SOC GEN 191S

WINTER Q 2026

FEAR, IDENTITY, OBSESSION

How Contemporary Media Reflects and Shapes Genetic “Common Sense”

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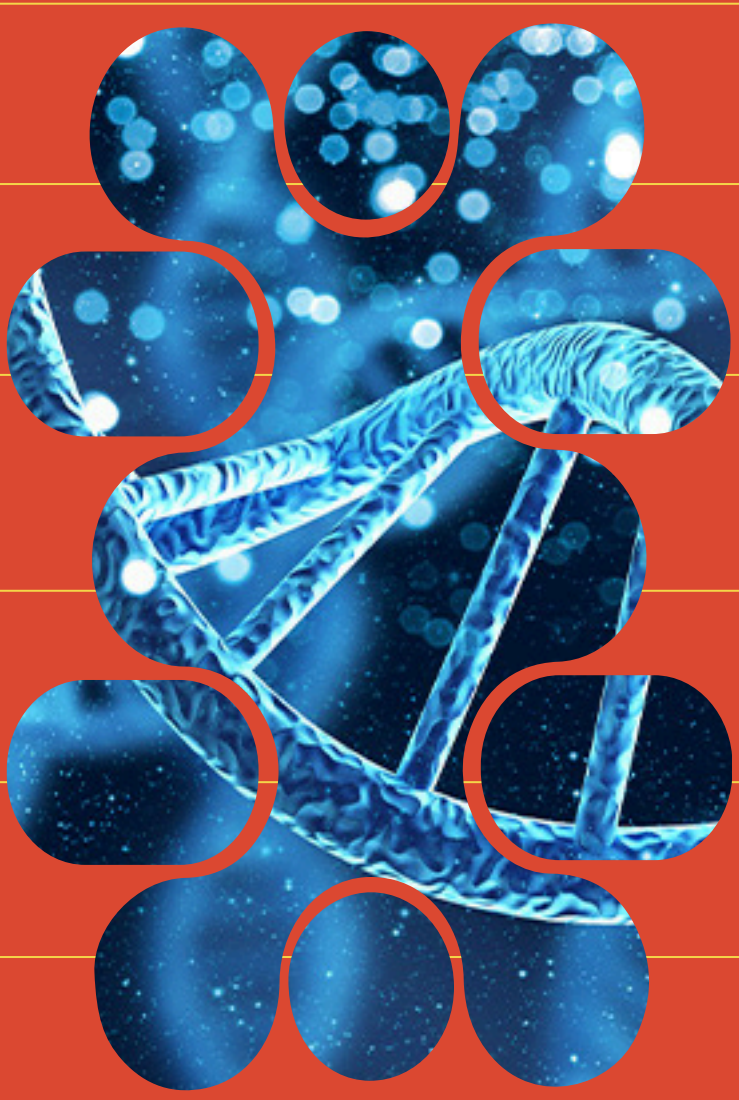

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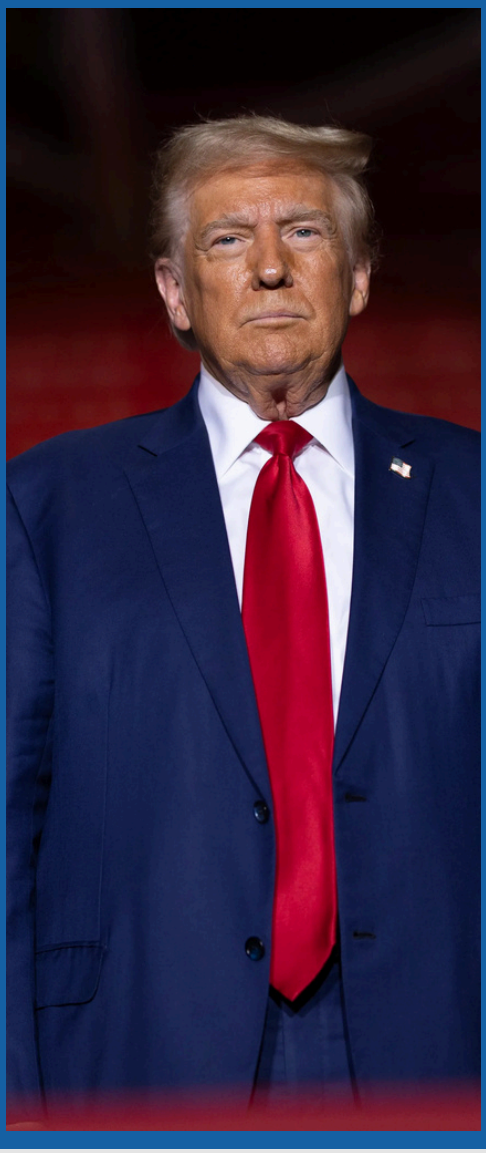

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A look into the conversation around genetics - and the sociopolitical outcomes that follow.

Gene (noun):

1. A unit of heredity which is transferred from a parent to offspring and is held to determine some characteristic of the offspring.
2. A cultural icon baked into modern society, often used to explain identity, behavior, intelligence, and worth (Nelkin & Lindee, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

The science of genetics has undoubtedly become entrenched in American society. Television shows and movies use genetic themes in their world-building and plots, genetic products are marketed to consumers to make sense of their identities, non-genetic products are marketed to consumers using genetic language, and politicians use dangerously eugenic rhetoric to advance their agendas. Inspired by the attention garnered from a particular American Eagle advertisement, which used a "good genes/jeans" troupe in its marketing, we identified a wide variety of media sources from the twenty-first century that both reflect and shape the genetic "common sense" that has come to be.

Through our research, we have identified three main themes apparent in this genetic conversation – fear(mongering), identity-building, and consumer obsession. All three of these threads come together to form a complex, chaotic, and rich dialogue. Throughout this zine, we will justify our interest in pop culture as a mechanism for "common sense" and influence, drawing readers' particular attention to the resurgence of genetic language in the broader American political discourse, and explore how different media forms illustrate our three identified themes. Each of these points is an important thread in the overall picture of the genetic fanaticism in the United States.

Sydney Sweeney for American Eagle, 2025

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Media forms play an influential role across many aspects of U.S. culture. They are an inescapable influence that we are incessantly subjected to. New forms of media have become increasingly intimate and attached to how we interact with the world around us, beyond entertainment and leisure. The deeply embedded and embodied nature of modern media makes it impossible to separate pop culture forms from "culture" as a whole (Grindstaff, 2008). The way ideas are portrayed in the media directly shapes our opinions across social, cultural, and political contexts, and in turn, our ideas shape the way we consume media. In this project, we will address how genetics is represented in American media, and the direct impact that this representation has on genetic "common sense". We will examine relevant dimensions of media production and consumption – how they both contribute to and illustrate various genetic ideas.

The ubiquity and intimacy of media formats in both public and private life blur the boundary between consumer and consumed (Grindstaff, 2008). Social media is a particularly interesting case study for this very point, as it bears a nexus between corporations, government, and individual actors. Social media can be understood as a microcosm of broader culture; it represents an overt "habitable space" – a cultural arena where everyone is both a contributor and a consumer (Roberts et. al., 2019). But this phenomenon of joint culture-building is not unique to social media, and it is not by any means an entirely new trend. In fact, this idea of the "common sense" that we hope to unfurl draws inspiration from Gramscian philosophy. Gramsci's idea of common sense is deeply tied to popular culture. His conception of "common sense" is the sense of the masses,

built by historical events, philosophical opinions, and scientific advances (Lems, 2022). It includes elite ideologies, in that the media produced by large corporations or government entities influences public opinions, but it is also "rooted and enacted in the everyday," emphasizing the importance of the lived experiences of the masses in building this knowledge space (Lems, 2022). It is also important to note that common sense to Gramsci is not a static or monolithic presence. It continually transforms itself, and it may include contradictory or fragmentary pieces (Lems, 2022). Media forms are an effective source for examining "common sense" because, as aforementioned, they are built and consumed by all groups in society, and they shape and reflect vast, chaotic, and dynamic content. The evidence we have gathered reveals a real obsession with genetics as both a scientific and a cultural being.

Representations of genetics in the media bleed into different social arenas, particularly within political messaging and discourse. Political figures use genetic language to persuade voters to adopt particular attitudes surrounding issues such as public health, reproduction, or immigration. These genetic narratives can become widespread through popular media and directly contribute to the broader genetic "common sense" in the United States. By examining the impact of contemporary media on public policy, we identify political messaging that may echo early eugenic frameworks. Recent examples include the use of genetic language to promote anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States. President Donald Trump has made statements associating crime, immigration, and genetics, asserting that "we got a lot of bad genes in our country right now" (Martschenko, 2024). These statements promote his agenda of detaining and deporting immigrants in the United States. In this way, political claims in the media have been used to justify racial violence and increase social division within the country. Additionally, ideas about immigrants "replacing" white populations have been circulating in the media. The pronatalist movement, supported by Elon Musk, claims that declining fertility and population collapse are an imminent threat to the United States (Sear, 2025). As the owner of the popular social media site "X", formerly known as Twitter, Elon Musk has enormous influence over social perceptions of ideologies such as pronatalism. For example, on July 7th 2022, Musk posted on X, "Doing my best to help the underpopulation crisis. A collapsing birth rate is the biggest danger civilization faces by far" (@elonmusk). With over 235,000 likes and 32,000 comments, it is evident how many people are influenced by pronatalist statements made online, especially by prominent sociopolitical figures. Patrik Hermansson, a British researcher known for performing undercover journalism in alt-right movements, defined the main goal of the pronatalist movement as "promoting the idea that certain people should have babies that have been improved with positive eugenics" (Wilson, 2025). Positive eugenic campaigns from the 1920s and 1930s promoted this idea of the white nuclear family, and pronatalism was intentionally designed to discriminate, both based on race and sexuality (Fronc, 2007). The method used by pronatalist advocates is to instill fear in the general public as a tool to maintain control over women's bodies. It is important to identify and criticize these ideologies that echo past eugenic attitudes. Amplified within the media, eugenic language continues to find its way into political spaces that influence public opinion and policy.

FEAR(MONGERING)

In TV and Film

A common theme within contemporary film and television is the use of genetic ideas to display fear. With the rise of genetic technology, modern society has become fascinated with interpretations of genetic alterations, mutations, and social hierarchies. We can see this particularly within science fiction films and franchises, as well as in television shows. One prime example of this is within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Heroes such as the Hulk, Spiderman, Captain America, and numerous other characters received their powers through scientific experimentation or alterations. On Marvel fan databases, fans have identified more than 1,000 characters who are subject to genetic engineering, both in Marvel comics and films (Marvel Database). One particularly fascinating subset of this franchise is the X-Men films. These movies follow characters labelled as "mutants" who are genetically distinct from the standard human due to their possession of the "X-gene". The premise of the series is how these mutants are ostracised and labeled as dangerous by society (Grimsted et al., 2024). Through this narrative, we can see how film can exacerbate the fear of being "genetically different". These characters can be understood as "cultural objects" that resonate with the dominant ideologies and practices of the larger social order (Parks, 2017). These representations of genetics in film can amplify fears surrounding genetic difference and reinforce the idea that genetic variation is threatening.

Television shows are riddled with genetic references and themes, particularly in crime and medical dramas. For example, in the popular crime drama CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, “39% of the episodes feature cases where DNA evidence is used to help solve the crime” (Bull, 2019). The portrayal of DNA as a foolproof method for identifying perpetrators has become known as the “CSI Effect”, which can be defined as “the harboring of increased expectations of forensic evidence and/or exaggerating the value of forensic evidence as a result of viewing forensic crime shows” (Schweitzer & Saks, 2007). In reality, this type of forensic investigation takes much longer than depicted and is not an entirely reliable way of proving someone guilty. Similar shows, like Bones, which follows the story of forensic scientists who work with the FBI to solve crimes, represent these same themes. One example from this TV series is in Season 5, Episode 21, where Bones depicts the forensic scientists being able to obtain a full DNA profile from the belly of a dust mite found in a victim's mouth. Real-world forensic scientists identified this case as highly improbable given that the sample was so small and contaminated, especially by the victim’s DNA (Beddow, 2017). This use of genetic testing to solve crimes could be seen as an attempt to scare the audience into obeying the law, conveying the idea that if you commit a crime, your DNA will implicate you. By implying that DNA evidence can be used as an all-powerful tool of surveillance, viewers can become convinced that their DNA could be used against them.

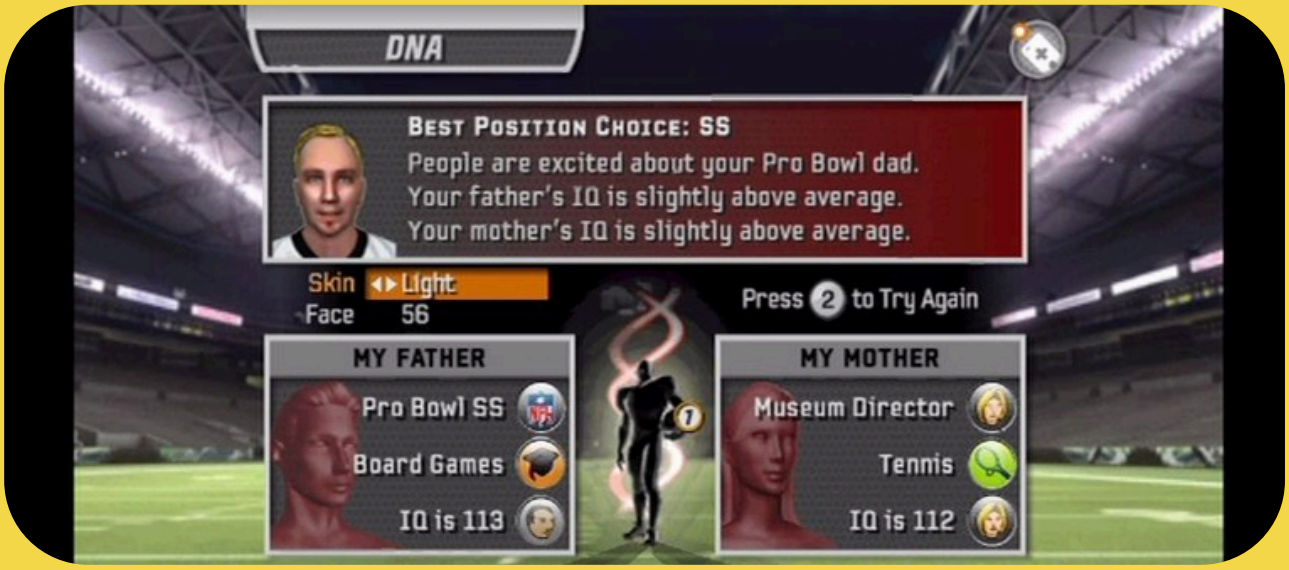
Ultimately, contemporary film and television use genetic themes and language as a narrative device and a social fear-inducing tool. Modern genetics is framed in a way that emphasizes danger and surveillance associated with genetic technology. Science fiction films and crime dramas are just two examples of how genetic language in the film and TV industry influences public genetic “common sense”. Framing genetics as something that can determine one’s identity creates real-life effects on the viewers consuming this form of media.

CSI DNA Laboratory Set

X-Men Comic Book Cover, 1997

IDENTITY BUILDING BLOCKS

Another arena where genetic common sense becomes apparent is in identity-building. A cultural assumption that has been built over time is that human identity lies largely, if not exclusively, in the genes (Nelkin & Lindee, 2004). Nelkin and Lindee argue in The DNA Mystique that the gene of pop culture is not a biological entity. Though it references biological mechanisms, it is used to discuss power and personhood more than science (2004). Kendrick Lamar's song "DNA." highlights this point excellently. He cites his own heritage and identity traits as being built into his DNA, including, "royalty," "hustle," "riches buildin'," "power, poison, pain, and joy." He sings, "this is my heritage, all I'm inheritin'" and discusses how he was "born like this" (Lamar, 2017). His song highlights all aspects of his material inheritance, including his DNA and the physical conditions he grew up in. Although he acknowledges this "soft" heredity, the focus of the song is certainly the DNA that forms his identity, and how he will pass on those identity-building blocks to future generations. (Genius, 2017). A song with similar genetic troupes is "Genetics" by Meghan Trainor, where she relays that her beauty and body are due exclusively to her genetic makeup (2020). Like



Screenshot from Madden 07 Player Creation

Lamar, she touts her "good genes" by explicitly saying, "My DNA is graded A." Unlike Lamar, however, Trainor's song exemplifies a "hard" heredity, where genes exclusively and entirely define oneself. Together, these two songs illustrate the dynamic nature of the conversation around genetics in pop culture. The two reference their genetics in forming different aspects of their identities, but what they have in common is their "good DNA" as fact, offering an explanation for their identity and a justification for their success. The influence that these two celebrities (and others) have in the social sphere makes these themes significant for our overall understanding of the genetic "common sense" today. From this, we gather that even for the most rich and famous among us, genes are still the most important actors involved in shaping their identities.

> "I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA. I got hustle, though, ambition flow inside my DNA." - Lamar, 2017

Another media form that reveals identity building themes in genetics are video games, which often allow users to build their own characters, sometimes with DNA as the starting point. The two examples we'll discuss here are Madden and The Sims. Madden 07 allows users to build their ideal football player through something akin to selective breeding. Users have the ability to "re-roll" for either or both parents in order to optimize their athlete, and the parent's DNA denotes both physical and intellectual traits, from athleticism and IQ to career (Rashad, 2024). In The Sims, there is no single goal like athleticism in Madden, but users have a lot of freedom to build their humanoid characters and breed them to produce more genetic offspring. Physical traits like eye and hair color, along with personality traits assigned via points may be inherited by future generations (theSimsWiki). Both of these video games allow users to build out the identities of their avatars by manipulating the DNA of their parents. While the traits are not always inherited in a straightforward manner, there is no mention of anything outside of DNA that may affect the identity of the offspring. Genetic identities become naturalized in the avatar, again illustrating how our common sense strongly bases identity traits in genetic makeup, whether the traits be physical or mental.

Screenshots from The Sims Video Game

Video games and music both represent unique media formats as they are (often) built by powerful companies and famous celebrities, but are ubiquitous forms of entertainment and leisure. In this case, the genetic "common sense" found in these media types is one that highlights the importance of our genetic makeup in building our sense of self. The video game features and song lyrics simplify the biological mechanisms of genetic inheritance, representing a point where the biological entity of "the gene" instead becomes a cultural one. Moreover, this cultural entity is vital to the building of personhoods of fictional avatars, celebrity bodies, and in turn, the lived identities of those who consume this media.

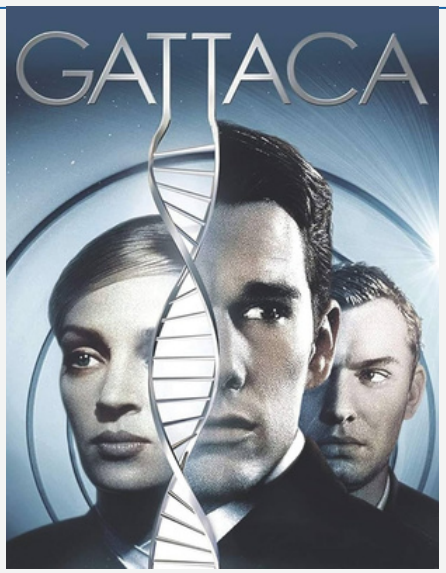
CONSUMER OBSESSION AND OPTIMIZATION

Another prominent thread in the media's shaping and reflecting of genetic "common sense" is how this conversation is driven by intense consumerism and a trend toward self-optimization. These factors work to create a constant conversation around genetics in public spheres – on advertisements, in podcasts, and on social media. In fact, a commercial advertisement for a clothing company is what sparked our initial interest in this topic. Sydney Sweeney, a prominent actress, embodies many Western beauty ideals – she's white, blonde, and conventionally attractive. Last year, she participated in an American Eagle campaign, where she discussed what "genes" are (i.e. passed from parent to offspring, defining physical and mental traits). The ad is premised on the idea that "Sydney Sweeney has great genes/jeans" (Norwood, 2024). The ad immediately faced huge backlash, and was discussed widely online. Many felt that it mirrored eugenic ideals; by supposing that Sweeney's genes are great, the company implies that others' are poor (Norwood, 2024). On social media, some called the ad "eugenic," "white supremacist," and even "Nazi propaganda" (Lavietes, 2025). In contrast, some conservatives, and even the White House itself, pronounced their defense of Sweeney and the ad. Popular conservative activist Charlie Kirk tweeted, "Are all the people complaining about the Sydney Sweeney fake controversy just ugly liberal women with bad genes?" (2025). President Trump wrote on his social media Truth Social, "Sydney Sweeney, a registered Republican, has the 'HOTTEST' ad out there" (Norwood, 2024). Shortly after its release, Dunkin' released their own ad touting the good genetics of their star, Gavin Casalengo. Once again, the ad uses genetics as an explanation for the good-looks of the actor as he says, "This tan? Genetics." (Lamour, 2025). While there was less of an online debate about this ad than the former, many online discussed the apparent pattern of genetic language in commercials.

This trend reveals two key points. First, it displays the constant conversation that occurs in public dialogue surrounding genetic themes. The companies, their marketing teams, the general public, news outlets, even politicians all participated in this discussion. Second, it shows a use of genetic themes to push consumers toward self-optimization. While customers can't change their genetics, perhaps they can purchase these products to become closer to those actors in these campaigns.

Genetic products and services play on this theme of optimization in a more direct way. A new product, IVF+, from a company called Nucleus Genomics offers parents the ability to pick from their embryos based on genetic profiles created by the company. Their slogan, "Have your best baby," and their advertisements in New York subways highlight genetic factors in different traits like IQ and height (Regalado, 2025). The company advertises to consumers a way to literally optimize their babies, and thus, their own lineage. Once again, customers cannot alter their own genome, but now they can optimize their children's. The company plays overtly into parental concerns about the outcomes of their children, and advertises genetic "choice" as a safeguard against disease and "poor" traits. Once again, social media outrage ensued. Some argue that all of these ads are "rage bait," i.e. controversial ads that get people talking, thus increasing awareness (Snelling, 2025). Other critiques online include accusations of "eugenics" and a widening of the wealth gap in the promotion of such products (Washington Post, 2025). Once again, the conversation around genetics is incessant and chaotic, with strong emotions from fear to excitement about new technologies and the way they advertise themselves.

CONCLUSION



GATTACA Film Poster, 1997

Gavin Casalengo for Dunkin', 2025

Nucleus Genomics Subway Ad, 2025

In the 21st century, technology and media have grown at an explosive pace, one that has occurred so quickly that research on their social and cultural impacts cannot keep up. For this reason, we became interested in examining these impacts on the broader cultural knowledge about genetics in the United States. Across a variety of contemporary media forms, genetics has become a powerful cultural symbol. The examples we explored throughout this zine demonstrate how this media shapes and reflects genetic "common sense". We identified three common threads in this genetic conversation – fear(mongering), identity-building, and consumer obsession. Recognizing these categorical impacts is important when discussing genetic media narratives to help determine how the public understands these as scientific and cultural concepts. This project highlights how genetic language circulates through contemporary media to shape social attitudes, influence political discourse, and contribute to the ever-evolving genetic "common sense" in the United States.

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