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“I do like my sparkly jeans!” – Communication through embellished jeans

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**Background:** Denim jeans have long captured the heart of consumers across much of the world. From bell bottoms to acid wash to low riders to skinnies, as jeans have gone through a multitude of style iterations over the past century, so too have the cultural meanings associated with this ubiquitous garment. Since its working class beginnings in the American west, jeans have come to be associated with notions of “democracy, independence, equality, freedom, and fraternity” (Davis, 1989, p. 348), but also “upscale,” “socially distinct,” and “contemporary” (Fiske, 2010, p. 6). Jeans have the ability to juxtapose multiple, contrasting meanings including, “both community and individualism,” “unisexuality and masculinity or femininity” (Fiske, 2010, p.4), and “ostentation vs. understatement” (Davis, 1989, p. 343). Gordon (1991) noted that changing styles of jeans reflect prevailing sentiments in popular culture making the study of jeans worthy of serious consideration.

One popular contemporary style is rather noticeable, particularly from behind. Exemplified by the brands Miss Me and Rock Revival, these jeans incorporate embellishments, such as contrast stitching, embroidery, sequins, crystals, metal studs, and rhinestones, primarily on the back pockets, but also on front pockets and yokes. An advertisement for these jeans encourages consumers to “make as great an entrance leaving the room as entering one” (“Wallflower,” n.d.). Given the ability of jean styles to reflect multiple cultural meanings, it is the purpose of this research to investigate meanings associated with jeans with heavy ornamentation, especially on the back pockets.

**Method:** This study is the exploratory stage of a project investigating the perceptions and experiences of women who adopt the style of embellished jeans. Using a purposive sampling method, participants for this qualitative study were identified through a mass emailing to students at a large Midwestern land-grant university. In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted with six women aged 19 to 33 years old. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant confidentiality. Using the constant comparison analysis method, codes were established and then grouped into categories and related to one another. Each transcript was independently coded by two researchers, resulting in an acceptable inter-coder reliability rating of 88% (Creswell, 2007).

**Results:** Themes emerging from the data revealed that the women adopted the style of embellished jeans to communicate desired identity traits. For instance, they utilized this garment to simultaneously stand out and fit in. Because the jeans were popular, they could be utilized to conform to their chosen social group. However, the wide variety of embellishments allowed

them to assert their own individuality, thereby also resisting complete conformity. As Tanya said, “It was nice to know that you could get a pair and they’d be different from somebody else’s, but you’re still wearing the same thing.” Participants also embraced the jeans for their semiotic meanings, reading expressions of status and femininity in what they called “sparkly” or “blingy” jeans. While ordinary jeans can act to perform “a kind of class, race, and gender erasure,” (Salazar, 2010, p. 305), interviewees appreciated embellished jeans for their ability to “communicate that you have money” (Tanya) and to provide “a more feminine touch” than “regular jeans” (Kailey). One interviewee referred to the style as “princess jeans,” a term that encapsulated ideas of wealth, class, and femininity. The women made their appearance decisions based on their perceptions of how other people might view them, which in turn was based on assumptions of shared meanings. These women relied on their ornamented denim to indicate social belonging while also promoting individuality and constructions of femininity and status.

**Conclusions:** This study’s purpose was to explore the use of a popular apparel item to communicate traits such as social membership, class, and femininity. The women in this study interpreted and hoped to impart shared semiotic meanings from their embellished jeans. The data ultimately supported Simmel’s (1904) concept that human behavior is guided by dual forces: the conflicting desires to be both part of a group and a differentiated individual. Participants were clear that this style was appropriate and popular in their current environment, but might not be in future settings. They recognized that new styles will surely be adopted, each presumably enlisted to serve the same functions. By evaluating these women’s perspectives on their appearance choices, this study advances the body of knowledge pertaining to visual communication in terms of social acceptance, individuality, and constructs of class and gender.

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