



JEANS: FASHION ICON AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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Abstract: *This paper aims to present the denim clothing, specifically jeans trousers, as a fashion icon. Seeks to present this product as material culture, considering material culture as detailed understanding of the symbolic properties that remain into the products. Also presents an understanding of how the consumption of jeans trousers happens, in that impregnated symbolic base that has been built upon them, during an evolution of meanings. It is concluded that the understanding of this product as material culture comes to contribute to making these meanings useful for both creators and consumers of these clothing, which can create different meanings for the same costume.*

Keywords: *Fashion, Jeans, Material Culture, Symbolic Consumption*

1. Introduction

Fashion more specifically on Clothing is an influential builder of many meanings that can be materialize in an experience of consumption. Consumption as a dynamic activity has a rational and symbolic logic (LEITÃO, et al., 2006). Symbolic features are the subjective part of the consumption and the rational an objective part of it, which generate the motivations as their culturally constructed meanings between the society and the individual.

Both meanings present in the advent of fashion products as new meanings acquired in their evolution and perpetuity are related to the form of socialized knowledge shared by social groups. This shared comprehension is called Social Representation. This knowledge socially shared makes the clothes pieces to gather connotations that come in many different cultural contexts.

Therefore we can see why several scientific areas are deeply affected by Fashion, and in turn, fashion can be seen in the light of various sciences such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, economics, marketing and others. This is because the Fashion regarding clothes is able to complete the picture of the society history and as part of this history, is a widespread phenomenon of human behaviour present in his interaction with the world that has become a process of social communication (LIPOVETSKY, 1989; MILLER, 2001; SOLOMON, 2002).

The relationship between the object and its meaning for people in a culture, or in other words, the importance and influence that have shaped the cultural identity of a society makes these objects, in the circumstance of clothing, a field for these sciences study, and specifically for the material culture researchers. That means that the technical aspects of clothing manufacturing, commercialization and consumption forms are relevant to us, as we can mentioned it to the general problem of organization, development and societal changes (ALMEIDA, 2002, p. 137).

This fact occurs due to the easiness that some clothing products have to acquire new social representations that renew their meanings, detaching them from their technical characteristics and extending their consumption, thereby making them a Fashion Icon. (CRANE, 2006, p. 347).

The consumption of the fashion icons products transit intensely and particularly in the world of contemporary culture, and with the participation of consumers in the process is possible to notice that

some products become special because it works as a communication vector of several generations. Thereby, the consumption of this type of product becomes driven by symbolic meanings acquired in the cultural evolution of societies in overlapping their functionality.

The result is that we come across a product that turns into material culture, full of symbolic meanings, being consumed by their ability to aggregate and serve as stimulus, helping individuals to define their role, their self-image, and thus to get adequate performance for every situation in which they are inserted whenever they wear this product.

The denim products, especially jeans trousers, since its appearance as handmade process and its introduction in the industrial evolution and taking place in the fashion system, while manipulator of meanings became that icon product, having an important role in the material culture and consumption of the societies. Although it has undergone constant metamorphosis throughout its history, it has in parallel been part of successive changes of social scenario and is still full of socially shared sense.

The facility that new meanings can be attributed to jeans clothes can intensify his elevation to an icon (CRANE, 2006, p. 347).

This effect makes the jeans trousers a special garment, probably due to its ability to overcome the reductive configuration of a product, therefore to materialize itself in the physical representation of "immortalized fashion." The Jeans are stable in their type of "Product of Style", with several periods of interest and consumption over the years and still today, constituting a broad area of creativity, production and trade, as well as still holds future projections.

In this context, was created this research to present the jeans trousers as a fashion icon and as a representative of the material culture of a society, especially through social representations and symbologies raised from the evolution of this garment that guide its consumption today.

To understand the symbols assigned to this garment that could constitute material culture, it was carried out a questionnaire to be applied to a very specific population where the dress codes were diluted and had a very wide age range, so it was opted for a college environment, choosing the Minho University as a model.

1.1 The Denim Clothes

The first symbolism that Denim Clothes had was strictly based on its functional characteristics associating them as work clothes. Seen as a "clothing uniform" during the World War I, had its high point because both Levi's and Lee brand's made military uniforms for Americans Army Soldiers and for those who stayed working in the factories.

Still in that period another symbolism incorporated to Jeans was its use by the American Cowboys explored by the Hollywood movies, that promote these characters as heroes wearing Jeans Trousers (the *vaqueras* trousers). In this context started the dissociation of the jeans as a utilitarian clothe, rising socially the Jeans Trousers, being related to others symbolisms such live style of independency, uncomplainingly, and sometimes solitude, current in the Cowboy life style, which help to associate freedom towards these garment.

On World War I the denim clothes companies supply the American Army not only with the denim itself to the army uniform, but mostly with the clothing for the soldiers where they wore not in the battles. But in the World War II, with the society changes and the companies starting to concern with others niches market, in this context, the companies starts to invest in a female public because woman was the society image in this period. Therefore the manly image in the Jeans trousers was replaced for a strong, independent and practical image that the women had to transmit (Figure 1).

Not only the heroic glory were symbolized the Jeans trousers. Another strong symbolism associated to it was the rebellious sight, built by the youth generation dissatisfied with the war. They formed the

opposition subculture, with their Harley-Davison motorcycles travelling through the country spreading this image associating to this garment. It is certainly, up to our days, the most remembered symbolism but is also when the Jeans trousers become a fashion product.

In all the history of Denim until the end of 40s and beginning of 50s, show it as utilitarian and work clothes. Despite it personify the strong and freedom of the cowboys, the resistance and durability of work clothes and the heroism of the North Americans people, the Denim clothes still carried an inferior class distinction.

However, this same distinction, incorporated in multiples images of the young cowboy or rebel, would be explored by the Hollywood movies which were the responsible for spread of a new identity for Jeans dressing as symbolic casual clothes worldwide, (LASTRUCCI, 2005, P.58), especially for the youth. And the women were not forgotten, the sexy image of woman wearing Jeans trousers were constant on the movie at that time.

At the same time, a partnership starts between music and fashion more specifically among rock and roll and the Jeans trousers. In the cinema, Elvis in the 1957 movie Jailhouse Rock, built a double-barrelled symbolism, because at the same time sum more negative points to the idea of Jeans trousers as a representative of the marginalized or inferior classes, it was worn by one of the greatest young singer at that time (Figure 1).

Because of this image, there was a time that Jeans trousers were forbidden be worn by the young people, even at school. In this context, the mass culture, specifically advertising, was used by Jeans brands, it became fundamental to fight the stereotypes created towards these products. The companies felt compelled to defend their products, a good example was a Levi's & Co. advertising exposed on figure 1: "Jeans: Right for School!" (KYI, 2005, p. 42).



Figure 1: Evolution of advertising of the Denim Clothes that accompany the progress of this clothes itself.

At the time, the youth people start to determine what was on fashion, which turn an appropriate moment for the Jeans trousers to drop the reputation of working clothes and were promoted as a young product, happy and elegant (KYI, 2005, p. 43). Formal outfits were replaced and the Jeanswear became the student youth "uniform". The suits expressed values that no longer match to the typical university students' values that expanded new connotations – freedom, equality and absence of social classes (CRANE, 2006, p. 345 - 347).

In the social matter, another change status it surge because of two motives, the first one referring to the fact that workers classes (who wear denim only to work, in the fields or factories) acquired more amounts of leisure clothes, consuming post modern clothes which Jeans trousers were part of it. The second point was that medium classes, influenced by music, advertisements and movies, maintain their consumption style based on identify of the industrial society equating clothes between society classes (CRANE, 2006, p. 390). The Jeans trousers seem to get, in that time its most contemporary symbolism, its democratic status.

The counterculture of the 70s came to make stronger the "love affair" among Jeans and the ideology. And it was the high moment of the interaction between the object and society, because was a time of low consumption and customization. In this idealism of the counterculture, the young hippies start to protest

against the life style of their parents, dressed on business suits living centred in consumption. However, the Jeanswear was associated to youth, and it didn't took a long time to the adults start to imitate their young sons and start to use Jeans trousers also, at that moment associated to Youth, Freedom and Seduction.

Until the end of 70s, the Jeans trousers had its apogee, included by the hand of the Yves Saint Laurent it got in the *haute-couture* fashion shows. At the beginning of the 80s a "sophistication" movement happen with Jeanswear and other symbolisms starts to shape toward these products, washing and finishing process were applied to reproduce aging and continuous using appearance, becoming a desired product. A period signalized as a era of the "design jeans", which brought to the Jeans trousers a strong connotation to status, derived especially, from brand logotypes on the trousers that became the more important piece, even more that the shape or the style itself.

In the "Jeans design" context, the durability concept changed completely because it appeared different styles, tiding up this product to the fashion cycle signalized by these changes in seasonal collections. A new durability notion was settling: the fashion time. Then, there was a huge difference between a new or old Jeans, brand A or Brand B, expensive or cheap Jeans.

An additional aspect at that time, there wasn't like other times, a reference group associated to the use of Jeans trousers but many. All of the subcultures were supplied with Denim brands to their group. Was the initiation of "Premium Era" in Jeans trousers configured as inverse to the market share phenomena. This is because an additional effect: Jeans are now present on mass-market and fast-fashion stores, trough large retail companies working as segment leaders of low prices products and this polarization between medium and high markets seems to be the most striking tendency on current scenario. There are an increasing segment of consumers that consume these trousers with medium and low prices.

It's possible to observe that the investments in clothing are less and less in current economic situation, which pressure all markets even Jeans trousers and Denim to adjust themselves and propose to the different market segments the best relation between offer, brand, quality and price. It's become the reflection of the contemporary society itself that lives on a market crisis affecting the consumer behaviour.

1.2 Social Representation and Symbolic Consumption

The Social Representations has its social side and its side affective/symbolic. From a social knowledge, the social representations are extracted from groups and as a result of symbolic process, they are particular because depends of the relation between the consumer and the product. The mix of experience of each one with the experience of others (the social) continually creates experiences that constitute the reality of all (GIGLIO, 2003, p. 138). That's why the shared social concept is related to development of "social imaginary" conception with no false representation (JUNQUEIRA, Lília).

Clothes serve as a communication vehicle and all of the communication takes place by symbols (Engel, 1995 apud MIRANDA, 2008, p. 23). The communication related to clothes is a dynamic process in which the shared meanings are created and negotiated for a common understanding. Between the emitter and the receptor must have minimum level of accordance about dressing meanings for the interactions occur. As an example, the "appropriate clothes" for a job interview or a "wedding dress" (MIRANDA, 2008, p. 23).

The cultural context, accordingly to McCracken (1989 apud D'ANGELO, 2004) it is compound by cultural categories (that classify uncountable social phenomenon accordingly to gender, age and social classes, etc.) and cultural principles (ideas and values that organize and evaluate the phenomena and base their categorization). Such as fashion products, two aspects derive on cultural context, the advertising and the fashion itself.

Not all of the clothes meanings are the same for all the consumers once each one reacts in a particular way over the elaboration of concepts created by the fashion and disseminated by advertising. In addition to that, personal concepts diverge accordingly with a personal history of each individual their learning process

and its social cultural context. Thus, each symbol code attribute depends on the cultural context of the product, and on the consumer (McCracken, 1989 apud D'ANGELO, 2004), also follows this flow.

In this sense it is necessary to understand that clothing communicates with society through their meanings over time, allowing the construction of meanings relatively open and closed. These clothes whose meaning is relatively "open", tend to be associated to opposite concepts like work/leisure, rebelliousness/conformist. The items whose image is relatively "closed" tend to represent a specific meaning: work or leisure, rebelliousness or conformist (CRANE, 2006, p. 358).

Now, despite the fact that the consumer has more knowledge about products it is hard for them to distinguish if it is based on their technical functions and in its quality, even because this kind of differentiation by industrial knowledge is limited to a few groups of consumers. Therefore, this implies that products serve as symbols that are evaluated, bought and consumed by its symbolic content (MIRANDA, 2008).

2. Development of the Practical Study

The present article is part of the result of a dissertation Master in Design and Marketing made at Minho University, Portugal. The study's main focuses were explored and understood the consumer's behaviour of Jeanswear through a questionnaire inquiry. This aimed to determine different types of consumer profiles according to different age groups. However, it is possible to extract from this study all the symbolism associated to the Jeanswear for a determinate group, because the universe studied in this research was employees (teachers and non-teaching staff) and students from Minho University.

2.1 Study Sample

The research was focussed to the academic society of Minho University in an extension that considered its employees (teachers and non-teaching staff) and students. This sample was selected with the principle that this "group" would be able to function as a reflection of changes taking place in terms of consumption patterns in certain time, in a determinate culture as the young adolescents and the young adults that compose the researched group that according to some authors, belong to subcultures and "style tribes" that leads to imitation of other age and social economic groups (CRANE, 2006, p. 45).

Adding that these groups realize the types of transitions experienced over previous generations, as revival flashes that normally define the fashion and the youth experiences as a research phase and identity affirmation. In this matter, an appropriated context had form where the adults and matures also became an interesting group to be studied.

Another important aspect in choosing a university, as a research universe was the fact that the university nowadays support more diluted clothing codes that tend to informality adopted not only by the students but its teachers and non-teaching staff.

For this purpose, was used the UMnet, a local net which was possible to reach all the university society. However, despite the fact many tries together with the university IT service, it was not possible to have the full information about how many users the internal net distribution list have, where the mechanism of data collection was circulated. Still we obtain a total of 257 answers.

It is noteworthy that although the possibility of reaching a larger population were real, we opted for accidental non-probability sampling, which allowed the study in real time, as determined lower cost and less time to perform.

2.2 Data Collection Instrument

It was defined that the questionnaire by survey was the most appropriate for the data collection, since it is the most expeditious and cheaper effective manner, enabling better data collection from the audience,

beyond that this instrument is capable to provide information that are likely to quantified and analysed statistically.

Most of the questions that compose the survey were closed answers (one or multiple choices, mostly choices in scale) but also had some open question to a deep and subjective exploration giving the research some qualitative character. Was realized a previous test to check comprehension and clarity of the questions. After proper corrections and formulations, the survey were presented in online electronic format and spread by email based on University electronic mail database.

On the preparation the questionnaire it was decided to divide it by subjects, from the most general to the most to the more specific subject. And the most important part for this article is related to the second and third part since in this range we can identify all the all the sample connotations regarding the fashion and Jeans trousers.

3. Results Presentation and Discussion

The achieved results from the survey (sent by the University internal net distribution list) were 257 answers, in which 70,1% were validated (and 29,9% were annulled because it were incomplete or less coherent answers). The sample research, end up to be composed by majority of "Young" and "Young Adults" (ages between 18 e 35) follow by "Adults" (age 36 to 45) and less represented by the "Mature" group (age superior to 45 years).

The second part of the survey (called here part A) regards to the behaviour as a consumer and the internal/external influences that the individuals are subject, specially what kind of fashion information they search for. Intended to find out which type of fashion information existent could influence groups inside the ages explored. The third part (called here part B) try to identify the specifically behaviour connected to consumption of Jeans trousers exploring the valued characteristic attributes, its symbolisms and social representation related to the Jeans trousers in social contexts and finally the self concept about fashion and Jeans consumption by the respondents.

One of the questions proposed on part 'A', had five option of answer (single choice) that better represent the respondent answer about searching for fashion information. The existent options were: "Medias (Internet, Television, Magazines and Papers)", "Family", "Store Window", "Observing other people in the street" and it was given other option they could respond: "Don't search for fashion information". For other hand on part B we intent provoke a self-evaluation on agreement or disagreement about the sentence: "I am not to worry about fashion".

As a result, both questions give us as a result that the Young people have the Media as a field of search regarding fashion, but they say that they are not too worried about fashion. In the consumption perspective of symbolic goods the Young group tend to have their values and perceptions generated through industrial Culture products as publicity, magazines, papers and all Medias.

The Young Adults as well as the majority of "Mature" claim don't researching about fashion information, equally affirm not being too worried about what's 'IN' on Fashion. The Andragogy science justify this arguments in the fact that Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, resisting to imposing will on them being their auto-analysis always associated to independence.

Another question present in part 'B' was relevant to understand the studied group, regarding their self-image when questioned about in which degree they agree with the sentence: "The way people think about themselves is reflected on the way they dressed". The result was that all groups from Young to Mature, as well as they "completely agree" or "agree partially" with the sentence and believe that clothes reflect the way people idealize what they are".

At part 'B' was asked to the sample about which two pieces of clothes (bottom part) they wear with more regularity and with 50,8% answer the Jeans trousers. Yet, the interesting point about the results found, by

crossing data, the Jeans trousers are the clothing more worn by the university teachers. These become a curious fact because, if we observe in a micro vision the typology of Institution studied, Portuguese Universities, have in their core a very traditionalist history where few years ago was required from students to wear a academic costume (very formal apparel), and to the teachers a very formal dress code either. On the other hand looking through a macro vision, Portugal belonging to Europe that still have some formal habits on clothes especially in a public occupation and services and just recently joined to American dress codes that promote a informal clothes on Fridays (know as Casual Day).

Many speculation could be done about the fact of Teachers from Minho University had preferred or allowed themselves to wear Jeans trousers as their day by day clothe, but a possible reason is that the Minho University have very young Teachers staff, themselves apexes of change. If this same study was made in a more traditionalist university as the Coimbra University with ages of traditions, possibly we didn't obtain the same conclusions (but this study do not have data to get these conclusion it is just hypotheses that need a verification).

Still on part 'B', the most extensive and dense part, are showed the result regarding "the image of Jeans as an object" for the groups as well as their self-image while integrant of the Jeans consumption process. This is the part that demonstrate the social representation of Jeans trousers, the concepts that the groups as a whole share, and describes how this object it is seen and which situations it is accepted by the groups.

This question requires that the respondents made a word/concept association that comes to mind when they see someone wearing a Jeans Trousers. The results show that Comfort, Informal and Young were the more recurrent words which seem to represent a strongly social concept shared by the groups. Probably because many products are consume more because of its social significance than its functionality (SOLOMON, 1983 apud MIRANDA, 2008). With that, assuming that the general definition of Comfort it is measure over users reporting the absence of discomfort, the comfortable products are the ones that provide to their users sense of pleasure (Jordan 2000, apud Paschoarelli e Meneses, 2009 pg.249). The contradiction in these results is that even the garment materials are now more body friendly, with more soft textures. But the Denim fabric has its own rigidity that does not agree with the comfort sense itself and without referring the fact that some of finishing process, for example resin washes, that clearly let the trousers even more stiff, the less ergonomic fittings (low waist trousers) that for some many times is imposed by the fashion and eradicate the comfort for some apparel goods. According to Erner (2005, pg.127), "the comfort does not command the set of fashion trends".

"Informal" and "Young" were also quite chosen words. Can be related to Solomon (ibid, 2008) study that explain that the role of products works as a social stimulus, identifying that sometimes the products consumption as a "compensatory" way as the individual does not recognize very well the role they are supposed to represent so the product symbolism end up being the first influence on the behaviour. In this way people use products for influence their appearance (role representation) what should justify the choice for "Youth" and "Informality" symbolisms because the Jeans trousers send out this image in a determinate situation.

Linked to the perception that consumers have of themselves, the clothes have a special character as a material object, because, as is the consumer's body, acts as a filter between the person and the world around them (CRANE, 2006).

On the survey in part 'B' yet, was questioned to the use of Jeans trousers in different social situations seeking to evaluate in which social contexts the group declared to wear or not this clothes. The enquiry was formed by two questions, one closed and in scale and the other open as a exploratory matter which try to find why they give the that answer.

Analysing the answers, it seems that in "informal situations" this this piece of clothing is more socially accepted while in the formal situations the use of Jeans trousers appear as "probably not wear" by the respondents. Among the answers justification was the concern about the image that society would have about them wearing those clothes in formal situations. Without a doubt this is due to the fact that clothes

are part of a set of products used by the consumers to define, communicate and represent social roles (Solomon, 1988 apud PAÇO e RAPOSO, 2003).

In her note about Social Representation in Modern Sociology, Junqueira (JUNQUEIRA, Lília) explains that through the social representation, the products gain the ability to precisely exceed its "tool" toward a second role, that of becoming an element of the consumption game, in which the sense of consuming a certain product is given by its value of symbolic significance. But this process happens in the consumer unconscious, the social subjects does not realize this separation, and it is precisely in this unconscious that lays the effectiveness of Social Representations inside consumption.

Through the results it is possible to conclude that the Jeans trousers within the various contexts of society, works as an advisor in a value judgment. This because its concepts and significations culturally built, becoming beliefs not only by the individual but by the society as well. This in turn consumes and uses products advised and guided by these judgments.

4. Conclusion and Final Notes

Today is impossible to imagine some culture without the Jeans trousers but it is fact that this didn't happen from nowhere it is without a doubt the result of a series of changes on the material culture of this piece of clothes and an extensive transformation of material relations through society. It is a product that covered and still covers so many open and closed meanings because of the meaning transfer provided with tangible memories certain cultural meanings that become material culture of a particular culture.

In this sense, to study the Jeans trousers is something far more widely than study it as just a piece of clothes inside the fashion system. Would be limiting something that is more extensive and capable to represent at least, all the culture material of the occidental societies. And the importance of the fashion is born precisely in the human value of material culture pieces such as Jeans trousers.

In the hypothesis of Jeans trousers being material culture of a society what was realized in this study is the meanings of the objects emerge by its attributes and performance characteristics that individuals believe it have but not entirely inherent to the object itself but formed by interactions between individual, object and context.

Which means that the symbolic consumption exists because the product added the ability to function as stimulus helping the individual to define their roles and self-image to obtain an appropriated self presentation to each situation they were inserted. Product added the ability to function as stimulus

The consumer is the last end where it builds of a meaning. He uses these cultural meanings built around products, in order to define themselves socially because the concept embedded in the products influences his own perception of life as the utilization, and exhibition of a product contributed the personality construction (McCracken, 1989 apud D'ANGELO, 2004; SOLOMON, 2002).

This study only approach one side researched but under a multidisciplinary perspective, inside this article context, many approaches would be possible including studies that believe consumption as a symbolic act could be itself considered as material culture (Miller, 2007).

Therefore this study contributes for many other studies and applications since the conception of Jeans products in its core concept, its functionality and even its sell image in advertising campaigns, adapting the products to a cultural, social and even individual contexts of the consumers.

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