TikTok responses can be read as rhetorical ruptures, users rearticulate the campaign's verbal rhetoric through visual irony, such as overlaying historical images of eugenics propaganda or contrasting Sweeney's image with diverse bodies.

This intertextual represents what Stathakopoulos et al would call a rhetorical inversion where the audience repurposes the ad's own formal strategies to undermine its message.

McAllister and DeCarvalho (2014) further show that advertising often positions women as both selling subjects and objects of the gaze. Their analysis of the male consumer gaze clarifies how Sweeney's body becomes a site where gendered and racialized visibility converge, shaping how audiences interpret her presence within the campaign without requiring any claim about the brand's intent.

### Platform Specific Publics and Participatory Interpretation

Digital media scholars argue that platforms like TikTok create new publics that reinterpret cultural texts through participatory practices. Morrison (2020) highlights how lifestyle celebrity culture intersects with networked publics showing that audience interpretations are conditioned by platform affordances such as remixability and intertextual density. Tiktok's stitching and dueting functions enable critical intervention, allowing users to parody brand messages in real time. These affordances support what scholars describe as counter public meaning making where viewers collectively critique, reframe, or destabilize dominant narrative.

### **Description and Context**

American Eagle released the "Great Jeans/ Great Genes" campaign as part of its ongoing denim rebranding strategy. The ad featured Sydney Sweeney, a well known actress known for her roles in Euphoria, White Lotus, and Anyone But You, posing in light washed jeans and a white tank top. The tagline, Sydney Sweeney has great jeans/genes was meant to emphasize the brand's timeless fit and quality while capitalizing on Sweeney's popularity. Almost immediately,

the campaign drew criticism across social media. Users on TikTok began circulating screenshots and stitches of the ad pairing them with captions and commentary that pointed out its racial and historical undertones. Commenters like Sayantani Dasgupta, @sayantanidasguptabooks, argued that the wordplay linking “jeans” and “genes” combined with the visual emphasis on Sweeney’s fair complexion and blue eyes evoked the language of eugenics and racialized beauty hierarchies. The backlash grew rapidly and these discussions framed the campaign as a case study in how brandy despite progressive posturing continues to reproduce narrow ideals of beauty and generic desirability under the guise of humor and simplicity.

TikTok became the central arena for discourse. Users dissected the ad through the platform’s duet and stitch features combining media literacy with humor and irony. This participatory reaction illustrates what communication scholars identify as digital counterpublics, digital spaces where users collaboratively construct critiques of mainstream media. The ad’s reception is not just a controversy but a rhetorical event in which audience members perform critical cultural analysis in real time. Many users explicitly referenced the history of eugenics connecting Sweeney’s image to earlier Western ideals of racial purity. Others critique how the male gaze is embedded in the ad’s framing of Sweeney’s body suggesting that she was simultaneously the subject and product of an aesthetic economy that privileges whiteness and sexual availability. To understand the cultural resonance of this discourse, it’s useful to situate it alongside the history of racialized advertising. In Medeiros (2018) analysis of Pepsodent toothpaste ads from the early 20th century, he argues that brands historically “restored whiteness” and “sanitized Blackness” through visual rhetoric that equated lightness with purity and modernity. Though American Eagle’s campaign operates in a vastly different cultural moment, it unconsciously revives this same semiotic structure. By invoking “genes” the

campaign ties beauty and desirability to a move that inadvertently echoes the logic of eugenics. Campbell et al (2025) show that diverse representations in advertising directly affects brand authenticity and trust. The American Eagle controversy underscores a paradox, while brands seek authenticity through simplicity and nostalgia they risk alienating audiences when their imagery contradicts contemporary values of inclusion.

The great jeans/ great jeans campaign belongs to a wider cultural trend in which fashion and lifestyle advertising draws heavily on celebrity influence. Sydney Sweeney's public persona plays a crucial role in how the ad was interpreted as she has cultivated an image that is self exploitation through the male gaze. Known for her sensual performances in *Euphoria* and her media presence, Sweeney has often capitalized on her hyper feminine aesthetic as a form of self branding. Her decision to sell her bathwater and later a soap with a hole in it blurred the boundary between empowerment and commodification reinforcing the idea that Sweeney's celebrity identity thrives on sexualization and reclaims tools of objectification as supposed acts of agency even as those gestures remain legible within the logics of male desire. When Sweeney appeared in the American Eagle campaign, audiences read it through the accumulated meanings of her brand. President Donald Trump publicly commented on the campaign asking who Sweeney was and then when told she was a registered republican he added " If Sydney Sweeney is a registered Republican, I love her ad, I think her ad is fantastic". Trump's comments reignited debate about the role of ideology in celebrity branding and his "endorsement" deprived backlash over the ad's racialized subtext which linked the campaign to broader political tensions surrounding whiteness, conservatism, and the gender representation in American media. Tiktok users dissected not only the ad's visual and verbal rhetoric but also the contradictions within Sweeney's self presentation, an actress who markets empowerment while embodying an

aesthetic historically tied to patriarchal and racialized beauty standards. Sweeney's body, image and brand became symbolic where discourses of whiteness, femininity and politics collided turning what should have been a denim campaign into a cultural constriction of authenticity and beauty in contemporary American media. It also shows how advertisements rhetorical power extends far beyond its original media form.

The controversy surrounding American Eagle's "Great Jeans/ Great Genes" campaign offers a site for rhetorical and critical media analysis because it encapsulates how advertising mediates cultural anxieties about identity, race and authenticity. The TikTok discourse around the ad demonstrates how audiences today act as active interpreters and critics, not just passive consumers. Preliminary observations suggest that the backlash is less about the ad's explicit message and more about its unconscious participation in a racialized visual tradition. From the readings, it can be understood that the campaign is part of a longer genealogy of advertising that equates witness with beauty and desirability. Applying feminist media theory and visual rhetoric analysis will allow the next stage of this paper to explore how gendered and racialized aesthetics operate within and affect that drives digital branding. By situating this discourse, this paper aims to illuminate how digital publics not only respond to but actively reshape the meanings of race, beauty, and authenticity in media culture.

## **Analysis**

This analysis draws on visual rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and whiteness theory to examine how meaning is produced and contested across both the ad and its audience responses. Visual rhetoric provides the tools to analyze how TikTok users manipulate imagery, editing and compositing to reframe the ad's visual logic. Critical discourse analysis

traces how language and tone in captions and comments reproduce or resist dominant ideologies surrounding whiteness, beauty, and authenticity.

Through a feminist theoretical lens, I explore how Sweeney's image operates within the structures of the male gaze, revealing tensions between agency and objectification. Finally, whiteness theory drawing from Richard Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture* highlights how Sweeney's blonde, blue eyed body functions as a symbolic anchor for racialized ideals of purity and desirability. Across these frameworks, I argue that TikTok users transform a moment of advertising failure into a space of cultural critique, demonstrating how online publics act as interpretive communities capable of subverting corporate control and renarrating celebrity imagery. The analysis examines not only the advertisement but also its discursive afterlife and the ways users transform a marketing failure into a cultural critique that exposes how online publics function as rhetorical agents capable of subverting corporate control.

American Eagle's "Great Jeans/ Great Genes" campaign attempted a clever wordplay that quickly turned controversial. The slogan, tagged with phrases such as "my body's composition is determined by my jeans" positioned Sweeney's body as both the literal and symbolic product of her genetic makeup. Given Sweeney's established persona, audiences read the ad as invoking exclusionary notions of "good genes" echoing eugenicist ideologies of racial superiority. On TikTok, users such as @sayatanidasguptabooks, explicitly connects the ad's rhetoric to contemporary political discourses surrounding race and heredity. Others also responded, turning Sweeney's image into a contested site of cultural meaning. Rather than just consuming the ad passively, these users engaged in an act of rhetorical resistance, reframing the ad's visuals through humor and critique. This audience practice transforms the advertising text into a

participatory discourse about representation, privilege, and the limits of feminist agency under branding.

This analysis employs a multi-method critical approach that integrates visual rhetoric analysis, critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and whiteness theory to examine how meaning circulates and is contested across the TikTok discourse surrounding Sydney Sweeney's "Great Jeans/ Great Genes" campaign. Joshua Gamson's *Claims to Fame* argues that modern celebrity functions as a site where audiences negotiate authenticity and artificiality. Sweeney's celebrity persona embodies precisely this tension as she presents herself as the "authentic small town girl" who once rebuilt vintage cars and then the hyper stylized, sexually charged actress popularized by Euphoria. Users pick up on the contradiction revealing how her celebrity image sways between empowerment and objectification. One TikToker edits an interview of Sweeney speaking on her building cars and her "having a personality" and saying she doesn't like being sexualized to her most recent advertisements including one selling her branded bath products in a suggestively erotic style. After @drsquatch posted the bathwater ad on tiktok, the comment section was filled with comments like "Why are we going backwards" "Is this a humiliation trial" biting commentary on how Sweeney's self presentation has become increasingly structured by the male gaze. This shift in Sweeney's branding parallels what Matthew McAllister and Lauren DeCarvalho describes as "sexualized branded entertainment" where female celebrities become both content and commodity. Sweeney's marketing persona, reproduces the tropes of desirable white femininity that advertisers have long used to sell lifestyle aspiration. Yet TikTok critiques this and exposes the structural expectations placed on women in celebrity culture to commodify their own desirability.

Sweeney's role as Cassie Howard in *Euphoria* intensifies this tension between agency and spectacle. The show repeatedly frames Cassie's body and even nude shots and personality through aesthetic codes of the male gaze. Laura Mulvey's foundational concept of the male gaze where the camera aligns with masculine desire finds renewed relevance here as Cassie's pain and self doubt are rendered beautiful. Yet Sweeney's own awareness of this dynamic complicates this reading. In an interview with *The Times* May 2025, she expresses frustration that her acting talent is overshadowed by fixation on her body but a lot of facebook comments to this interview like @sistersofprimevalinitiative says "like selling her bathwater and posing naked for money. Right" In a popular video by @scar\_secret2, she edits together clips of Sweeney's recent ads with a caption saying "...using your body to sell stuff isn't great" with a duet of a video captioned "Ever ad makes her Cassie in real life". This emphasizes how her advertising persona reproduces the same reaction as her television roles. Through these videos and commentary, users refuse passive spectatorship and instead become co authors of Sweeney's image, exposing the ideological scaffolding beneath her brand.

The core of the controversy lies in the racial coding embedded in the phrase "Great Genes". Dyer's analysis of whiteness provides a crucial lens for understanding how Sweeney's image anchors the campaign's racialized appeal. Dyer argues that whiteness operates invisibility as a marker of purity, desirability and universality in visual culture. Sweeney's physical appearance, blond hair, blue eyes, embodies this ideal, allowing the brand to equate her "genes" with superior quality. The pun collapses aesthetic beauty, genetic inheritance, and consumer value into a single signifier suggesting that whiteness itself is the ultimate product being sold. TikTok audiences recognize this as comments in videos about the ad are "because only sweeney's genes are better?" or "the real crime is that she's naturally brunette". These responses

exemplify how digital publics deploy humor and intertextuality to subvert advertising rhetoric. By exaggerating the ad's language, users expose its ideological function, turning the grammar of whiteness into an object of ridicule rather than aspiration. Angelica Morris and Lee Ann Kahlor's research on whiteness in advertising supports this reading, noting that audiences increasingly interpret racial homogeneity in marketing as exclusionary. The TikTok backlash against American Eagle demonstrates how viewers are not merely offended but analytically attuned to how whiteness operates as an invisible norm. Their discourse constitutes a form of media literacy rooted in social justice critique, illustrating how participatory platforms democratize semiotic power.

The tension surrounding Sweeney's image also reflects broader tensions in celebrity branding between authenticity and performance. As Morrison observes in his analysis of Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*, lifestyle celebrity often relies on the performance of ordinariness as a form of distinction as celebrities must appear "real" while embodying and maintaining an image of glamour and success. Sweeney's early public persona as a girl who rebuilt cars offered precisely this authenticity narrative, contrasting with her later commodification as a symbol of desire. TikTok users' nostalgia for her earlier persona calling it "before her lobotomy" signals a longing for authenticity unmediated by the male gaze. But Gamson reminds us, authenticity in celebrity culture is always a construction, a rhetorical effect produced by audience engagement. The same platform that critiques Sweeney's commodification simultaneously sustains her celebrity by circulating and debating her image.

Through duets and captions, users enact what Perea describes as a "rearticulation of subjectivities", transforming the act of viewing into an act of authorship. The discourse surrounding Sweeney's ad then becomes a participatory feminist practice. Users' humorous

exaggerations and intertextual references not only critique the ad's racial and gendered codes but also reimagine what kinds of femininity can exist within media culture. In this sense, TikTok operates as a counterpublic, where marginalized voices can expose and contest the ideological functions of mainstream advertising. This participatory critique aligns with Colin Campbell's findings on diversity representation in advertising, which emphasize how audience responses increasingly shape the cultural reception of brands. By refusing to accept the ad's message at face value, users force corporations to confront the interpretive labor of their audiences. This discourse exposes the racial limits of this supposed empowerment. As Dyer's and Morris and Kahlor's analyses suggest, white femininity retains its market privilege precisely because it can safely sway between purity and eroticism. The ad's invocation of "great genes" relies on this ambivalence as it sells sexual appeal without threatening the racial hierarchy that underwrites desirability in Western media. What emerges across these videos and responses is a kind of participatory ethics that transforms corporate messaging into an open site of negotiation. The analysis suggests that TikToks' affordances enable audiences to occupy a dual position, both consumers and critics. Through collective discursive resistance, users assert that advertising cannot control the meanings it releases into the public. Instead, these meanings are constantly rewritten through communal critique, humor and the affective labor of everyday media literacy.

Across the analyzed TikToks, audiences demonstrate an emergent participatory ethics, a shared awareness that meaning is never fixed but always subject to reinterpretation. Users exploit TikTok's duets and edits to disrupt the seamlessness of advertising and reveal the contradictions of celebrity feminism.

The public response to American Eagle's "Great Jeans/Great Genes" campaign demonstrates that advertisements no longer exist as self contained messages delivered to passive

audiences. Once an image enters digital circulation especially on a platform like TikTok, it becomes a site of negotiation, interpretation and at times outright rejection. What the American Eagle framed as a playful pun became , through users' commentary and humor, a flashpoint for broader conversations about whiteness, hereditary beauty ideals and the aesthetics of contemporary femininity. TikTok users did more than just criticize the ad, they collectively interrogated the historical and cultural assumptions embedded within it, revealing how easily “fun” branding can echo eugenic logics or reproduce exclusionary beauty norms. The discourse surrounding Sydeny Sweeney’s appearance and the “Great Genes” slogan reflects how viewers today are equipped with the tools and vocabulary to identify racialized visual codes, to critique the male gaze, and challenge corporations that continue to rely on narrow inherited ideals of beauty. TikTok's contributions expose the tensions between corporate attempts to harness celebrity femininity and the public’s increasing willingness to scrutinize those attempts through an intersectional lens. By treating TikTok reactions as the research object, this paper positions participatory platforms as crucial arenas for contemporary media analysis. The backlash to the American Eagle campaign emphasizes how meaning is produced collaboratively between celebrities, marketers, cultural histories of representation and highly engaged online publics. This case reveals that even a short advertisement can become a cultural event when audiences seize the tools of interpretation for themselves.

## WORKS CITED

Campbell, Colin, et al. "Diversity Representation in Advertising." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 53, no. 2, Mar. 2025, pp. 588–616. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11747-023-00994-8>.

Dyer, Richard, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. Routledge, 1997  
<https://jpgenrgb.blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/dyer-white-1997.pdf>

Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. University of California Press, 1994  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274450798\\_Claims\\_to\\_Fame\\_Celebrity\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_America](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274450798_Claims_to_Fame_Celebrity_in_Contemporary_America)

Morris, Angelica, and Lee Ann Kahlor. "Whiteness Theory in Advertising: Racial Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Ads." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 415–30. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10646175.2014.955929>.

Morrison, Joshua N. "Stealing Fame: Lifestyle Celebrity and the Dubious Cultural Politics of Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*." *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, June 2020, pp. 149–65. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1746370>.

McAllister, Matthew P., and Lauren J. DeCarvalho. "Sexualized Branded Entertainment and the Male Consumer Gaze." *TripleC (Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation): Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 299–314. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.31269/vol12iss1pp299-314>.

Medeiros, Ben. "Restoring Whiteness, Sanitizing Blackness and Authenticating Modern Artifice: Pepsodent Toothpaste and the Visual Branding of Amos 'N' Andy." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, vol. 38, no. 2, June 2018, pp. 343–57. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/01439685.2017.1300407>.

Phillips, Barbara J., et al. "How Visual Brand Identity Shapes Consumer Response." *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 31, no. 3, Mar. 2014, pp. 225–36. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/mar.20689>.

Stathakopoulos, Vlasis, et al. "Visual and Verbal Rhetoric in Advertising." *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 27, no. 4, Nov. 2008, pp. 629–58. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.southwesternu.idm.oclc.org/10.2501/S0265048708080177>.