Denim Jeans: A Qualitative Study of Product Cues, Body Type, and Appropriateness of Use

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Denim Jeans: A Qualitative Study of Product Cues, Body Type, and Appropriateness of Use

Osmud Rahman

Abstract

The physical appearance of clothing has been shown to influence consumers’ evaluations and purchasing decisions. However, favorable product attributes may not always translate into a purchase. In order to gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes a consumer’s mind, denim jeans were used as the research vehicle and a qualitative research method was employed to illuminate underlying consumer motives. In total, forty-two female subjects aged from eighteen to twenty-seven years participated in this study. The results of this study reveal that the preferred jeans choices were closely related to the fit of the garment,
body image, and appropriateness of use. Some informants preferred
darker colors and specific jeans styles because these elements could en-
hance, accentuate, or conceal specific areas of their body. It is evident
that the value of a pair of jeans is not derived from its function alone,
but also from the meanings ascribed to them.

KEYWORDS: product cues, body image, appropriateness of use,
Canada, denim jeans

Introduction

Significance of Product Cues
Consumers often rely on a wide array of product cues to guide their
judgment on product quality and to justify their purchasing decisions.
According to prior studies (Rahman et al. 2008, 2009; Jin et al. 2010),
product cues can be dichotomized as intrinsic and extrinsic, and con-
sumers tend to use both cues concurrently when judging a product.
Intrinsic cues involve physical composition (e.g. fit, fabric, color, and
style), whereas extrinsic cues involve product-related characteristics that
are not directly attached to the physical object (e.g. price, brand name,
and country of origin). Among the extrinsic cues, price and brand name
are most frequently used for apparel evaluation (Eckman et al. 1990).
They are relatively easier to recognize, interpret, and understand than
intrinsic cues. However, intrinsic cues are generally perceived as reliable
indicators of quality and deemed to be more important than extrinsic
cues (Lennon and Fairhurst 1994; Rahman et al. 2010). There is ample
evidence that apparel consumers often use intrinsic cues when assess-
ing the quality of a product (Forsythe et al. 1999). A study conducted
by Eckman et al. (1990) found that 80 percent of their participant’s
responses on clothing evaluation were referred to intrinsic cues rather
than extrinsic ones. In particular, fit and style are often considered to be
important for clothing evaluation among youths (Taylor and Cosenza
2002).

According to earlier apparel studies (Rahman 2009; Rahman et al.
2010), product cues may generate multiple meanings and benefits to the
users such as functional usage, psychological values, and experiential
pleasure. Without a doubt, product evaluation is a multidimensional
construct encompassing both cognitive and affective processing. For ex-
ample, product appearance can be used to assist consumers in both the
impression formation of the utilitarian values of a product as well as the
development of a personal representation of self (Bloch 1995; Govers
described, “Affective judgments implicate the self ... Cognitive judg-
ments deal with qualities that reside in the stimulus.” In order to gain a
deeper understanding of the salient effects of intrinsic cues, the present
Denim Jeans

study was primarily focused on the physical characteristics of a product rather than its extrinsic or intangible attributes.

**Significance of Body Image**

However, it is important to note that favorable product cues and a pleasant aesthetic experience may not always translate into a purchase. Other than the positive responses elicited by the product’s physical attributes, body image also plays a significant part in the purchasing decision process. Many apparel shoppers are concerned how a garment may look on their bodies and how they may be perceived by others. According to a study on female body image conducted in the United Kingdom by Apeagyei (2008), 86 percent of the respondents were concerned with their appearance by wearing certain types of clothing, and 85 percent acknowledged that identical garments could look different on distinct body shapes/types. Clearly, the clothed body image has been perceived as an important evaluative determinant for many female consumers.

If the social stereotype or ideal body image cannot be achieved, an unpleasant psychological state (e.g. anxiety, dissatisfaction, and depression) within a person may occur (Higgins *et al.* 1987; Altabe and Thompson 1996). Thus, individuals may use clothing as a means to accentuate their ideal body features or to conceal/camouflage undesirable body attributes (Markee *et al.* 1990). With this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why body modifications, supplements, attachments, and adornments are adopted to attain a more acceptable or desirable image. It is evident that more and more consumers use fashion clothing/accessories, makeup, body piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery to enhance, modify, aestheticize, and transfigure their body image (Abbott and Sapsford 2001). Indeed, clothing is a prevalent way of adorning the body. A change in clothing style or outward appearance can result in a change of one’s moods and attitudes towards his/her body and self (Rahman *et al.* 2011). As Alexander *et al.* (2005: 55) asserted, “Clothing is often viewed as an extension of the physical self and as an integral part of the body image.”

Thus, body cathexis is often viewed as an integral part of self-concept and determining factor of self-esteem. According to certain apparel literatures, the fit of a garment is closely associated with consumer choice and satisfaction. Fit can be defined as the way a garment conforms to the human body (Workman and Lentz 2000) or the relationship between clothing and body (Ashdown and DeLong 1995). Several studies have clearly revealed that fit was the most important cue for apparel evaluation (Hsu and Burns 2002; Apeagyei 2008; Rahman *et al.* 2010). In many cases, well-fitted garments do not only increase body cathexis but also elevate the brand image. However, there have been relatively few studies that have dealt with the relationships between perceived body image and the fit-models of denim jeans.
Over the years, several apparel studies (DeLong et al. 2002; Wu and DeLong 2006; Jin et al. 2010; Rahman et al. 2010; Rahman 2011) have examined consumer’s perceptions and behaviors towards denim jeans. For example, Rahman et al. (2010) investigated the functional and aesthetic aspects from a Canadian and Chinese cross-cultural perspective while another recent study (Rahman 2011) of Canadian consumers found that intrinsic cues played a significant role in the selection and evaluation process. Without a doubt, these prior studies have provided insights and important information concerning consumer behavior toward these popular, ubiquitous fashion garments. However, the tripartite relationship between denim jeans, body image, and appropriateness of use has not been fully examined and explained in these previous studies.

### Significance of Appropriateness of Use

 Appropriateness can be defined as usefulness, correctness, value (Amabile 1983) and fitting “the demands of the situation” (Brown 1989: 11); and along with product attributes and perceived body image, this value seems to be important for clothing evaluation and purchasing decisions.

 According to Belk (1974), any study of buyer behavior that ignores situational factors is unlikely to provide reliable result.

 It is obvious that individuals do not use the same product for every situation or occasion. They tend to make choices that are most appropriate based on a specific circumstance. For example, a study conducted by Liu and Murphy (2007) found that Chinese consumers tended to purchase expensive wine for public occasions whereas less expensive ones for private consumption. Many literature studies on impression formation report that appropriate attire and appearance for a given circumstance yield positive or favorable interpretative inferences. The appropriate usage of clothing can construct self-image and identity (Ericksen and Sirgy 1992), play a vital role on the membership schema (Rafaeli et al. 1997), influence the impression of others (Peluchette et al. 2006), and enhance one’s physical and psychological comfort (Hsu and Burns 2002). In addition, this construct is multidimensional, encompassing aspects that are sociocultural (e.g. social class and status), situational (e.g. specific settings, time), and demographic (e.g. gender, age). Thus, appropriateness of use is closely related to the variance in behavior to the individual as well as to the situation/occasion. In other words, a consumer’s perception of clothing is not merely associated with product attributes and body image, but is also linked to situational and usage appropriateness. However, there has been little apparel research has focused exclusively on the topic of appropriateness of use. To fill the gaps of our knowledge, it is worthwhile to investigate how the aforementioned elements (product cues, body image, and appropriateness of use) are integrated to provide further information to fashion practitioners regarding consumers’ evaluation and consumption of denim jeans.
Research Objectives

Many apparel research studies have examined various topics related to clothing evaluation such as the importance of product cues (Rahman et al. 2009), aesthetic and utilitarian quality (Morganosky 1987; Rahman et al. 2010), body image and cathectic (Chattaraman and Rudd 2006), social/psychological value and sensory pleasure (Fiore 1993). However, there has been limited research reported regarding consumer perception and behavior which consider the significant influences derived from product cues, body image, and appropriateness of use.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this complex relationship, a qualitative research method was employed and denim jeans were used as a vehicle to illuminate the underlying motives. Denim jeans were chosen for this study simply because of their familiarity among student subjects, and previous studies have found that the garment fit on the lower body (e.g. waist, shape of legs, hips, and thighs) was a major concern to many female consumers (Davis 1985). The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to gain a deeper understanding of which intrinsic cues are strongly linked to the body type and jeans choice; (2) to investigate how product cues, body image, and appropriateness of use interact to evoke consumer perceptions and behavior; and (3) to elicit facets of relevance relating to consumer evaluation and consumption of denim jeans.

Research Methodology

Subject and Location

The selection criteria were age, education, and sex; and the participating subjects were female, eighteen years or older, recruited from eight universities and colleges in Ontario. Women were chosen because they are more involved in fashion and are more sensitive to clothing cues than men (Auty and Elliott 1998); and researchers such as Alexander et al. (2005) have found that females exhibited a higher concern about their body image. Moreover, this study was conducted in Ontario province because it is the largest clothing market in Canada followed by Quebec, Manitoba, and British Columbia provinces (Statistics Canada 2012).

Research Design

According to the present literature review, it is obvious that the vast majority of prior apparel studies were mainly focused on a quantitative research approach to gain more reliable data. However, quantitative data may overlook an individual’s motivations, feelings, opinions, and attitudes of individuals. In order to gain a deeper understanding of what crosses consumers’ minds when they evaluate clothing, a qualitative method was employed and in-depth semi-structured interviews were developed for the present study. Interview questions were developed to
cover three areas—personal preferences (product attributes), perceptions (body image and product), and behavior (shopping habits, product usage). These questions include: “what type of jeans do you like or dislike?” and “why?,” “what kind of product attributes are important to you when you shop for a pair of jeans?,” “how do you define a high quality jeans?,” “do you have any problems on finding a pair of well-fitted jeans?,” and “if you do, what are those problems?,” “how often do you wear jeans?,” “how many pair of jeans do you currently own?,” “do you wear all of them on a regular basis?,” and “why?"

Each individual interview ranged from forty-five minutes to one and a half hours in length and they were conducted until a point of saturation was reached (McCracken 1988). As stated by McCracken in *The Long Interview: Qualitative Research Methods* (1988: 9): “The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory … The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world.” In addition, the sample size of forty-two was deemed to be sufficient for a qualitative study such as this. According to Grunert and Bech-Larsen (2005), a sample size between twenty and one hundred is acceptable.

**Data Collection Procedures**

After collecting basic demographic information (age, occupation, and income), informants were asked to describe their body type in simple terms or words such as pear-shaped, curvy, slim, petite, or athletic build. Other than this self-depicted/self-perceived image, they were also asked for consent to record their body measurements including waist, hips, and height. As soon as the body measurements had been recorded, an extensive in-depth interview was then conducted to solicit specific thematic concerns including perceived product quality, personal preference, perceived body image, product usage, and consumption experience. The interviews were audio-recorded and the tapes were transcribed directly after the interviews. The content was subsequently analyzed to determine common themes.

**Data Analysis**

According to the words/phrases used within the context, data were then sorted into categories for analysis and comparison. In some cases, informants’ responses contained multiple beliefs and viewpoints; thus, the number of codes assigned to each word/phrase could be varied (Carey et al. 1996). However, to avoid distortion of the data by multiple responses, if an informant mentioned several words/phrases (e.g. beautiful, flattering, and attractive) that belonged to the same category, they were only considered as one response to that category. The process of emergent coding described by Stemler (2001) followed. A team of three reviewers (two fashion professors and one research assistant) independently examined the transcripts to identify the content categories, with
each reviewer devising his/her own classification scheme. All three then met and intensively discussed the commonalities and differences of their separate schemes and reconciled the differences. Upon a mutual agreement among the reviewers, researchers identified methods in which to classify categories and assigned codes to each individual’s responses until all data had been analyzed.

Findings and Discussion

In total, forty-two female subjects participated in this study and were recruited from a broad range of academic interests as shown in Table 1. All were undergraduate students except for P33 and P34, who were graduate students, and ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-seven years, with the mean age being 20.3. Twenty-seven informants held a part-time job and nine earned Canadian $10,000 or more per year.

According to the results of the self-reported body type, a large percentage of informants considered themselves as pear-shaped, followed by athletic build/muscular/boy type, slim/slender/thin and curvy. As indicated in Table 1, informants’ waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) ranged from 0.65 to 0.89, and the mean score was 0.77. According to Lanska et al. (1985), if the WHR of pre-menopausal Caucasian women fell within the range of 0.67 to 0.80, she would be considered normal and healthy. Another study on the attractiveness of the female figure (Forestell et al. 2004) found that participants preferred figures with WHRs close to 0.70. Based on Lanska et al.’s (1985) findings and recommendations of WHR, most of the subjects (27/42 or 64.3 percent) fell into the normal and acceptable range. However, these findings should be viewed with caution because body weight and height also interact with the waist and hip size to form the attractiveness of the female figure (Furnham et al. 2006; Swami and Furnham 2006). Nevertheless, the current findings did provide some indications/information about the body type of the participants in this study. For example, P26 might be considered overweight because her height was 5’ 1” and WHR was 0.87, while on the contrary, P16 may be seen as underweight because her height was 5’ 8” and her WHR was only 0.65.

Product Cues, Body Image, and Appropriateness of Use

Relationships between Product Type and Body Type

It is evident that many informants made their jeans choice based on perceived body image rather than on fashionable clothing styles. Due to the popularity of skinny jeans at the time this study was conducted, informants shared a substantial amount of information and personal experience with the interviewer about this particular style. For instance,
Table 1

The demographic profile of informants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major of study</th>
<th>Income/Year</th>
<th>Part-time job</th>
<th>Body type</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Waist</th>
<th>Hip</th>
<th>WHR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>Sales Associate</td>
<td>Normal and slender</td>
<td>5’ 5”</td>
<td>27”</td>
<td>38”</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Short and normal</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>31”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Curvy</td>
<td>5’ 11”</td>
<td>36”</td>
<td>46”</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
<td>Waitress</td>
<td>Short and athletic</td>
<td>5’ 4”</td>
<td>30.5”</td>
<td>37”</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>Sales Associate</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>29.5”</td>
<td>36”</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Athletic build</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>31.5”</td>
<td>43”</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Short and regular</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>26”</td>
<td>37”</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Curvy</td>
<td>5’ 5”</td>
<td>31”</td>
<td>36.5”</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Sales Associate</td>
<td>Tall and pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 6.5”</td>
<td>29”</td>
<td>38.5”</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
<td>Petite</td>
<td>5’ 1”</td>
<td>27.5”</td>
<td>36”</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Boxy/boy type</td>
<td>5’ 7”</td>
<td>37”</td>
<td>45”</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>6’ 1.5”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>47”</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Slim and slender</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>25”</td>
<td>36.5”</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Art/Contemporary Studies</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5’ 5.5”</td>
<td>32”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5’ 7”</td>
<td>35”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>Waitress</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>26”</td>
<td>40”</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>Gymnastics Coach</td>
<td>Muscular</td>
<td>5’ 5”</td>
<td>29”</td>
<td>38”</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Curvy</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>29.5”</td>
<td>38.5”</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 7”</td>
<td>31”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>Waitress</td>
<td>Hourglass</td>
<td>5’ 4”</td>
<td>27.5”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$3,500</td>
<td>Sales Associates</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5’ 9”</td>
<td>31.5”</td>
<td>40.5”</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
<td>Visual Merchandiser</td>
<td>Curvy</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>28”</td>
<td>39.5”</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Criminology</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Square</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>45.5”</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Petite</td>
<td>5’ 4”</td>
<td>28”</td>
<td>37”</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Athletic build</td>
<td>5’ 4”</td>
<td>32.5”</td>
<td>41”</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mass Communication</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Athletic build</td>
<td>5’ 1”</td>
<td>33.5”</td>
<td>38.5”</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>Grocery Store</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 2.5”</td>
<td>27”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 11”</td>
<td>29”</td>
<td>42”</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Curvy</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>33”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5’8.5”</td>
<td>27”</td>
<td>36”</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>29”</td>
<td>40”</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Strategist Assistant</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>5’ 5”</td>
<td>32.5”</td>
<td>38”</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>South African History</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>Teaching Assistant</td>
<td>Petite</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>26”</td>
<td>31”</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
<td>Pharmacist</td>
<td>Athletic build</td>
<td>5’ 8”</td>
<td>32”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$1,100</td>
<td>Seamstress</td>
<td>Tall</td>
<td>5’ 11”</td>
<td>28”</td>
<td>37”</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P36</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 2”</td>
<td>39”</td>
<td>48”</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 10”</td>
<td>32”</td>
<td>41.5”</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Teller</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>5’ 6”</td>
<td>32.5”</td>
<td>41”</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Slim</td>
<td>5’ 6”</td>
<td>27”</td>
<td>39.5”</td>
<td>0.68</td>
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<tr>
<td>P40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 4”</td>
<td>34”</td>
<td>43”</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>P41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>Tourist Guide</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>5’ 5”</td>
<td>27”</td>
<td>36.5”</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>Campus Pub</td>
<td>Pear shape</td>
<td>5’ 7”</td>
<td>32”</td>
<td>41.5”</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mean age: 20.3 years.

N/A: not applicable; MI: missing information (informants did not provide information on this particular area); hip: measure the hip circumference at the widest part of the buttocks; WHR: waist-to-hip ratio.
one informant [P22] said, “I find that they [skinny jeans] are really comfortable because they move with your body.” Other informants liked skinny jeans because of their aesthetic appeal and ease of comfort. Although these jeans were comfortable and appealing, eleven informants disliked them for a number of reasons. First, skinny jeans obviously did not fit every informant’s body type. Some expressed that they did not have a slim or slender enough body for this type of jeans, and there was discontent with their body type, legs, and hips in general. Second, due to the skintight silhouette, less-than-perfect body parts (e.g. hips and legs) could be adversely emphasized or accentuated. As one of the informants [P39] expressed, “I find that skinny jeans make you look like a triangle. It puts the emphasis on the hips and I don’t like that.” A third reason was that anorexia or an unhealthy body image was linked to skinny jeans. For example, informant [P33] said bluntly, “I find that skinny jeans aren’t good unless you’re anorexic.”

A few informants indicated that they liked skinny jeans but they did not have the body type to wear them. For example,

I like skinny jeans. I think some people look really good in them. But my legs are too short and wide … that I just look like a pear if I wear them … I wish I could wear them though. [P2]

Without a doubt, the congruity of body figure and jeans type could greatly affect consumer perception, confidence, and self-esteem. There is clear evidence that individuals who were tall and slim tended to have more confidence and a feeling of self-gratification in wearing skinny jeans.

I am more concerned with my body type. I think that for a person like me, wide leg jeans would accentuate a part of the body that I don’t necessarily find appealing … Because I’m so tall, I think one of my favorite features are my legs. So I guess, sometimes, when I want to accentuate them, then skinny jeans are the way to go. [P12]

I think you’ve got to be somewhat slim to wear skinny jeans. I think I can pull it off well. You can’t be huge to wear them … it doesn’t look flattering. I think they look nice on me. I guess I have a flattering body type for them. [P41]

Apart from the informant’s opinions of skinny jeans, there is no significant correlation between style choice and WHR. It appeared that tall and slender subjects (P1, P13, and P41) showed more favorable responses to skinny and wide-leg jeans, whereas short, pear-shaped, and curvy subjects (P28, P40, and P42) responded more positively to flared jeans. Interestingly, two informants (pear-shaped body types) had
similar and fascinating viewpoints on the relationships between hips and the flared styles.

I like flares because they even out my hips. [P40]

Boot cut and flare fit my body type a lot better. I feel like they even out my hips and they don’t make my thighs look nearly as big as they do in skinny jeans. [P42]

Regardless of what style the informants liked or disliked, their body figure and perceived self-image played a significant role on jeans evaluations, purchasing decisions, and consumption.

The Significance of Color Cues

Interestingly, it is not merely the fit of a garment that can accentuate the body (Markee et al. 1990); the color can serve similar functions. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that both color and fit (i.e. garment shape/silhouette) can be used simultaneously to define the boundaries of bodily appearance. In total, twenty-three informants indicated that they preferred dark-colored jeans over light-colored ones. Five emerging categories were identified to explain the underlying reasons why the vast majority of our subjects preferred dark-colored jeans. The categories are “as dressy/formal attire,” “body image,” “versatility,” “appropriateness of use,” and “practicality.” In terms of as dressy/formal attire, nine informants perceived darker jeans as being most associated with sophistication and classiness, as fancy and formal. On the contrary, light-colored jeans were more often linked to casual attire. As per body image, eight informants revealed that dark-colored jeans could slim or accentuate their hips, and conceal their less ideal body features. For example, several informants commented:

Dark colored jeans makes you look thinner and would accentuate a part of your body that you don’t necessarily or usually find appealing. [P12]

I like dark denim jeans and they look best on me. I like things that can slim me down a little bit. [P4]

I find dark jeans can slim my body and it matches more clothing too. I wear way more with dark jeans because it’s sort of like black pants, it’s like a classic piece. [P36]

For the category of versatility: five informants revealed that dark-colored jeans were more versatile than light-colored ones because they could be worn with almost any outfit. Playing a vital role on the appropriateness of use, a number of informants suggested that darker jeans
were more appropriate for evening or formal settings. As one informant [P13] stated, “Darker jeans can always go for night and lighter jeans not so much ... light colored jeans don’t seem as formal. When you think of trousers, black is more formal, that’s my mentality.” Several subjects found that wearing jeans to school or to work was more practical because the dirt and stains on dark jeans were hardly noticed. As a result, some subjects felt that wearing darker jeans was less constraining and they tended to wear them relatively longer than other clothing items.

For example:

I prefer dark jeans to other items because I usually wear clothes that I can get dirty and don’t feel bad about it. [P32]

I don’t need to dress up for my job. So, I just get dress and go. Darker jeans don’t look as bad when they stretch out as others. You can wear them for more days before washing them. [mumbling] [P27]

Therefore, the vast majority of the informants (23/42 or 54.8 percent) preferred dark jeans over other colors. To summarize the preference for dark-colored jeans, the following excerpt from the interviews clearly displays most of the informants’ sentiments:

You can’t see the stains on dark jeans as easily. I think they look more sophisticated and dressy. You can pretty much wear them any time and they conceal flaws better. [P34]

**The Interrelationships among Product Cues and Body Image**

The present research found that fit was the most frequently cited product cue, followed by price, quality, comfort, and color. Although color was considered one of the important cues in the prior section, it played a less significant role as compared to fit. As one informant [P21] pointed out, “Anyone can wear dark or light colored jeans, but I think not everyone can wear skinny jeans or wide leg jeans. It depends on your body type. If you’re short, you’re not going to wear a wide leg because that’ll make you look even shorter.” Therefore, it is not surprising to see that some informants were more concerned with the fit of their jeans rather than the price or brand name. For example:

Fit is very important ... how it makes the butt look. If they are a perfect fit, I would just get them, even though they’re going to cost me a bit more money. [P1]

Based on our informants’ responses, fabric, fit, comfort, body image, and quality were closely related. Any modification and alternation of a
single product cue would create a chain effect on the other elements. In other words, intrinsic product cues are not only linked, but they are also synchronized with each other. For example, if the denim is too stiff or loose, people will not feel physically and psychologically comfortable. If the jeans are too tight, they may feel restricted and uncomfortable, and may start questioning the product quality. For example:

I wouldn’t spend my money on something that was uncomfortable, or else I wouldn’t wear it. You have to be comfortable in anything you wear. You have to feel comfortable in your own body ... Something that doesn’t feel like it’s going to rip when you sit down, something that doesn’t cut off your circulation, or over-emphasize parts of your body that you don’t feel comfortable about. [P12]

I find that if they’re [jeans] too stiff, when you sit down they really start to hurt the back of your knees because they dig in. So, I like to make sure that my jeans have the softness and they don’t do that when I sit down. [P21]

I don’t want jeans that are too tight. Then I feel restricted in my movement because I’m wearing them for everyday activities. [P17]

In some cases, the quality of a pair of jeans was also related to its lifespan or durability. For example, informant [P5] commented, “Good quality jeans should last for a longer time ... To me, durability means color that doesn’t fade or wash out easily, and a consistent fit throughout its life span.”

**Appropriateness of Use: Self-image and Specific Situation**

According to the behavioral data, over 50 percent of the informants wore jeans at least four days per week. The number of jeans they currently owned varied from three to twenty pairs, with each individual owning approximately eight pairs of jeans on average. However, the majority (thirty-four informants) did not wear all of them regularly, and they rotated and wore only three or four pairs on a day-to-day basis. The rest can be classified as jeans that were no longer worn or ones that were seldom-/occasionally worn. Why did they keep so many jeans in their wardrobe? In order to understand this behavior, valuable insights were drawn from the interviews, and six major reasons were identified.

First, things (in general) were kept without any logical or concrete reasons. Three of the informants described themselves as “pack rats.” Second, these jeans were worn for special occasions or in a private setting. Third, these jeans were saved for when they lost weight or for the next fashion/trend cycle. Fourth, a dislike for disposing of clothing in
good or acceptable condition; a few informants felt guilty if they did not look for possible solutions to reuse, recycle, or refurbish those old jeans. Fifth, several informants admitted that they made a poor buying decision—they discovered that the jeans were ill-fitting and/or unattractive after the purchase. Two informants mentioned that they might pass them down to their siblings or give them to friends. Sixth, a few informants were emotionally attached to the old and worn-out jeans. They became memorabilia that were reminders of the sentimental or pleasurable moments encountered along life’s journey. This finding is consistent with Banim and Guy (2001: 207), as they stated, “... no-longer-worn clothes allow women to maintain a connection with former, important aspects of themselves and their lives.”

It is obvious that some of the jeans were outdated, ill-fitting, and too worn-out. To many informants, those no-longer-worn jeans were inappropriate or ineffective to be used as a communicator or signifier in the current social context. In some cases, some informants only wore them in a confined or private situation such as at home. Simply, failure to appropriately manage their clothed body image may result in embarrassment, social uncomfortableness, and ridicule. As Entwistle (2000: 7) described, “Wearing the right clothes and looking our best, we feel at ease with our bodies, and the opposite is equally true: turning up for a situation inappropriately dressed, we feel awkward, out of place and vulnerable.” The following two quotes clearly reflect upon this idea:

I only wear them [old jeans] around the house and on laundry day because it has the rips in them so I don’t wear them out. [P8]

Some of them [jeans] are old so I just wear them at home. I only wear them when no one else is around. [P41]

Apart from the no-longer-worn or privately consumed jeans, other pairs were worn only for special occasions. Those jeans were distinctively different to the regular ones, and the informants used them to make a personal statement and/or present themselves appropriately in a particular social setting. In many cases, they devoted enormous amounts of time and effort to coordinate the jeans with other clothing items, fashion accessories, hairstyles, and makeup in order to create the most fitting image. For example, two informants revealed:

The other jeans are more like occasion jeans. They’re either skinny or different colored jeans... They’re different washes that I wouldn’t want to wear every day. So, I just kind of every once and a while pull out my gray skinny jeans to make a statement. [P26]

I wear them for special occasions. One pair is white and another pair does not look like a regular jeans. I wouldn’t wear them all the time, just with certain outfits. [P13]
The Coordination of Jeans and Footwear

This study has found evidence that the appropriateness of the clothed body image was closely related to proper accessorizing, wardrobe coordination, and the situation of use. For example, several informants found that skinny jeans were more appropriate for Winter than for Summer because they could tuck them inside a boot to keep their legs warm. In addition, many informants indicated that skinny jeans were relatively more versatile than other jeans styles because they could easily be dressed up or down depending on other apparel items and footwear. Women can wear a pair of dark skinny jeans with high heels to create a sophisticated and feminine image, or they can wear them with ankle boots or sneakers to create a casual or youthful appearance. The following excerpts from the interviews clearly demonstrate that, for many women, wearing jeans was actually related to footwear coordination and appropriateness of use.

When flares started to get so big, they covered your whole shoe. I think boot cut jeans are easier and cleaner, they fit on top of your shoes nicely. I find you can wear them with runners or with heels ... And darker denim boot cut is better for heels. [P6]

Skinny jeans are really cute if you’re wearing them with ballet flats or something. It looks like old Hollywood. [P9]

I like skinny jeans not necessarily because they were in ... They fit into my boots in winter and that’s why I like them. In addition, I think skinny jeans give a really nice long leg. If you wear them with heels, it looks very elegant and sophisticated. [P13]

Sometimes I think flares look nice with flats. I wouldn’t really wear flares with high boot ... I wear boots with straight leg jeans because you can tuck your jeans into the boot, and it’s good for rainy days. [P37]

Thus, choosing a pair of jeans is indeed a complex cognitive process with many factors to consider—color (dark, medium, light), style (skinny, boot-cut, wide-leg, flared jeans), footwear (flats, sneakers, heels, boots), weather/season (Fall/Winter, Spring/Summer, rainy days), situation (formal/workplace/home/school settings), and personal image and preferences (old Hollywood style, classic look).

Conclusion

Clearly, the present study does not merely confirm previous findings (Rahman et al. 2010; Rahman 2011) such as the salient effect of fit and color cues in the evaluation of denim jeans. It also shows that the recurring criterion of jeans choice was closely related to the fit of the
garment, body image, and appropriateness of use, providing new insights and additional evidence for the validity on what role the body image and appropriateness of use play in the context of denim jeans consumption. Most importantly, the results of this study may provide valuable information to fashion designers on denim jeans design and development.

It is obvious that individuals do not use the same product for every situation, as consumers often make choices that are most appropriate based on a specific circumstance. Using color as an example, the meaning of dark denim jeans is often associated with being elegant, classy, sophisticated, and/or formal. Therefore, the combination of style and color is deemed to be important for many consumers to create an appropriate or desirable public image for a specific social situation. In addition, this study clearly indicated that the relationship between garment fit and body type could play a significant role on the jeans choice. A consumer may have positive perceptions toward skinny jeans because of their contemporary style or color. However, if the jeans do not look good on the body of the consumer, she will most likely refrain from buying it. When it comes to jeans consumption, many consumers are particularly concerned with the fit to their hip and buttock areas. Thus, it is not difficult to understand why some informants preferred darker colors and specific jeans styles because these elements could enhance, accentuate, and/or minimize problematic hip areas. In other words, jeans that fit properly can provide a well-balanced proportion and offer experiential pleasure to the wearers, whereas a pair of ill-fitting jeans may generate uncomfortable feelings and/or negative emotions.

**Jeans Fit/Style: Desirability and Versatility**

To offer consumers both physical and psychological comfort, it is imperative for fashion designers to understand the relationships between human body type and the jeans fit/model. For example, several informants clearly indicated that the proportion between the hips and the leg opening of the flared model played a vital role to the wearer’s image. In order to create jeans with well-balanced proportions and pleasing aesthetic appeal, designers could pay greater attention to the relationship of the hip area, the height (inseam), and the leg opening. Designers may also consider adopting the concept of the Golden Section (length : width = 1 : 0.618), which is an attractive proportion that humans seem to prefer (Benjafield 1985), to guide their prototype development.

The skinny jeans were most frequently cited, and perceived to be more versatile than flared, wide-leg, and bell-bottoms. Although fashion trend plays an important role in the informants’ responses, many of them expressed that they often wore skinny jeans because of their adaptability, practicality, and aesthetic pleasure. They could wear them with a wide variety of clothing items in many different social situations. If jeans designers and manufacturers wish to strengthen the product
desirability, they must offer their jeans with multiple benefits and values. For example, collaborative effort or co-design between jeans designers and footwear designers may prove to be useful in developing a product for diverse situations, applications, and coordinations.

**Longevity of Style and Environmental Friendliness**

Color also played a significant role in the evaluation and consumption of denim jeans. In this study, many informants expressed that they preferred dark colors to light colors. However, due to the loss of color over the course of use, many wearers may not want to wear their faded jeans because they are no longer relevant and appropriate. As Cotton Incorporated reported in 2007, 40 percent of the respondents were bothered by the fact that their dark jeans faded. Due to the consumers’ discontent with the lack of fast colors, “Stay True Cotton” technology was introduced to retain 93 percent of the original depth of color after twenty-five home launderings. This was compared to approximately 80 percent fastness for untreated garments (Cotton Incorporated 2007).

To prolong the lifespan and reduce environmental harm, fashion practitioners should relentlessly search for innovative methods and new technologies to extend the aesthetic longevity of their products. As Fletcher (2008: 166) points out, “it becomes clear that making a product last is very different to making a long-lasting product.”

**Final Notes**

It is evident that the value of a pair of jeans is not derived from its function alone but also from the meaning ascribed to them, the clothed body image, and usage suitability. Similarly, the longevity of jeans usage is not solely depended on its physical endurance or durability but also the wearer’s desire, experience, pleasure, and attachment of the product. As Chapman (2008) argued in his article, “… there is little point designing physical durability into consumer goods, if consumers lack the desire to keep them.”

Therefore, it is important for companies to understand these complexities and to create a product to meet their consumers’ needs and aspirations. Creating and delivering products with desirable values is essential to sustain market competitiveness as well as to build favorable long-term relationships with customers. The more attention the fashion practitioners pay to the tripartite relationship between product cues, body type, and usage appropriateness, the more likely the product is to be accepted by consumers.

**Limitations and Further Research**

The current study clearly demonstrates that various product cues, body types, and appropriateness of use could greatly influence consumer
perceptions and evaluations of denim jeans. Further research involving different apparel products is needed to shed additional light on this particular tripartite relationship. Moreover, the associative learning of various product cues such as fit/shape (e.g. boot-cut, bell-bottom, skinny style) has not been fully examined; as well as the sizing system, the model/fit of denim jeans and the relationships between body type and jeans fit should be investigated further. I strongly believe that understanding the congruity between perceived body image and clothed body image will enable denim jeans companies to develop a more desirable product. Other than the aforementioned limitations and recommendations, the present study may not represent Canadian apparel shoppers as a whole because the current sample is focused on a young female demographic in Ontario province. To strengthen its external validity and to avoid potential bias, future studies should expand the focus to male consumers and different age groups.

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References


