

Jeans in Genes

How consumption and symbolism of jeans have changed over time

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I laughed when I found old photos of my grandmother, my mother and me from our teenage years, but then something struck me. At around 16 years old we were all wearing jeans – each in different eras. Jeans seem to be a solid movement from subculture to subculture, changing and adapting through time. My Grandma was part of the social group back in the mid 50s called Bodgies and Widgies. Her jeans were pedal pushers, which she wore with a white blouse and flat shoes made easy for dancing and riding on the back of motorbikes. There was a moral panic over this culture of youth because they presented a threat to the Australian way of life by consuming goods from American culture and being unpatriotic (Stratton 2012, p. 185). This generation of youth ‘articulated a new radical working class critique of Australian society whilst, at the same time, helping to establish the “teenager” youth period as a real category’ (Stratton 1984, p. 21). For the first time there was an abundance of work for youth, allowing them to earn significant money and contribute to a new consumer market.

My mother was part of a subculture known as ‘Sharpies’, which were predominantly located in Melbourne. The ‘Sharpie culture was created when the hippy culture became too mainstream and commercialised’ and it was no longer considered ‘cool’ or deviant from social norms (Beilharz 2012, p. 65). Just like the Widgies before them, the Sharpies were connected by working-class youth consuming the market. However, the Sharpies – considering their working-class wages – tended to wear expensive clothing. (Bessant 2009, p.21) Even certain brands were important to the Sharpies. So was born the demand for ‘Lee’ and ‘Levi’ jeans; you were nothing without that label in Sharpie cultures, if you wore jeans they were the only acceptable ones.

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s changed sociological perceptions of youth. Although predominantly focused only on working-class male youths in England, their method for defining subculture and its drivers is still used in society today by some theorists. Subcultures are formed when youths cannot, or will not, identify with social norms of the time. With youth wanting to pull away from social norms, they attract others who feel the same. Subculture is cemented when identity is formed. The CCCS identified that, for the first time, youth had a dispensable income, mostly from working, which allowed them to consume like previous generations had never done before. Such was the way for my grandmother and my mother.

As with all theories there are criticisms with the work of the CCCS in that they over-romanticise working-class youth, ignored racial and cultural issues and did not consider young women's involvement in subculture. Women were a driving force behind fashion changes like jeans, but the CCCS theories do not recognise women as being part of the subculture.

My teenage years in the 1990s were a fashion tragedy when I reflect back, but sure enough it was all about the jeans. Not only were brands important but styles changed with seasons and designers at least twice a year, making the consumer market bigger than ever before. The look was all about dirty, ripped or unkempt jeans – the baggier the better – worn with flannelette shirts. The boundaries between subcultures, especially in the 90s, seemed to be fluid more so than ever before. Youth was no longer typecast to a particular subculture as defined by the CCCS, but moved between groups depending on a range of factors. The physical display of identity was largely done by clothing, hairstyles and accessories and this was a means of being accepted by society and identifying where your place was within a larger peer group (Deutsch 2010, p. 231). Youth had changed a fair bit since my grandmother's days and the way of growing through youth to adulthood was no longer the same. McDonald theorised that the 'old method of constant employment and own place' was no longer relevant and therefore left youth of the 90s unguided in development into adulthood, which resulted in higher levels of insecurity and anxieties (McDonald, cited in White & Wyn 2013, p. 181).

The 90s also saw the development of a new theory on youth, based on arguments by sociologists such as Weber and Baudrillard, called post-subcultural theory. Weber believed that status differentiates even between the same class systems and Baudrillard believed that everyone creates a style and that youth creates culture through fashion. This is a breakaway from subcultures being defined by behaviours or deviance, and shifts to a lifestyle existence in youth. Lifestyles emerged as subcultural theories no longer defined a new youth of the 90s because youth was constructing lifestyles that were flexible and fluid in adapting to the world around them.

Jeans have gone through a stage of diffusion and defusion in being consumed by a subculture, such as the Widgies and Sharpies, to become commercialised and consumed on a mass market the world over. Jeans are no longer seen as a significant part of youth, culture or deviance, but as a symbol of status by the brands one wears and styles that are in fashion. Jeans have become so commonplace within western society that it is no longer only youths wearing them. Consumer culture is now 'a defining characteristic of being young' (White & Wyn 2013, p.188). If youth do not conform to consuming what is seen to be 'cool' by their peers, then it can lead to a sense of exclusion and high levels of anxiety and even depression (White & Wyn 2013, p. 189). There is a growing fear that the consumer culture has led to a 'McDonaldisation'¹ of materialistic identities for youth lifestyles, and that identities are no longer formed out of breaking from mainstream norms like previous generations.

Jeans throughout the generations have defined, symbolised and consumed what it means to be a teen through time. Their representation in early subcultural theory was set as a defining act against social norms to symbolise a subculture by brands and attitudes to social norms. Then through diffusion and defusion, jeans were no longer a part of subcultures so much as a lifestyle in youth. The relevance of jeans through society has changed dramatically from my grandmother, to my mother, then to me; it will be interesting to see where it goes for my daughter.

References

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About the author

I am a single parent of three children and had no idea what I wanted to study. Through my four years of part-time study, I found my passion in working with adolescents and hope to further my studies in high school education. I hope to study the Graduate Diploma in Education next year and get to work with high schools in rural areas.

¹ McDonaldisation is the process by which the ideas and principles pertaining to fast-food restaurants are beginning to dominate more and more sectors of societies thanks to globalisation (Ritzer, 2006).