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Deconstructive Analysis: American Eagle's "Great Jeans" Campaign

Backgrounder

Founded in 1977, American Eagle Outfitters, Inc. (AEO) is a leading apparel retailer recognized for its denim innovation, youthful branding, and consistent focus on authenticity. The company was originally founded in Michigan by brothers Jerry and Mark Silversman as an expansion of their family business with the goal of providing affordable leisurewear and footwear to young consumers (American Eagle, 2014). In the 1990s, the company was acquired by Schottenstein Stores Corporation and shifted focus to denim and casual apparel, which established the foundation of today's AEO's identity (American Eagle, 2020).

American Eagle Outfitters, Inc. is led by Executive Chairman and CEO Jay L. Schottenstein and President and Executive Directive Director Jennifer Foyle (American Eagle, 2025). Headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the AEO brand's portfolio extends beyond American Eagle; it owns Aerie, Tod Snyder New York, Unsubscribed, and Quiet Platforms. The company operates over 1,500 stores worldwide and ships internationally (American Eagle, 2025). However, American Eagle remains the company's core brand, offering casual apparel and denim in over 800 stores in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico (American Eagle, 2025). Since its founding, AEO has become one of the largest denim retailers in the U.S. In 2024, it reported record revenue of $5.3 billion and kept its #1 ranking in denim with its customer base (American Eagle, 2025).

American Eagle competes within the clothing and denim retailers industry against brands like H&M, Levi Strauss, Gap, and Abercrombie & Fitch (American Eagle, 2025). Despite the saturation within the U.S. denim apparel market, which was valued at $358.7 billion in 2024 (Statista, 2025), AEO thrives through its accessible price point, strong brand loyalty, and cultural relevance.

Mission Statement

- To empower self-expression and confidence through timeless, quality denim and casualwear
- To celebrate inclusivity and authenticity by connecting communities through shared culture and creativity.

American Eagle seeks to make customers feel comfortable and confident by offering casual, long-lasting, and stylish clothing that reflects individuality and optimism (American Eagle, 2025).

Brand Positioning

- **TO** Gen Z and Millennial consumers who value comfort, authenticity, and affordable self-expression
- **AMERICAN EAGLE IS THE** leading American denim and apparel brand rooted in youth culture and inclusivity
- **THAT** delivers timeless and high-quality clothing that empowers individuals to feel confident and connected
- **BECAUSE** American Eagle combines innovative denim design, cultural relevance, and accessible pricing that make self-expression attainable for everyone.

Statement of Problem/Opportunity

On July 23, 2025, American Eagle launched its Fall 2025 denim campaign "Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans," featuring actress Sydney Sweeney. The campaign aimed to strengthen American Eagle's position as the number one jean brand for Gen Z by celebrating self-expression, confidence, and body positivity (American Eagle, 2025). It highlighted the launch of a limited-edition denim jacket, over 50 new styles of jeans, and more than 800 new clothing items from tops to dresses. The launch included "The Sydney Jean," a limited-edition jean supporting domestic violence awareness, with 100% of its revenue donated to Crisis Text Line (American Eagle, 2025).

However, within days of its debut, the campaign's teaser video, which features Sweeney saying:

> *"Jeans are passed down from parents to offspring, often determining traits like haircolor, personality and even eye color. My jeans are blue…Sydney Sweeny Has Great Jeans"* (American Eagle, 2025)

The video sparked immediate backlash on social media. The wordplay "jeans/genes" led critics to accuse the brand of racial insensitivity and promoting eugenics, which is a theory associated with white supremacy (Restrepo et al., 2025). The controversy also politicized the brand once the U.S. President Donald Trump commented on his Truth Social social media site that the ad was "the 'HOTTEST' ad out there," and while highlighting that Sweeney was a registered Republican (Fonrouge, 2025). Ultimately, this action drew even more attention, growing the company's shares by 23%, earning over 3,000 news articles, and dropping brand sentiment from +50 to -31 (Hawkins, 2025).

The lack of an immediate response from American Eagle allowed the public to control the narrative and gave space for further public scrutiny. Former Gap and J.Crew CEO Mickey Drexler criticized AEO's silence and argued that a quick apology and acknowledgment would have mitigated reputational damage (Bharade, 2025).

From a communication perspective, this situation represents a crisis for American Eagle. The backlash reveals how fragile brand perception is in a politically polarized market, where campaigns are quickly reframed on social media. It also represents a problem for the brand's reputation and stakeholder confidence, as it risked years of reputation built around inclusivity and authenticity. Even though 59% of U.S. consumers found the ad appropriate (Tcholakova, 2025), a thoughtful response was needed to address outrage, rebuild trust, and reconnect the company's image with its core values.

Finally, on August 1, 2025, American Eagle released a single statement on Instagram saying that the campaign "is and always was about the jeans," and reiterated that the brand continues to celebrate authenticity and self-expression (D'Inocenzio, 2025). Many found the response defensive, hostile, and tone-deaf (Hawkins, 2025).

Research

Research Goals

- Track how media outlets are covering the campaign and what is being said on social media conversations.

- Evaluate the extent of the backlash surrounding the "Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans" campaign to determine if negative sentiment online is overshadowing customer support.
- Measure how the controversy impacted brand trust, consumer perception, and engagement across target audiences.
- Identify which crisis communication strategy would minimize reputational harm.
- Determine which medium and message is the most effective to reach audiences and to control the narrative.

Research Methodology

- Primary Research
    - Qualitative: Focus Group
        - Conducted a rapid-response focus group with 10-15 Gen Z and Millennials consumers aged 15-30 based on major U.S. cities like Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago.
        - Evaluate emotional reactions of the campaign, while also exploring the interpretation of the wording of "great jeans/genes."
        - Tested possible apology and/or clarification statements to determine any signs of defensiveness, authenticity, and/or necessity.
    - Quantitative: Survey
        - Distributed online surveys to American Eagle's Real Rewards members and to 10,000 individuals who represented the target audiences
        - Measure shifts in brand perception by comparing their sentiment before and after launching the campaign
        - Identify the key elements that caused controversy around the campaign, and which elements achieved their desired purpose.
- Secondary Research
    - Review media coverage to understand the key elements to be targeted in further communication.
        - The New York Times, Axios, NPR, Business Insider, AP News, etc.
    - Monitor social media discourses to identify public narrative, tone, and audience response.
        - Social Media: TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook and Reddit

        - Social Listing Tools: Social Sprout, Meta Analytics, Hootsuite
    - Analyze consumer behavior to determine brand visibility and brand engagement.
        - American Eagle's official website and Google Trends
    - Study other brands' crisis management strategies to determine effective or ineffective communication strategies.
        - Case studies on the industry

Situation Analysis (SWOT)

Internal

Strengths

- Strong brand awareness and loyal customer base that identify American Eagle as a top U.S. apparel retailer (Statista, 2025; American Eagle, 2025)
- Strong celebrity partnership with Sydney Sweeney, who aligns with Gen Z's and Millennials' values of relatability and authenticity (Lockwood,2025)
- Strong advertising and communication strategies with 3D billboards, AR Try-ons, and Sphere displays (American Eagle, 2025)
- Financial stability and profitability (American Eagle, 2025)

Weaknesses

- The campaign message is perceived as racist and insensitive (Restrepo et al., 2025)
- Lack of pre-launch testing on the message and visuals of the campaign (Personal hypothesis)
- No immediate crisis management plan nor rapid public statement, which led the backlash to grow uncontrollably (Bharade, 2025)

External

Opportunities

- Industry trends show that audiences prefer transparent and authentic communication (Belchandani et al. , 2024)
- Gen Z consumers show higher relatability and forgiveness to brands that admit mistakes and engage in honest communication strategies (Takemasa, 2025).

- Increased brand awareness and visibility due to media coverage on the backlash (Hawkins, 2025).
- Millennial consumers show higher engagement with brands that represent causes they support (Spotify, 2023).

Challenges

- Strong political polarization across the country, and endorsement from President Donald Trump, which alienates part of the AEO target audiences (Fonrouge, 2025).
- Inflation and economic uncertainty that is reducing consumer spending in clothing (Belchandani et al. , 2024).
- Over 3,000 negative articles that reach over 50 million readers, attracted negative attention to the brand (Hawkins, 2025).
- Decline in public sentiment due to the power of social media on changing campaign narratives (Hawkins, 2025).

Strategic Insight

- American Eagle's campaign with Sydney Sweeney successfully increased brand visibility and media coverage. However, the strong backlash online and negative articles show that the company cannot only rely on getting the audience's attention, but it should focus on authentic and inclusive messages that align with the brand's core values to maintain credibility.
- Research on target audiences, Gen Z and Millennials, shows that they value honesty and show higher chances of forgiveness when brands admit mistakes and communicate openly, but American Eagle's delayed response also shows the need for rapid and transparent crisis management messages to avoid reputational damage and rebuild trust faster.
- Due to the strong political climate around the country, brands have a high chance of becoming politically polarized and their messages misinterpreted, in this case as racially insensitive. This shows the importance of pre-testing messages and adopting inclusive language to ensure campaigns align with social expectations and avoid potential crises.

Communication Goal

- Reestablish American Eagle's credibility and reinforce its authentic and inclusive brand values.
    - Following backlash to the "Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans" campaign, American Eagle's highest priority was to restore trust and reinforce that the campaign's core message was to celebrate self-expression and confidence.
    - *Personal Analysis:* In this case, focusing on reframing the narrative of the campaign and restoring brand trust was essential for American Eagle, as crises of this origin can cause long-term impact on audience preferences and relatability.

Communication Objectives

- Increase positive brand sentiment by 25% across social media and traditional outlets within three months.
    - American Eagle seeks to measure recovery in brand perception due to the decline in sentiment from +50 to -31 after the controversy (Hawkins, 2025). Increasing brand sentiment will mitigate long-lasting impact on the brand's reputation and consumer loyalty.
    - *Personal Analysis:* Focusing on increasing brand sentiment is a good strategic move. Because the backlash was stronger on social media platforms, trying to shift perceptions will help to avoid the long-lasting effects of today's cancel culture.
- Secure at least 10 neutral or positive features in top-tier media outlets by October 2025.
    - To avoid the crisis becoming a staple in the American Eagle's history, getting coverage in credible news sources will help to counteract misinformation around the campaign's intent and refocus attention on AEO's inclusive identity.
    - *Personal Analysis:* Securing positive coverage should help American Eagle to "bury" the problem and avoid Google searches on the brand point directly to this controversy.
- Increase engagement rates by 20% across American Eagle's social media channels by October 2025

- To renew consumer trust and maintain the brand's reputation as a culturally relevant apparel leader, restoring interactions through social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat is of the essence.
- *Personal Analysis:* Measuring engagement across social media would show the company if target audiences still relate to and identify with messages shared across their platforms.

Target Audience

- Trend Setter Gen Z
  - Individuals aged 15-28 with an average household income of around $80,000 (Kollar & Scherer, 2024) living in big cities like Los Angeles, New York, Austin, Phoenix and Chicago.
  - Highly expressive, socially aware, and motivated by authenticity and inclusivity. They favor humor and transparency in brand communication and honest activism (Takemasa, 2025).
  - They are digital natives engaging primarily on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, and are key in shaping viral trends and public discourse online (Takemasa, 2025).
- Nostalgic Millennials
  - Adults aged 29-35, early professionals and/or young parents with an average income of around $75,000, living in big cities like Los Angeles, New York, Austin, Phoenix and Chicago.
  - They prioritize their spending, having clothes further down their priority list, and are more likely to spend on brands that align with the values and causes they support (Spotify, 2023). They also tend to be more nostalgic and favor brands that were part of their teenage years.
  - Social media actives, being the most active on Facebook, Instagram and X. They tend to review brands and products online, and follow influencer recommendations. (Content Science, 2025)
- American Eagle Loyal Consumers
  - Existing customers aged 16-35, living in suburban and urban areas across the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

- Loyal but sensitive to changes in brand initiatives and tone. They associate American Eagle with optimism, inclusivity, and comfort, aligning with the brand's core values (American Eagle, 2025)
- They are active on social media and are used to the brand's body-positive tone and innovative campaigns.

Current Brand Perception

- During the crisis, American Eagle is perceived as a once authentic and inclusive brand that has become politically polarized, culturally insensitive, and socially recognized by its poor judgment (Fonrouge, 2025).

Desired Brand Perception

- American Eagle is an authentic and inclusive brand that inspires confidence, individuality, and self-expression through timeless, high-quality casualwear and denim (American Eagle, 2025).

Key Message Mapping

Single-minded message

- American Eagle's "Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans" campaign celebrates confidence and individuality through jeans that allow everyone to express their authentic selves (American Eagle, 2025)

Audience-specific messages

- Trend Setter Gen Z
  - "Innovative fits and endless versatility reflect how our community wears their denim: mixed, matched, layered and lived in…attitude and a little mischief" (American Eagle, 2025).
  - Messages highlight authenticity, self-expression, and a bit of humor, which are key values that this audience looks for in brands (Takemasa, 2025).

- *Personal Analysis*: In their public statement, AEO made sure to highlight these key ideals to reframe public narratives from controversy to a celebration of denim's role in creative self-expression and inclusivity.

- Nostalgic Millennials
  - "It's rare to find a brand that grows with you, the way American Eagle has for generations. They have literally been there with me through every version of myself." (Lockwood,2025)
  - Messages use the power that nostalgia has to attract Millennials customers by leveraging Sydney Sweeney's personal story of growing up with the brand (Belchandani et al. , 2024).
  - Having a high-profile celebrity as the main focus of the campaign, and reiterating it in their public statement with "Her jeans. Her story," the brand appeals to the audience's trust in influencers (Content Science, 2025)
- American Eagle Loyal Consumers
  - "We'll continue to celebrate how everyone wears their AE jeans with confidence, their way" (American Eagle, 2025)
  - Messages reinforce optimism and inclusivity, which are core values that loyal customers have related to American Eagle for years (American Eagle, 2025)
  - *Personal Analysis:* Emphasizing continuity and belonging in their public statement, American Eagle was trying to rebuild trust and emotional connection that may have been lost during the controversy with their loyal audience.

Personal Analysis: The public statement was found defensive to many audiences, as people felt that the company failed to acknowledge any wrongdoing. In my opinion, having a bit of empathy and addressing those who felt targeted by the campaign would have been a better way to mitigate the crisis instead of staying firm with its message.

Creative Platform

- Audience
  - People value authenticity and inclusivity, and seek cultural awareness from brands, particularly during moments of public scrutiny (Belchandani et al. , 2024).

In this case, American Eagle's target audiences were expecting transparency from the brand and an honest and self-aware response.

- Brand
    - American Eagle is a brand that seeks to make customers feel comfortable and confident by offering casual, long-lasting, and stylish clothing that reflects individuality and optimism (American Eagle, 2025).
- Concept
    - Through the public statement, American Eagle focuses on rebuilding brand trust by highlighting its core values. Rather than issuing an apology, the brand chose to share the original purpose of their campaign, which was to celebrate self-expression through jeans.

Strategies

- Leverage controversy to maintain brand visibility and increase engagement.
    - American Eagle benefited from the viral social media backlash, and with the release of their public statement, the brand's mention volume increased eighteen times what it was previously (Hawkins, 2025). Even though brand visibility and engagement online increased in numbers, the brand would have benefited more if it had addressed the crisis rapidly, as misinformation and public discourse would have ended instead of going viral through criticism and memes.
- Reinforce brand credibility through constant and authentic ambassador endorsement.
    - Despite backlash, American Eagle continued to position Sydney Sweeney at the forefront of their advertising and social media, leveraging her relatability to Gen Z and Millennial audiences(Lockwood, 2025). By continuing to share campaign photos on social media, and not retracting from campaign initiatives, it shows how the brand sought to mitigate reputational damage with their celebrity's image.
- Redirect attention towards social responsibility to shift focus from the controversy.
    - American Eagle pushed the Sydney Jean initiative, which donated 100% of profits to Crisis Text Line (American Eagle, 2025). This helped to reinforce their values of empathy in purpose, which shows their strategy to counter criticism

with a positive social action appealing to their Gen Z audience that values activism (Takemasa, 2025).

- Preserve brand identity through controlled communication.
    - American Eagle maintained a clear and firm messaging while addressing that the campaign "is and always was about the jeans" (Hawkins, 2025). Through this approach, they showed confidence in their campaign and avoided an apology that could have had more negative reactions. However, showing more empathy and addressing concerns about racial insensitivity could have resonated more with their target audiences.

Tactics

Paid Media

- Keep 3D billboards active throughout the crisis.
    - American Eagle continued to feature Sydney Sweeney on 3D billboards in Times Square and on the Las Vegas Sphere (Kapner, 2025)
- Maintain their digital ads across social media platforms.
    - American Eagle chose to keep Sydney Sweeney's campaign posts and boosted them through Instagram and TikTok, gaining media exposure throughout the crisis (Lockwood, 2025).
- Sustain their social integrations across different social media platforms.
    - American Eagle partnered with Snapchat and BeReal to create branded Snap Stories that increased campaign engagement (Lockwood, 2025).
- Feature Sydney Sweeney in store visuals and windows
    - Campaign's photos remained displayed in American Eagle stores across the United States (Kapner, 2025;Lockwood, 2025).

Earned Media

- Schedule an exclusive CEO interview.
    - American Eagle's CEO Jay Schottenstein gave an inclusive interview to the Wall Street Journal, addressing the Sydney Sweeney controversy, affirming they stand confident in the campaign. During the interview, he also stated that AEO

employees were instructed to "stay calm" and not to comment on the issue. (Kapner, 2025)

- Even though American Eagle increased its brand visibility, mainly in a negative way, from earned media due to the overwhelming coverage on the campaign, I don't believe they use many earned media tactics in their crisis management plan, apart from the CEO's interview.

Owned Media

- Keep campaign photos on the official American Eagle website and social media (American Eagle, 2025)
    - American Eagle decided to keep the campaign's visuals on their official website and digital platforms, which shows message consistency and confidence in their campaign.
- Distributed digital newsletters to existing customers (hypothetical)
    - American Eagle most likely had personalized newsletters that invited existing customers to get to know the campaign's purpose and support Sweeney's denim collection and the donation initiative to Crisis Text Line.

Shared Media

- Release a public statement on American Eagle's official Instagram account.
    - American Eagle posted their only public statement on their Instagram account, clarifying the campaign's meaning: "is and always was about the jeans" (American Eagle, 2025)
- Continue sharing campaign photos and short videos on Instagram and TikTok.
    - Before and after the public statement was posted, American Eagle has continued to share Sydney Sweeney's visuals across their social media pages (American Eagle, 2025)
- Let online conversation and memes increase brand visibility.
    - American Eagle's campaign went viral over social media, creating room for public debate and recreation of the ad teaser in a humorous way (Hawkins, 2025)

Personal Analysis: These tactics show how American Eagle has stood confident in their messages and the overall campaign. By posting a short "clarification" on Instagram and

continuing to push the original campaign initiatives, like ads and social posts, the brand has appeared as defensive and insensitive to audiences who expect the brand to be accountable for creating a campaign that resonates with racist origins.

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