

Not All Jeans Fit The Same: Intersectionality and The Divide Between American Eagle and GAP's Approaches to Representation

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Abstract. Intersectionality explains how overlapping identities shape how people are represented. In an ad, it can be seen when models with different racial backgrounds, body types, and gender expressions are shown in ways that highlight how their combined identities affect how they are portrayed. This research analyzes the intersectionality that is represented in American Eagle 'Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans' with Sydney Sweeney and GAP 'Better in Denim' with KATSEYE. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, the data were gathered from campaign videos, taglines, visual elements, and verbal narratives released in 2025. The findings reveal a contrast between two campaigns: American Eagle relies on single-axis representation centered on white femininity, while GAP presents a collective, multicultural femininity that more reflects intersectional values. This study argues that despite being both commercial instruments, the representational choices used in both advertisements make a difference in reflecting and negotiating intersectionality in the modern media.

Keywords: *intersectionality, representation, identity*

Abstrak. Interseksionalitas menjelaskan bagaimana identitas yang tumpang tindih membentuk cara orang-orang diwakili. Dalam iklan, hal ini dapat dilihat ketika model dengan latar belakang ras yang berbeda, tipe tubuh, dan ekspresi gender ditampilkan dengan cara yang menonjolkan bagaimana identitas gabungan mereka memengaruhi cara mereka digambarkan. Penelitian ini menganalisis interseksionalitas yang diwakili dalam iklan American Eagle 'Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans' dengan Sydney Sweeney dan GAP 'Better in Denim' dengan KATSEYE. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus komparatif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari video kampanye, tagline, elemen visual, dan narasi verbal yang dirilis pada tahun 2025. Temuan menunjukkan kontras antara dua kampanye: American Eagle mengandalkan representasi satu dimensi yang berpusat pada feminitas kulit putih, sementara GAP menampilkan feminitas kolektif dan multikultural yang lebih mencerminkan nilai-nilai interseksional. Studi ini berargumen bahwa meskipun keduanya merupakan alat komersial, pilihan representasi yang digunakan dalam kedua iklan tersebut membuat perbedaan dalam mencerminkan dan menegosiasikan interseksionalitas dalam media modern.

Kata Kunci: *interseksionalitas, representasi, identitas*

Introduction

The dynamics of the global fashion retail industry are characterized by intense competition, massive digital innovation, and rapid shifts in consumer preferences, especially among Generation Z. Amid this landscape, denim products remain a core category and a key battleground for specialty retailers. Two American retail giants, The Gap and American Eagle, have historically dominated this market, but their strategies for maintaining cultural relevance and market conversion continue to evolve (Stockrow, n.d.; Gap Inc., n.d.). This competition reached its peak in mid-2025 through a series of contrasting marketing campaigns, which were later dubbed the “Denim Wars 2025” by the media (Exchange4Media, 2025). The striking differences in communication strategies and brand ambassador selection during this period offer a case study for analyzing marketing effectiveness in a digital era fraught with sensitive issues.

American Eagle Outfitters, Inc. (NYSE: AEO) is a global specialty retailer founded in 1977 and headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. AEO is known for targeting the teen and young adult market (ages 15–25) with on-trend denim and casual clothing offerings. In the last decade, AEO's growth has been largely driven by its sub-brand, Aerie, which focuses on intimate apparel and loungewear with a message of body positivity and inclusivity through its #AerieREAL campaign (American Eagle Outfitters, Inc., n.d.). AEO emphasizes the strength of denim as the foundation of its business.

The Gap, Inc. (NYSE: GPS) is one of America's oldest and most iconic apparel retailers, founded in 1969 in San Francisco, California, initially focusing on the sale of Levi's jeans and LPs. GAP operates as a multi-brand conglomerate that includes Gap (classic casual wear), Old Navy (value/affordable), Banana Republic (premium), and Athleta (activewear) (Gap Inc., n.d.). GAP leverages its brand heritage as a symbol of relaxed American style, but continues to struggle for relevance in the eyes of Gen Z consumers who are dominated by new fast fashion brands.

Sydney Sweeney is an American actress (born 1997) and starting her career as a child actress, Sydney has appeared in dozens of feature films, series, and short films. In 2019 she was cast as Cassie Howard in the HBO original series *Euphoria* who gained global popularity through the series. Sweeney is a self-made woman and a modern Hollywood beauty icon (idntimes.com.). American Eagle's campaign with Sydney Sweeney: This campaign, titled

“Sydney Sweeney Has Great Jeans,” uses an approach designed to go viral through ambiguity and linguistic provocation. In the 30-second ad, Sydney Sweeney explicitly states that she is not telling the audience to buy their jeans, then concludes with the phrase: “Sydney Sweeney has great jeans. You see what I did there, right?”-[00:00:28]. This strategy utilizes wordplay between the words “jeans” (pants) and “genes” (good heredity) as a disruptive attempt to attract attention, but this has sparked controversy and criticism for being tone-deaf and offensive to racial sensitivities (Brand Vision, 2025).

Katseye is a global girl group formed through a collaboration between HYBE LABELS and Geffen Records. It consists of six members with very diverse ethnic backgrounds, namely Filipino, Swiss-Italian-Ghanaian, Korean, American-Spanish, American-Indian, and American-Chinese (kprofiles.com.). GAP campaign with KATSEYE: In contrast, GAP launched the “Better in Denim” campaign. This one-and-a-half-minute ad features the multiracial KATSEYE group dancing energetically to the iconic song My Milkshake (sample). The GAP campaign focuses on celebrating diversity, movement, and heritage, repositioning the brand as an inclusive and culturally relevant entity in the global pop market. This approach has been praised for its ability to build warm and positive emotional connections with Gen Z, using a music video format that encourages participation (social traction) such as dance challenges on TikTok (Exchange4Media, 2025).

Previous research has not specifically compared GAP and American Eagle ads. However, there are earlier studies that examined the representation of women in digital advertising, which has developed rapidly, one of which is a study conducted by Kirani and Supriyono (2025) that provided a critical multimodal analysis of the Dr. Squatch commercial starring Sydney Sweeney. The study concluded that the use of actress Sydney Sweeney in men's product advertisements tends to produce objectification and sexuality of women through verbal modes and suggestive gestures. The research by Kirani and Supriyono (2025) focuses on sexuality in advertisements targeting male audiences. This study will fill a gap by analyzing how modern companies balance conveying ideological messages (inclusivity vs. traditional aesthetics) with the demands of maximizing profits from a polarized market segment. Thus, this research not only examines the visual aspects of advertisements but also evaluates brand ethical consistency amid the shifting values of Generation Z consumers, who are increasingly critical of issues of representation and transparency.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach to examine the intersectional representations in American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney and GAP x KATSEYE advertising campaigns. The main focus of the study is to show how overlapping identities shape representation in advertising by applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989) as the theoretical framework. This study approach will compare two opposite advertising campaigns as the main case studies by applying a comparative case study design which will lead to identification of specific representational approaches and further insights on how they apply to the intersectional theory.

The primary data for this study consists of the American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney campaign videos released in July 2025, as well as the GAP x KATSEYE "Better in Denim" campaign video released in August 2025. The visual elements that are examined include the video clips, dance formations, and the accessories featured throughout the video, whereas the verbal elements are taglines, voiceovers, spoken dialogue, and written text in the advertisements. The sources of secondary data present additional background that contain brands, media sources, behind-the-scenes access.

These two campaigns were selected due the contradictory of their methods in representing modern fashion. The American Eagle X Sydney Sweeney campaign features a single white woman celebrity, whilst the GAP x KATSEYE campaign showcases a multi-ethnic group with diverse cultural backgrounds. This contrast makes them ideal to study in which various brands build and market intersectional identities. The findings from both campaigns will then be compared to identify similarities and differences in their representational strategies. Overall, this study is interpretive in nature, where the researchers emphasize the process of meaning formation: how these advertisements construct, display, and market certain images of femininity and beauty under different representational strategies, and attempts to reveal the power dynamics and privilege structures behind messages that may appear neutral or inclusive.

Results

1. Two Ads Content Explanation

1.1 American Eagle ft. Sydney Sweeney

American Eagle's ad featuring Sydney Sweeney was the one ad that brought attention to the brand 'American Eagle', it was released on 23rd of July 2025. Its impact on the brand's reputation was huge, although it received backlash– AE's stock went up nearly to 40% (New York Post, 2025). The campaign videos showed only Sydney Sweeney in it; all of them were recorded in a closed studio with different concepts and same solid color backgrounds.

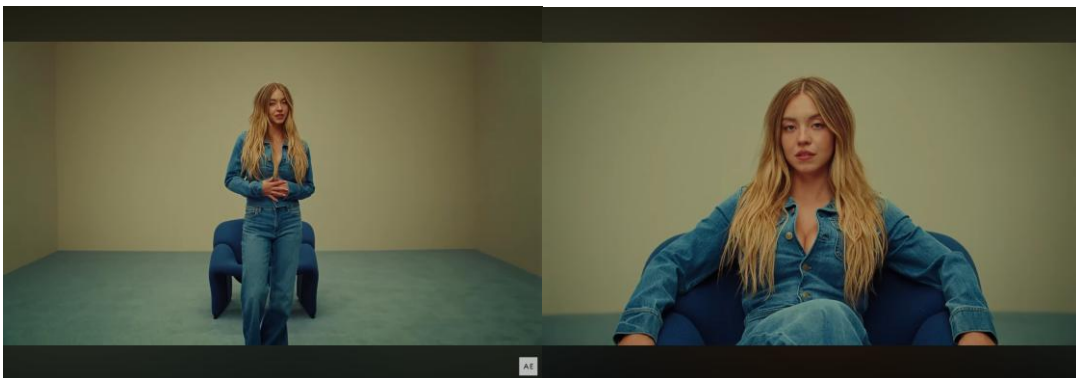
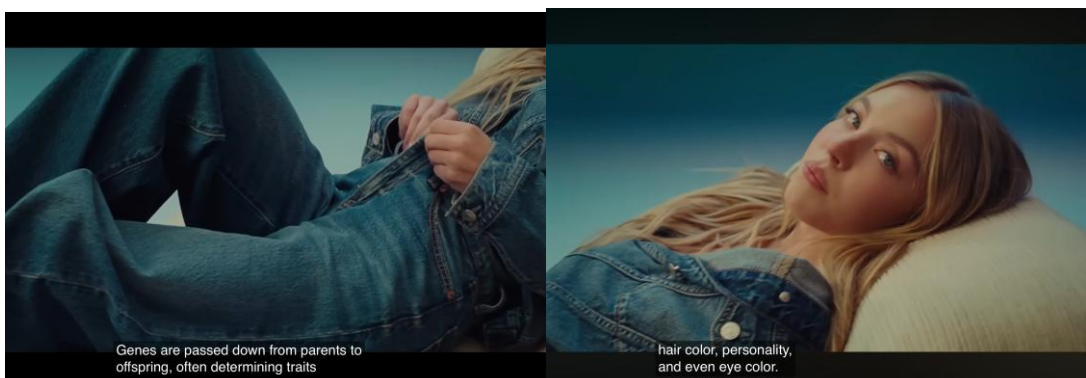


Figure 1. [Sydney Sweney as the main actor]

Sydney Sweeney was a sole actor in the ad. American Eagle's CMO Craig Brommers stated that the reason for her to be hired as the campaign's actor was because "there's a right time and a right place to use the right talent". Solely for the sake of targeting Generation Z's audience.



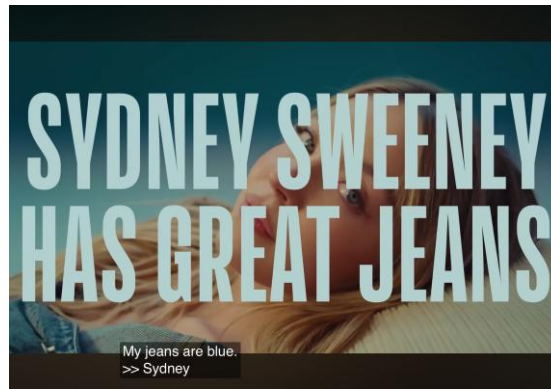


Figure 2. [Sydney Sweeney's quotes from the ad]

Within the ads, the most famous quotes from them are, “Genes are passed down from parents to offspring, often determining traits like hair color, personality, and even eye color. My genes are blue.” Then a male narrator concludes, “Sydney Sweeney has great jeans”. These specific taglines are what made the ads’ popularity skyrocketed, as they imply double meanings.

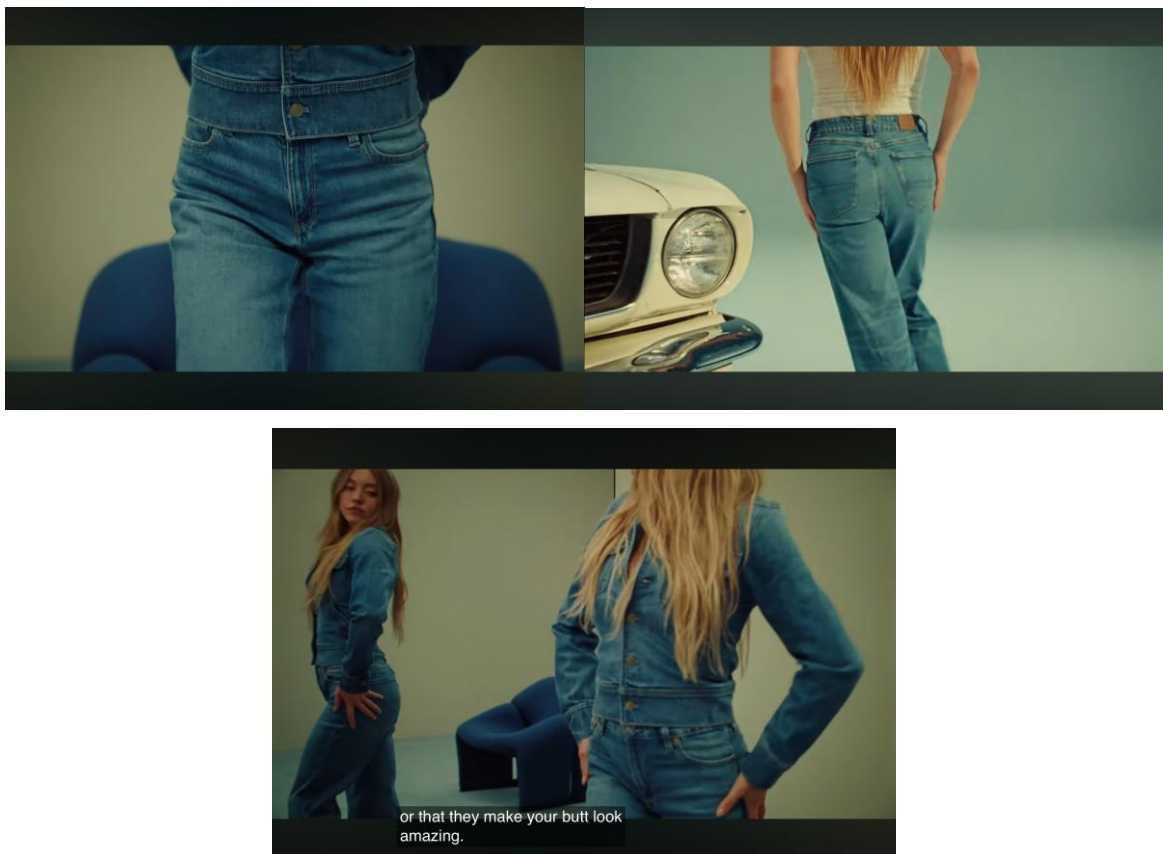


Figure 3. [The camera focuses on lower part of Sydney's body]

In the ads, the camera focus is often on Sydney's lower body part, as Sydney herself said that the jeans “make your butt look amazing”. The ads try to show that Sydney looks good in American Eagle's jeans which she was advertising. Moreover, the overall tone of her ad videos are cold-toned, as it represents the wordplay of “My genes (jeans) are blue”, as well as

showing the blue jeans that the company is marketing.

1.2 GAP ft. KATSEYE

On August 28, 2025, GAP launched its “Better in Denim” campaign ad in collaboration with KATSEYE. The commercial has successfully achieved billions of impressions across platforms and quickly became the talk of the internet by a storm. For GAP, the campaign’s impact was remarkable, leading to a 171% rise in brand mentions and a 286% surge in positive mentions during the analyzed period (Meltwater, 2025).



Figure 1. [KATSEYE as the main actor]

Since each member of KATSEYE comes from a different racial and cultural background, a rich variety of physical features are visible in the ad. In addition, a few members also include accessories that reflect their cultural background. The denim pieces they wear are also varied. This results in a form of diversity that is noticeable to the audience without removing their unique identities as individuals.



Figure 2. [KATSEYE Megan with black straight hair with pink highlight, denim shell top and mini skirt, and jade bracelet]

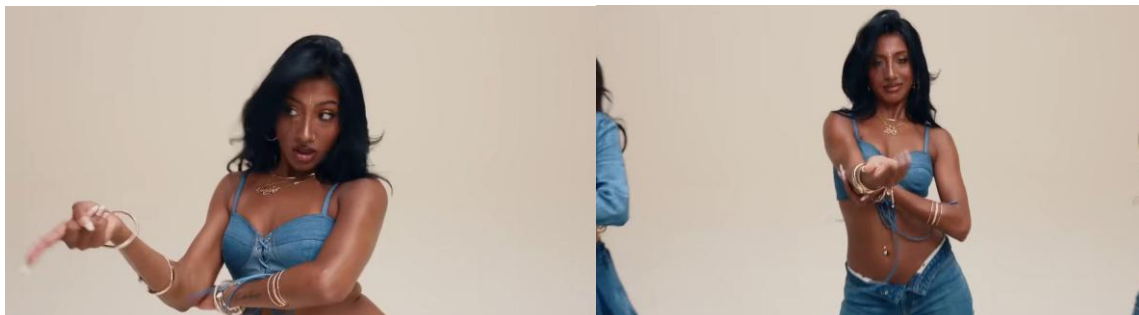


Figure 3. [KATSEYE Lara with black wavy hair, denim custom top and long jeans, gold jewelries, and bindi]



Figure 4. [KATSEYE Daniela with black curly hair, white tank top and long jeans, silver jewelries]



Figure 5. [KATSEYE Sophia with black wavy hair, denim fitted shirt and pleated skirt]

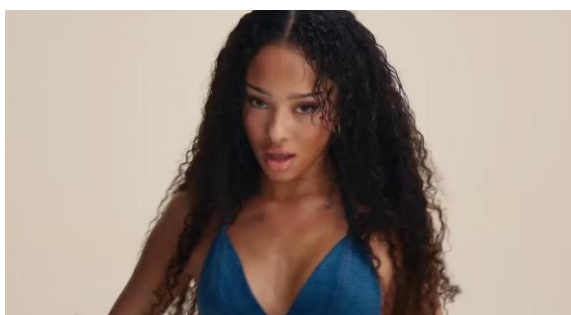


Figure 6. [KATSEYE Manon with black curly hair, custom top and extra baggy jeans, silver jewelries]



Figure 7. [KATSEYE Yoonchae with black straight hair, denim racing jacket and long jeans]



Figure 8. [Flower-like and dominos formations]

The Gap “Better in Denim” commercial starring KATSEYE was choreographed by Robbie Blue, with associate choreographers Lucas Debiasi and Marie Spiltenner. Several choreographies appear throughout the ad, such as domino, triangle, circle formations, and flower-like formations. The advertisement has wide and bright backgrounds which make the jeans stand out. The atmosphere is energetic with powerful synchronized dances that emphasizes unity through group choreography. The ad features Keli’s song ‘Milkshake’ and it concludes with the tagline ‘Better in denim’ written at the end of the video.

Better in Denim.

Figure 9. [Official tagline of Gap ft. KATSEYE campaign]

2. Intersectional Elements

2.1 Race Representation

The American Eagle advertisement centers Sydney Sweeney, a white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. In contrast, GAP advertisement showcases KATSEYE whose six members have different six nationalities. Thus, coming from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Lara (Indian), Yoonchae (Korean), Sophia (Filipino), Megan (Chinese) share the same race which is Asian. Daniela (American) has her ethnicity rooted as Venezuelan-Cuban. While Manon (Swiss) is counted as Swiss-Italian-Ghanian ethnically. The two campaigns present contrast racial representation, with American Eagle centering racial homogeneity through one single white figure while GAP showcases racial and ethnic diversity in the ad.

2.2 Gender Performance

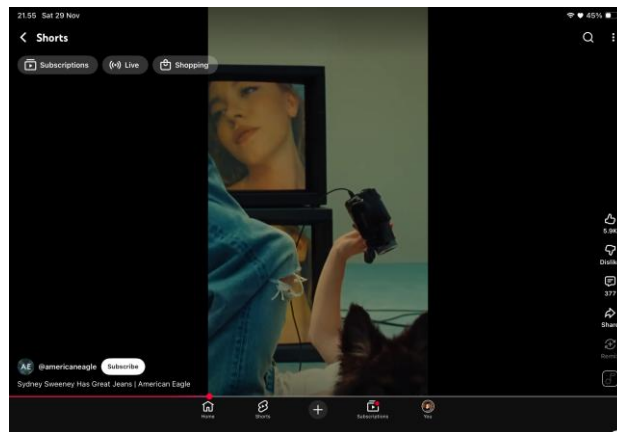


Figure 1. [Sydney Sweeney's 'sensual' body movement and demeanor in one of the ad videos]

The performance of gender in these ads can be seen in both American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney and GAP x KATSEYE's ads. Sweeney's individual femininity appears in her styling, wearing simple casual denim sets. She appears stylish while also embracing the simplicity of her look, highlighting her appeal that falls within her natural appearance. In one of her ad videos (picture 4.2.2.1), Sydney Sweeney's demeanor appears to be giving gestures of squirming in her position with a camera in her grip, showing upper parts of her body as the camera in her hand gave a close-up; highlighting the 'hotness' of her look while also promoting the denim she was using in the video (in which, giving a treatment of her appearance as the star factor). Moreover, since she is a sole presence, the ad directly promotes 'blue genes' to be great genes and thus, implicitly conveying that there is individual femininity because the ad only shows one body type and appearance.

Meanwhile, KATSEYE’s performance in GAP’s ad gives group dynamics that does not only show appearance, but also showcasing competency as in dancing in denims that the ad aims for to be trustworthy of their products. Moreover, there are also a variety of presentations in the ad since GAP used KATSEYE as their campaign actors to promote diversity and how gender performance can be collective, deriving from different countries and races.

3. Biological/Genetic Discourse



Figure 1. [American Eagle’s statements about great “jeans”]

Sydney Sweeney’s campaign with American Eagle uses wordplay in one of the clips. In the advertisement, Sweeney states: “Genes are passed down from parents to offspring, often determining traits like hair color, personality and even eye color. My jeans are blue.” and ends with the narrator stating the campaign’s tagline “Sydney Sweeney has Great Jeans” that highlights the brand’s signature denim. The sentence is also written in blue colored fonts.

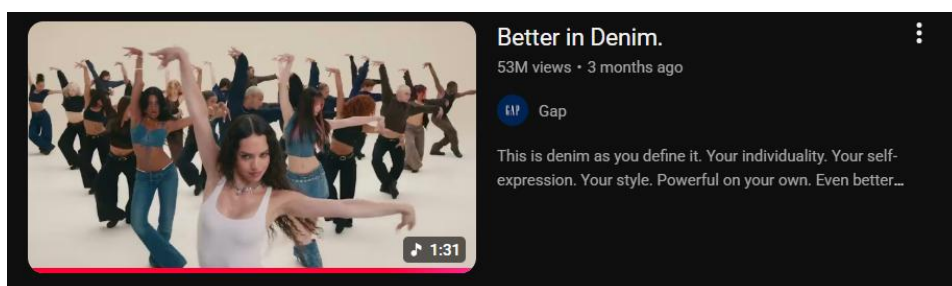


Figure 2. [GAP x KATSEYE tagline “Better in Denim”]

In contrast, GAP’s campaign with Katseye tackled Sweeney’s campaign by using word play “better in denim” that highlighted a larger degree than “great”.

Discussion

1. Power Structure and Intersectionality

In American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney's ad, they put her 'whiteness' as a universal standard that applies to her as an unmarked, natural choice for casting. In which, this reflects the deeply rooted system on how white women have more privilege in the media to be casted and starred in advertisements or movies, since 'framing whiteness outside intersectionality legitimizes a broader epistemic universe. In which 'the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of white people travel invisibly and undisturbed as race-neutral phenomena over and against the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of people of color' (Carbado, 2013).

Her femininity is also used to be highlighted as the 'star point' in the ad, it implies clear femininity: curvy yet considered as thin and conveys hotness yet simplistic look which are accessible only to those with white, middle-class cultural capital. Moreover, the 'natural beauty' that she advertised by using simple clothes and make-up shows a naturally-blessed 'good genes' which, if taken to the actor's genes, means 'white genes' with blue eyes and blonde hair. These intersect in various ways: her whiteness, femininity, and genetic factor creates layered privilege while systematically excluding multiply-marginalized women; Black, plus-size, disabled, and other non-conforming genders from cultural value and economic opportunity (Crenshaw, 1991).

GAP x KATSEYE ad presents a form of collective femininity by presenting multicultural groups whose members' identities intersect across race, nationality, culture, and style. Every member highlighted their cultural background through their clothing, even some members wear accessories to represent their culture. Megan carries a piece of her Chinese culture by always wearing her jade bracelet, Lara wearing Bindi to represent her Indian culture. Similarly, Daniela wears a silver necklace with her curly hair, portraying her Cuban-Venezuelan ethnicity. This suggests womanhood is plural and transnational. They shared choreography with dancers from different backgrounds, particularly from marginalized communities. This ad shows the collectivity not only to merely display diversity yet challenging the Western beauty standards. In the making, some dance formations also deliver unique meaning, such as flower-like circle formations that adapt a Chinese belief that round

formations symbolize equality and unity (Nasrullayeva, 2024). Whilst flower means that they're blooming together in unity.

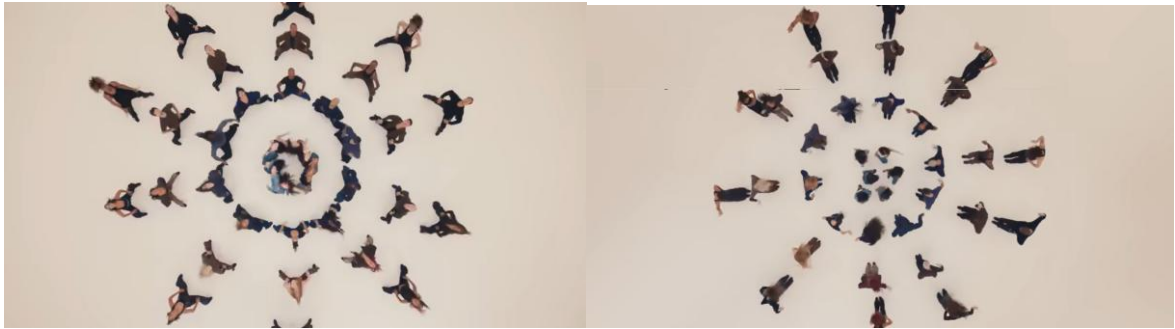


Figure 1. [Flower-like circle dance formations]

Robbie Blue also combines perfect blends of different styles in dance such as Hip-hop, Ballet, jazz funk and more. By mixing these contrasting techniques in dance, he creates something that feels meaningful in which he creates something that's contrast and different but succeeds in demonstrating unity through celebration of differences.



Figure 2. [Various dance formations]

American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney's ad centers a white, conventionally attractive, and thin celebrity whose body image and appearance align with dominant racial, gender, and class-based norms in society. By presenting this figure as the universal feminine ideal, this ad represents a single-axis concept and erases the experiences of Women of Color as well as enhancing the structural hierarchy that privileges whiteness more than other races. In contrast,

GAP x KATSEYE's ad engages more directly with intersectional concepts by bringing a racially diverse group of women, whose presence disrupts the historically white, Western-centric fashion landscape. With the clear overview of non-white, multicultural female identities, the ad implies the possibilities of various culturally-diverse representations, fully acknowledging that unequal structures shape who is seen and who is erased in social hierarchy.

Thus, while Sweeney's campaign enhances structural inequalities through non-intersectional representation, KATSEYE's collaboration actively intervenes in them by offering a more inclusive, globally aware image of femininity.

In addition to racial diversity, the GAP x KATSEYE campaign shows a considerable break in the classical gendered expectations in terms of choreography and composition of the dancers. The commercial is characterized by both men and women background dancers who do the same actions, that is, active, power-filled, and energetic instead of graceful and gentle. The design decision has significant implications as far as intersectional gender representation is concerned.

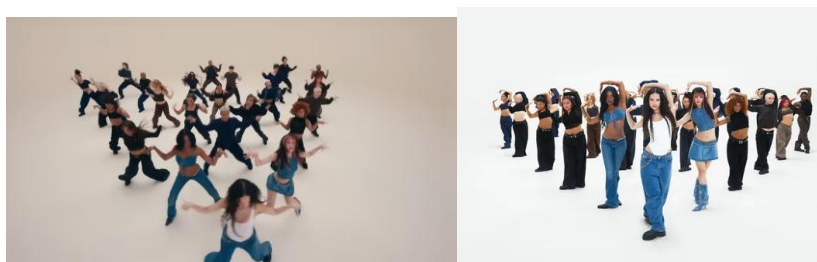


Figure 3. [Male and female dancer performing active movement]

In the KATSEYE campaign, the dance choreography is not subject to gender movement stereotyping. This is not because female dancers are positioned in such a way that they demonstrate less aggressive and feminine movements, and male dancers are restricted to violent and dominating poses. Rather, the active choreography is equally performed by both male and female dancers. This egalitarianism of the body conflicts with the tradition of commercial advertisements, which has been active over a long period, in which the body of women is choreographed into sexual appeal and is sexualized, but the body of men is represented as powerful and energetic.

The other details observed through the dances, even though the movements are dynamic and active, are not sexualized. The camera angles are also wide-angle, sweeping

rather than cutting the bodies into sexualized portions, which makes a significant difference to the Sydney Sweeney low-body position during the American Eagle campaign.

The approach is tied to such an intersectional feminist principle as the recognition of the reality that the gender oppression phenomenon appears in different manifestations in different circumstances. Crenshaw (1991) notes that Women of Color are usually subjected to the sexualization of every woman along with the denial of femininity that comes with the racist stereotype. The GAP campaign has rationalized multiple types of femininity, including athletic, strong, and active types of femininity, besides being challenging to the male gaze, which is accustomed to manipulating commercial representations of feminine bodies.

The equality between the male and female dancers regarding body movement could be defined as choreographic equality, which is an aesthetic implementation of the notion that gender is not the basis of defining physical capabilities, the corresponding body movement, and the right to be where one is, without being sexualized. This contrasts entirely with American Eagle's campaign, in which the physical looks of the model are not only the subject of the advertisement, but the object as well, and the camera angles and commentary itself emphasize that it is a body that is being sold.

In addition, this equal representation goes beyond race to an intersectional analysis of the performance of gender that is either subjugated or freed. The incorporation of male and female dancers of different races into the same choreography treatment provokes the consideration that the campaign created by GAP is an attempt to perform the multiple axes of identity simultaneously, taking into account that the system of marginalization is multi-layered: on the basis of race, gender, and representation.

2. Applying Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory

American Eagle's campaign with Sydney Sweeney uses the tagline "Sydney Sweeney has great jeans." However, before saying this line, she says: "Jeans are passed down from parents to offspring, often determining traits like hair color, personality, and even eye color. My jeans are blue." This wordplay creates confusion if she really means jeans or genes. This ambiguity sparked controversy. Having a white woman speak about having 'great genes' can implicitly reinforce the long-standing cultural glorification of white or widely known as white supremacist. Furthermore, it is also possible as an indirect promotion of eugenics. Eugenics

refers to the belief that society can be 'improved' by encouraging certain people to reproduce while preventing others from doing so. In the past, eugenics led to forced sterilization, institutionalization, and even "euthanasia" in the name of protecting the gene pool (Cristina, 2023). The term eugenics was first introduced by British anthropologist Francis Galton in 1883. He described it as the "science of human improvement," and this idea mainly centered on the supposed superiority of the "white race" (Uhlendahl et al., 2023). Consequently, the controversy centers on whether the ad functions as an intentional dog whistle or everything is just a coincidence.



Figure 1. [American Eagle tagline "Sydney Sweeney has great Jeans"]

However, KATSEYE x GAP strategically countered American Eagle's wordplay with their "Better in Denim" campaign. Following American Eagle's "Sydney Sweeney has great jeans" tagline, GAP deployed the comparative "better" to position their denim at a more superior level subtly challenging the notion that one individual's "jeans" could be deemed "great". By centering unity and diversity in their campaign, GAP reframed the conversation from individual glorification to collective representation. The choice of "better" suggested that diverse voices and inclusive representation surpass the narrow focus on a single figure. GAP positioned their denim as superior while maintaining clean, positive messaging that avoided direct attacks or controversy, proving that strategic wordplay paired with values-driven can elevate a brand above its competitors.

In the American Eagle ad, Sydney's identity as a white woman reflects how Eurocentric beauty ideals are shown in the media. The ideals revolve around having typical characteristics such as light skin tone, straight hair, physical features that are 'in line' with European facial structure (sharp noses and thinner lips), and slim body types. These standards are considered harmful because all women deal with pressure to look a certain way, but women of color also

face extra expectations based on race. This connects to Crenshaw's (1989) point that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism. Sydney also represents a kind of power tied to Europe's history. As Lowman (2014) notes, European colonialism not only took over land but also spread its ideas of beauty to the people and cultures it controlled. Even after colonialism ended, the beauty ideas introduced by Europeans stayed and continues to shape how many societies define attractiveness. Although discussions around inclusivity have expanded, Eurocentric beauty ideals still hold a dominant position globally (Elmi, 2024).

In their ad, GAP showcases KATSEYE, a group with members who come from many different race and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the ad also features backup dancers who are people of color and part of marginalized communities. By putting these diverse voices as their message in the campaign, GAP shows how representations work best when different communities stand together. This approach aligns with Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) argument that 'placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action.' Rather than treating each person's background as a separate category, GAP x KATSEYE demonstrates collective movement of representation that creates a stronger message.

The solo appearance of Sydney Sweeney in the ads reflects her personal privilege, and it is caused by Eurocentric beauty ideals that are marketed by American Eagle. As a white woman, she fits the traditional beauty ideas where whiteness and European features are the pioneer. When Sydney Sweeney shows up alone in these ads, it's a reflection of "white privilege" in the beauty world. The standards of beauty advertising often come across as supporting a very thin, young, white woman (Hernandez, 2021) and this has been the norm for so long that white women don't need any explanation for why they're there; they just get to exist as individuals. This isn't about Sydney Sweeney herself doing anything wrong. It's about a system that was built to favor people who look like her. Someone's "proximity to whiteness" allows them to benefit from white privilege without facing the same discrimination that others experience (Elmi, 2024).

In contrast, KATSEYE's campaign shows a much more diverse picture that goes beyond just the group members. All crew members, creative directors, production teams are coming from different backgrounds. The choreography was also developed by Robbie Blue

who is openly gay and identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. There are also backup dancers which are represented in the production and have different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The campaign also utilizes the soundtrack in the form of Milkshake by Kelis, a successful black woman as the background music.



Figure 2. [Behind the scene for "Better in Denim"]

3. Implications of Representation

American Eagle's latest ad concept raises a critical question: has the brand produced any campaign that does not center European representation after the Sydney controversy? Their approach to inclusivity feels increasingly uncertain. Following the backlash from Sydney's campaign in July 2025, American Eagle selected Travis Kelce for their September 2025 collaboration with Tru Kolors. This decision once again positioned the spotlight to a white figure, Travis, a well-known Kansas City Chiefs player. Although in the video several people of color appeared, Travis remains the dominant, front-facing model throughout the ad.



Figure 1. [Travis Kelce's in 'AE x Tru Kolors by Travis Kelce Drop 2]

Similarly, for its December 2025 holiday campaign, the brand selected Martha Stewart as their new face. She is none other than a white woman. Through this consistent pattern, American Eagle reinforces a rooted white supremacy and passively contributing to diversity in brand representation.



Figure 2. [Martha Stewart in 'Welcome to Martha's Denim Season']

However, GAP's commitment to inclusivity becomes clearer after the KATSEYE campaign. Following the KATSEYE ad released in August 2025, Gap introduced a holiday campaign in November 2025 featuring Sienna Spiro and their original choir. Sienna Spiro is a British singer-songwriter. The ad includes people of different races, genders, and even ages. Although they appeared as supporting roles, they are still given a part to specifically show their diverse identities.



Figure 3. [GAP holiday campaign November 2025]

As Crenshaw explains, "Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Originally articulated on behalf of black women, the term brought to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members but often fail to represent them" (Columbia Law School, 2017). In this context, it directly addresses the issue of representation, specifically how groups can "claim" members (like diversity in ads) but "failed to represent them" (tokenism).

The tension between commercial goals and social responsibility often occurs in advertisements. Both ads present diversity in how social issues are being communicated. Sydney Sweeney x American Eagle focuses on a single-axis approach and white-entered femininity, however, GAP x KATSEYE attempts to align the commercial goals with an intersectional narrative by portraying various racial and cultural identities. Both ads reveal that advertising tends to borrow the language of social issues yet rarely to put into action,

making identity politics an aesthetic rather than a structural response.

In both advertisements, identity is used as a strategic selling point, with each campaign exploiting the cultural, racial, or gendered factors of its ad's actor(s) to attract the markets and Gen Z's audience. American Eagle x Sydney Sweeney's ad commercialise a white femininity which seemed 'natural' and 'great' that uplifts even more beauty hierarchies which already exist. A different viewpoint can be seen with KATSEYE. The member's diverse backgrounds set them apart from Sydney Sweeney in terms of culture, race, and even class position. Their diversity as a group offers a wider and more inclusive form of representation. Intersectionality helps to validate that there are different types of femininity from every culture. Thus, their image has the potential to resonate with many individuals from different communities to feel seen and included rather than excluded.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis between American Eagle's (AE) campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney and GAP's campaign involving KATSEYE provides a clear picture of two different philosophies of representation in the retail industry. In the case of AE, the placement of Sydney Sweeney as a single figure—a white, blonde woman with a conventional physique—highlights the use of a single-axis approach. This advertisement, particularly with its play on words “great jeans/genes” and its focus on the actress's body, indirectly normalizes whiteness and certain beauty standards as universal and “natural.” This demonstrates the existence of layered privilege—race, gender, and genetic factors—that systematically upholds a hierarchy that benefits this group, while erasing women with multiply-marginalized identities.

In contrast, the GAP x KATSEYE campaign offers a collective narrative about femininity that is more inclusive and aware of the complexity of identity. By featuring six group members with diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, the ad visually emphasizes that womanhood is plural and transnational. The use of styling that features cultural markers (such as bindis and jade bracelets) and choreography that emphasizes unity amid diversity demonstrates GAP's efforts to be more proactive in its concept of intersectionality. This campaign successfully disrupts Western-centric views in the fashion world, recognizing that non-white and multicultural identities must also be represented on the global stage.

Overall, these two campaigns prove that representation in advertising is often used as a sales strategy, but its impact on social structures varies greatly. AE's strategy tends to reinforce existing structural inequalities by continuing to center the narrative on white figures, while GAP's strategy, although it may have commercial goals, seeks to commercialize inclusivity and offer more diverse representation. This highlights that an intersectional framework is essential for analyzing whether an advertisement truly represents the diversity of society or is merely engaging in tokenism, i.e., claiming to include members without truly representing them.

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Competing Interest: Gender studies.

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