This essay is an analysis of an advertisement for American Eagle Jeans written for my first year seminar class about semiotics. The assignment was an assessment of the manipulations of a specific print advertisement. The chosen advertisement is located below.
As a concept or idea becomes popular in our culture and begins to gather momentum, a sort of counterculture will almost inevitably emerge to rise against the concept and what it represents. In turn this counterculture becomes popular and, as one may guess, is overcome by its opposite, or what it originally opposed. One does not have to look far to see this phenomenon in action; it seems to be ever-present in our advertisements. For a long time, ads consisted of images of perfectly retouched bodies, flawless skin, and people who never seemed to make any sort of mistake. In recent years, a significant revolt has materialized against this aesthetic, resulting in a surge of individualism and the embrace and acceptance of originality in personality and style. Ironically enough, at the same time that companies encourage customers to reflect their true selves and control their own lives and decisions, they attempt to influence and control the population into conforming and buying their product. In a recent advertisement campaign from American Eagle Outfitters, the message preys on the consumer’s thirst for individuality, acceptance, and the freedom to express oneself. The ad essentially tells the readers that it embraces their imperfections and that only its product will allow them to bring out their true personalities.

American Eagle uses the theme of America in this ad to emit a sense of individualism and independence. The model that American Eagle has chosen represents the typical American well. The relaxed posture of the model and her casual look and pose signify quiet confidence in being
herself. She embodies the American character and ideal to be independent and not worrisome of the judgment of others. Most importantly, she wears what she pleases: American Eagle jeans. The model also appears to be sitting on the bleachers at what looks like a baseball field, perhaps at a high school or college. This setting relates to the targeted demographic, namely teenagers and people in their 20’s. AE thus facilitates a situation in which readers can easily imagine themselves, resulting in the seemingly logical assumption that because their lifestyle and demeanor reflects that of the model, they should have those same jeans that she wears.

If we wish to further explore the speculation that the ad appeals to the consumer’s wishes to be an individual and to stand out from others, we do not have to look any further than the choice of model to see the symbolism. The model’s striking red hair epitomizes divergence and deviation from the norm. Red hair, because of its boldness and rarity, has always signified these dynamic qualities in the minds of humans, and what better way for a company to say that they understand and accept us for our uncommonness and uniqueness than by putting a redhead in one of its advertisements?

A more superficial and disquieting observation can also be made concerning AE’s choice of model. While the ad unabashedly promotes confidence in our imperfections and seems to shun the idea of airbrushed and photo shopped Barbie dolls, the fact remains that the model is thin and tall. This decision on the part of American Eagle seems confusing or inappropriate; it contradicts the ideals promoted in their ad copy. The ad uses language such as, “one size doesn’t fit all,” and “the girl who owns every last curve of herself and lets the world see it is our girl,” which leads us to believe that the company accepts all body types as equal. This signifies a paradox in advertising, in which companies encourage individuality, as long as that individuality looks skinny, tall, and attractive.
American Eagle further perpetuates the myth of acceptance in their ambiguous presentation of the word “imperfect.” The word stands out to the reader because of its large, white letters and its placement at the bottom of the ad. At first glance, readers will only recognize it as the word, “imperfect”, yet on further analysis one will note that an apostrophe exists between the letters “I” and “M”. Due to this fact, it can also be read as the words, “I’m perfect.” By using this visual trick, the ad implies an association between the two phrases. The advertisement uses this to say to readers that their imperfections make them perfect, and that they should be proud of their flaws and eccentricities. This cleverly-placed, positive, and accepting message speaks volumes in our culture in which much negativity exists concerning self-image and confidence.

The ad creates another positive and potent image in what appears to be a sort of denim American flag pictured in the advertisement. Its stars are made up of the AE bird logo, while its stripes appear to be constructed from pieces of jeans. Because most readers often associate America with individualism and independence, this very strong and patriotic image reinforces the ad’s message that AE jeans can allow the consumer to have these desirable qualities as well. In this way, the ad assigns these attributes to its product so that they almost become synonymous with each other. Julia B. Corbett discusses this in her essay, “A Faint Green Sell: Advertising and the Natural World.” She explains that, “Even if the original function of advertising was to market simple products such as soap, advertising now functions to market feelings, sensations, and lifestyles. (234)” The message contained in the ad implicitly states that the jeans signify freedom and independence, causing consumers to subconsciously believe that if they buy AE jeans, they can purchase and own these traits and qualities.
While the overall image of the flag represents a strong and persuasive icon of autonomy which figures prominently in the ad, one also must look at the construction of the flag for deeper meaning. The different components of jeans that make up this flag are not all of the same wash, color, or style. They differ notably from one another, yet they consolidate to create a beautiful image of unity and togetherness. This implies that, like AE’s many styles of jeans, we all differ and contrast with one another, yet if we combine own unique qualities, we can create something beautiful. It is not a coincidence that the jeans collaborate to create the image of the American flag, as we regard America as a melting pot of many different cultures and backgrounds. AE uses this to their advantage in order to simultaneously promote uniqueness and individuality. This endeavor causes the company to appear more accepting than ever of consumers of all shapes, sizes, and origins.

Perhaps this ad succeeds in influencing readers not only because it appeals to a wide variety of consumers, but also because it chooses to represent an idea that appears attainable. Consumers have become increasingly distrustful and resistant to commercials and advertisements that seem fake and manipulative. In his essay, “Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising”, Jack Solomon describes the phenomenon: “There are some signs in the advertising world that Americans are getting fed up with fantasy advertisements and want to hear some straight talk. (551)” The “straight talk” in this advertisement promotes the feasible ideal of the average American. Rather than turning smart, vigilant consumers away with images of unrealistic and improbable standards, AE makes a wise decision to capture the attention of an audience that has become more apprehensive of the deception of advertising.

In a culture such as ours in which we have become accustomed to the ordinary and mundane, a growing desire exists to break free of our often humdrum lifestyles and have the
freedom to choose to live independently. Tired of masking our flaws in order to fit in with the crowd, we seek ways in which to be proud of ourselves. This American Eagle advertisement and many others like it promise consumers this reality by flawlessly combining these desires, which often go hand in hand, and presenting them in such a way as to convince us that they understand our wishes and can make them come true. American Eagle promises originality to their customers and a way for “the world to fit them.” However, there is strong irony in this method. At the same time that AE encourages us to be independent, they do it for the sole purpose of convincing us to buy their product, thereby persuading us to adopt their special “brand” of uniqueness. American Eagle promotes individualism, but not our own.