

# The Cultural Hegemony of Fashion: What Jean Advertisements Portray as Normal

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## **Introduction**

The foundation of a society rests in the existence of power dynamics which allow for the dictation of specific cultural norms by the ruling class upon the nondominant class. This imposition creates cultural hegemony, or a relation between a leader who benefits from dominating a consenting subordinate (Artz and Ortega Murphy, 2000). Advertisements impact a society as a whole and serve as a representation of cultural hegemony. They project a certain norm and ideal for consumers to achieve. When consumers buy an advertised product, they consent to and accept the projected norm determined by the company. Americans often choose their clothing based off what is collectively considered to be “normal” by adhering to popular trends or styles. Through the process of clothing selection, the consumer conforms to society’s expectations of normality, which are dictated by the ruling class (Fiske, 1989). This act of conforming also occurs when one wears denim jeans. Jean wearers consent to the norms imposed by the companies that are portrayed through advertisements. These ideals (fashion norms) are based on factors such as one’s body type, race, and gender (Fiske, 1989). Consumers conform to the imposed ideals by purchasing and wearing what the fashion industry presents as normal; thus, enabling corporations to continue dictating societal norms.

This relationship highlights the control of the fashion industry (the dominant class) how consumers, whether consciously or not, consent to the cultural hegemon and how it impacts their lives.

Studies indicate these imposed fashion ideals can have detrimental consequences for consumers, such as negative body image related to one's gender and race (Fiske, 1989). Although previous research has examined factors such as fashion advertisements portrayal of self-image, body type, and race, it is rare for studies to examine multiple factors for one type of fashion product or garment. This study examines what multiple factors presented as "normal" in advertisements for one major fashion product: jeans. The study used content analysis to examine the representation of what is ideal in relation to multiple factors (i.e., gender, race, fit, price) in online jeans advertisements. We focused on this specific type of apparel as jeans are an iconic American staple across people of all backgrounds and echelons. Thus, jean advertisements affect a large population in the U.S. and a broad spectrum of people in society across the world. Specifically, the current study analyzed the content of jeans advertisements to examine what companies present as "normal" in relation to fit, gender, race, and price.

## **Review of Literature**

Much of the research within the fashion industry studies gender norms and body image. This is particularly seen while considering female consumer's mental health in relation to the fashion industry's model selection for jeans advertisements. The use of severely underweight models promotes anxiety in females (Halliwel & Dittmar, 2004). The use of thin models occurs even though the use of average and above average weight models still effectively advertises a product, without the promotion of anxiety in females (Halliwel & Dittmar, 2004). Furthermore, use of underweight

models has continued to increase with models on popular magazine covers becoming thinner over the years (Sypeck et al, 2004). With the lack of representation for weight variations in models, these advertisements prompt both healthy weight and over-weight people to alter their body image (Savoy & Boxer, 2020). These unhealthy mental comparisons stem from the over-use of under-weight models. Moreover, studies show, overweight people are more likely to notice weight biased media than healthy weight individuals (Savoy & Boxer, 2020). This produces a toxic culture in which females feel inferior because of their body type. This struggle with body image begins at a young age as well. A recent study found children claimed they desired a lower BMI than what would be healthy (Heidelberger and Smith, 2018). The disproportional representation of healthy weight and overweight models compared to the number of models of unhealthy weight mentally effects consumers.

In addition to the weight comparison, females think about fit of jean in relation to their body image as a primary factor when buying clothing, such as jeans. Females make determinations about which jeans they can/cannot wear based on their body type (Rahman, 2015). For example, women with a stouter physique more often feel they should not wear skinny jeans (Rahman, 2015). Additionally, this research connecting to gender is limited mostly to females. Our study adds to the existing literature by including by analyzing how both female and male models are portrayed in advertisements.

Beyond the plethora of concerns about body image and gender norms, less research examines race in relation to what is projected as “normal” based on jeans advertisements. One pivotal study (Heidelberger & Smith, 2018), not surprisingly, found body image concerns also affect people of color. The study indicated that African American and American Indian youth rated themselves with a

higher BMI than their actual weight (Heidelberger & Smith, 2018). As seen through these growing concerns, there is a need for more research that examines how an exclusionary projected norm specifically impacts people of color.

Another noticeable limit to existing research is that price and its connections to the projected norm is not typically taken into consideration when analyzing this topic. Pricing is important to be considered as it sends a message about who should be able to afford what garments. It is imperative to understand what limits companies present for who can buy their jeans. Through pricing, stereotypes for what consumers purchasing in a specific price range should be wearing are made clear through the company's selling the denim.

Our study analyzes such patterns of hegemony (or what is portrayed as “normal”) across multiple factors; namely, through content analysis of jeans advertisements, we looked at how jeans companies provided underlying messages about what is “normal” in terms of representations of model size, model race, fit of jeans, and price of jeans.

### **Theoretical Framework**

While researching such predominant concerns in the advertising of denim, it is necessary to reflect on the hegemonic role between denim producer and consumer. Cole (2020) describes cultural hegemony as when the “dominant ideology of society reflects the beliefs and interests of the ruling class” (Cole, 2020). Cultural hegemony represents how and why certain societal concepts are normalized by those in power. Those not in the dominant group grant consent to these dominant beliefs though both conscious and unconscious effort (Cole, 2020). The fashion industry, specifically jeans advertisements, demonstrate cultural hegemony because jeans companies utilize underlying message through ad-

vertisements to make a statement about what ought to be considered ideal or “normal.”

In this study, we utilized a cultural hegemony framework because the relationship between consumer and corporation represents that of cultural hegemony. Corporations project ideals and societal norms through their jean advertisements and when consumers purchase these popular jeans they implicitly consent to those norms. These norms often relate to ideals about gender, race, and pricing.

Thus, our research focused on the research question: how do jean companies’ advertisements portray images of what is “normal”? This question allows us to delve into the hegemonic relationship between consumer and producer within the denim industry.

### **Research Methods**

We utilized critical content analysis methodology to code a set of texts – online jeans advertisements. Content analysis can be defined as a “flexible research method for analyzing texts and describing and interpreting the written artifacts of society” (Hoffman et al, 2012, p. 29). We used a qualitative content analysis approach that involved systematically coding the print and images in the jeans advertisements and identifying patterns among the codes to construct interpretations about the overt and underlying messages of the texts/advertisements (Hoffman et al, 2012). *Critical* content analysis adds a layer to content analysis in that it focuses on interpreting text for issues and messages about power. Beach et al (2009) describe the purpose of critical content analysis as “locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequality” through analysis of texts (p. 129). Since the goal of our study was to identify how jean advertisements reflect aspects of cultural hegemony, our methodology is

considered critical content analysis.

To represent the companies that are most impacting what consumers are consenting to, we examined the top ten companies in revenue for jeans. We utilized the Datantify global company database for 2019/2020 that lists denim companies with the highest earning revenue (Datantify, 2019). Datantify is a company known for presenting accurate statistics throughout varying industries. From this list, we determined the top ten brands and looked at the denim section of their websites. Once within a company's denim section, we identified the top ten suggested styles per gender. The top ten suggested styles per gender were the first ten jeans automatically suggested when the males or female denim page was loaded. For brands with less than ten styles for a specific gender, we used all the styles. Thus, we used non-random selection criteria to select the jeans advertisements to intentionally analyze the most popular brands of jeans.

Since websites continually change, we screen recorded the advertisements per company for each gender to keep track of the data as we were analyzing it. We next clicked on each individual jean within the top ten results. For each jean we recorded: Every picture given for the style; the name of the style; price; the description section (including model dimensions when available). As all the companies listed their products as either male or female, we could not code for variation in gender (such as non-gender binary or transgender).

The content analysis of jeans advertisements included two phases. In our first phase of analysis, to track model size, model gender, model race, and fit of jean for male and female advertisements, we coded each construct for each of the top ten suggested styles through multiple passes. We used iterative rounds of constant comparative analysis (Saldana, 2009) to code each category

below. We conducted inter-rater reliability to note discrepancies in coding and reconcile differences in application of codes.

### **Model size, females**

We divided each row of a sizing chart (see Appendix A below) into thirds. For example, for 5'9", we considered the left third of the chart (S, S, M) as below normal (coded as BLW NRML), the middle third of the chart (M, L, L) as normal (coded as NRML), and so on. For any size not listed in her row, the model was coded as extra below normal. Then, we used the bottom section of the chart to determine if the model's alpha size correlated with her waist size. For example, if a model was listed as waist size 27, we coded her as a S/small. Then, in the row correlated to the model's height, we determined which third she fell under (left third, middle third, right third).

When models' dimensions were not listed, we used a visual chart modeled after the CDC guidelines/standards for what is considered normal BMI (See Appendix B). Using the visual, we compared the model to the image and coded them with the same codes as above (i.e., ranging from X BLW NRML to – ABV NRML)

We intentionally used the construct "normal," because it was the most common term seen throughout BMI charts based on the CDC standards, and it aligns with our research question: that examines how companies present models as "normal."

### **Model size, males**

There was not a similar, non-company created chart for males, so we solely used the BMI chart (See Appendix B) to code the males' body types, ranging from X BLW NRML to ABV NRML.

### **Fit of jean**

We categorized the fit of each jean into two categories, tight

and non-tight fit through multiple passes of coding. If the shape of the model's leg and/or buttocks was defined through the jean, then we coded the jean as "tight." If the shape of the model's leg and/or buttocks was not defined through the jean, then we coded the jean as "non-tight." We conducted inter-rater reliability to note discrepancies in coding and reconcile differences in tight or non-tight application of codes.

### **Perceived racial group**

We coded each model's perceived racial group in three categories: presenting as White, presenting as a person of color (POC), or uncertain. When it was more difficult to discern if a model was a model of color, we coded the model as "uncertain." We then converted all "uncertain" codes to the POC category to err on the side of representing what appeared to be "outside" of the typical white "norm" for models.

### **Price**

To account for jean price, we simply recorded the price for each style of jean. When there was a range of prices listed or when the item was on sale, we recorded the lowest price listed. Our second phase of analysis included charting totals and averages for each construct for each company. We first organized the data into male and female. Next, for both male and female, we organized the data in terms of tight and non-tight fit to represent which constructs were represented most frequently for each type of fit. Since the average price was greatly affected by the drastically higher prices of high-end companies (i.e., Gucci at \$1,300 for one pair of jeans), we included both the price average and price median. Finally, we recursively reviewed charted totals and averages for each construct to determine patterns about relationships between gender, fit of jean, race, and price. Hypotheses tests were conducted to determine whether the data were significant.



## Findings

Analysis of jean advertisements revealed three themes about how they portray what is “normal” through their advertisements. See Table 1 in Appendix C, which presents the data to support these themes. Note that all differences in the Table represent statistical significance per the hypothesis testing.

First, there were noticeable differences between models’ body type for females versus males. Males most often fell into the normal category and females in the below and extremely below category for body type. Further, female jean advertisements had more diversity in model size than male jean advertisements.

In the male advertisements, most models fell in to the normal and below normal category for body type. For tight fit jeans for males, 100% of the models fell into the normal category for body type. For non-tight fit jeans for males, 80% of the models fell into the normal category while only 20% of the models fell into the below normal category for body type.

Conversely, in the female advertisements, most models fell in to the below normal or extremely below normal category for body type. For non-tight fit, 55.5% of the female models were extremely below normal and 44.4% of the models were below normal. For tight jean fit, most female models were below or extremely below normal (69.1%), whereas only 30.9% fell in to the normal or above normal category for body type. See Table 1 for an outline of these differences in totals.

Second, people of color were considerably underrepresented in jeans advertisements overall. For females, people of color were also associated with the least common/normalized jean fit. This was not the case for males.

White models far outnumber models of color across male and

female tight and non-tight jean advertisements. The overall percentage of white models was 81.9%; the overall percentage for models of color was 18.1%.

This pattern was not reflected in the male advertisements. Instead, when male models of color were represented in the advertisements, they were associated with the most normalized jean fit. For males, non-tight jeans were the most common fit represented (92%) (tight jeans comprised 8% of fit represented). There was a higher percentage of male models of color represented with this most normalized fit (non-tight) jeans (12.9%). Notably, there were zero males of color represented in the least normalized fit (0%). It is important to note, however, that even though male models of color were associated more with the most common fit of jean (non-tight), they were still outnumbered by white models in this category and not represented at all in the tight fit category.

In the female advertisements, non-tight jeans were the least common fit of jeans represented (10.5%) (tight jeans comprised 89.5% of fit represented). There was a higher percentage of models of color represented in the least normalized fit (non-tight jeans) (30%) than in the most normalized fit (tight jeans) (18.8%). Table 1 outlines these differences in totals.

Third, pricing differed between male and female jeans overall, and pricing differed for most common fit for male and female jeans.

Overall, female jeans are more expensive than male jeans. For female jeans, the overall price average is \$377 (\$322 median). For male jeans, the overall price average is \$74 (\$146 median).

For males, the most normalized jean fit (non-tight jeans), were more expensive than the tight jeans. The average price for the normalized jeans was \$99 (\$212 median price) whereas the average

price for the least normalized jean (tight) was \$49 (\$81 median price).

For females, the least normalized jean fit (non-tight jeans), were far more expensive than the normalized tight jeans. The average price for the least normalized jean was \$607 (\$546 median price) whereas the average price for the most normalized jean (tight) was \$146 (\$98 median price). It is apparent that the high-end company Gucci significantly impacted the average and median price for non-tight jeans. However, these data represent companies' portrayals of what is normal and consumers' purchasing choices. Again, see Table 1 for an outline of these differences in totals.

### **Discussion**

This study demonstrates that jeans companies project a specific appearance as normal and as the ideal standard for how one should look through both male and female jeans advertisements. Through their models, the companies project thin white models as the ideal for both male and females. According to Fiske (1989), as consumers buy the companies' jeans, they give consent to the companies' projected normal. Through continued jeans consumption, the companies maintain a hegemonic role in culture through promoting a dominant definition of normal.

The findings of this study indicate that jean companies perpetuate the definition of the ideal body (thin and white) in both the male and female categories. Even though weight biased advertisements have been shown to perpetrate body image issues, companies continue to project a specific body type (thin and white) though they don't need this to increase their sales (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004). This projection of normal excludes plus sized people and people of color. The general exclusion of people of color in the advertisements entrenches the cultural dominance of whiteness, asserting that white people remain the standard for the ideal body.

Therefore, beyond simply including more people of color in the model selection, we contend that jeans companies should also be attentive to the possible stereotypes they're projecting. For example, the more expensive jeans' companies had fewer models of color. This excluded models of color from being represented in higher end brands, insinuating they may not be purchasing in this price range. This wasn't the only toxic stereotype seen, however. Models of color were also seen wearing the more common style of jeans for both males and females. This construct categorizes them as being represented more so with the popular styles for each gender, placing the models of color in a comfortable norm projected by the companies. We argue that models of color should be seen represented in both popular and unique styles among a varying range of prices. This would show proper inclusivity.

Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that jeans companies project it is difficult for females to deviate from the norm of tight jeans due to the use of prohibitive price. For example, the most popular female style, tight jeans, typically cost less than other styles of jeans. Along the same lines, people of color were associated with the least common/normalized jean fit (non-tight jeans), the most expensive fit of jean. These findings imply that the pricing of each denim style demonstrates which styles the companies value and want their customers to value. Moreover, the use of models of color for the most expensive and least common jean type enforces and normalizes white cultural hegemony. Along with the concerns around style and models of color or price, style also correlates to body image. Jeans companies more often had tighter jeans on below average and extra below average women. By having these body types in tight jeans, the companies show off below average figures. This also meant that models who were average and above average had loose jeans to cover their body.

Overall, jeans' companies utilize their jean's price, model's

weight, gender, and race to project specific stereotypes about what one should or shouldn't wear. This determination is perpetrated as it relates to one's body type, race, gender, price range, or all the above. Despite the stereotypes these companies all continue to portray, they earn the highest earning revenue. Therefore, many buyers are consenting to these norms that are pushed through by the companies earning money from their purchases. Not only are many consenting to this, but each of the ten companies looked at all contributed to these hegemonic norms established.

### **Conclusion**

The brands analyzed in this study included the top ten jeans manufactures based on revenue. This means the public is implicitly adopting what the companies project as normal. The jeans companies serve as an example of a cultural hegemon because they project a standard, implying a certain societal norm and ideal. While these companies become the hegemon for American denim, they project specific beliefs each brand holds on what should be considered as normal. This is seen through their pricing, body image ideals, number of models of color, and style of jean in relation to these factors. To increase inclusivity for jeans companies, diversity in body type and models of color is imperative. This doesn't just mean increasing how many models of color or above normal models there are. This means ensuring companies have proper representation for all their styles and pricing.

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## Appendices

Figure 1

Sizing Chart

	Weight (lbs.)											
	<100	100	120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200	200+
< 5'	XXS	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL				
5'0"	XS	S	S	S	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL		
5'1"	XS	S	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL	XXL		
5'2"	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL	XXL		
5'3"	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'4"	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'5"	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'6"	XS	S	S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'7"		S	S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'8"			S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'9"			S	S	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL	
5'10"			S	S	M	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL
5'11"			M	M	M	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL
6'0"			M	M	M	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL
> 6'				M	M	M	M	L	L	L	XL	XXL

  

Alpha Size	XXS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL	XXL
Numeric Size	00	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16
Waist Size	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33

Chart used to convert given female model dimensions to alpha size and used to determine body type (i.e., normal, below normal, etc.).

Retrieved from: <https://support.stitchfix.com/hc/en-us/articles/204732770-How-to-find-your-size>

Figure 2

BMI Chart



Chart used for all male models and female models that did not include dimensions. This visual uses the same scale and numbers used by the CDC to determine BMI. Retrieved from: <https://serendipstudio.org/oneworld/identity-matters-being-belonging-becoming/body-binary>

Table 1

Totals Chart

MALE	Fit	Jeans	Models	POC Models	Very blw NRML	Blw NRML	NRML	Abv NRML	Price Average	Price Median
	<i>Tight</i>	8 (8%)	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)	0 (0%)	\$49	\$81
	<i>Non-Tight</i>	92 (92%)	70	9 (12.9%)	0 (0%)	14 (20%)	56 (80%)	0 (0%)	\$99	\$212
TOTAL	-	100	78	9 (11.5%)	0 (0%)	14 (17.9%)	64 (82.1%)	0 (0%)	\$74	\$146
FEMALE	Fit	Jeans	Models	POC Models	Very blw NRML	Blw NRML	NRML	Abv NRML	Price Average	Price Median
	<i>Tight</i>	85 (89.5%)	68	16 (18.8%)	10 (14.7%)	37 (54.4%)	16 (23.5%)	5 (7.4%)	\$146	\$98
	<i>Non-Tight</i>	10 (10.5%)	9	3 (30%)	5 (55.5%)	4 (44.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	\$607	\$546
TOTAL	-	95	77	19 (24.7%)	15 (19.5%)	41 (53.2%)	16 (20.8%)	5 (6.5%)	\$377	\$322
TOTAL	Fit	Jeans	Models	POC Models	Very blw NRML	Blw NRML	NRML	Abv NRML	Price Average	Price Median
	<i>Tight</i>	93	76	16 (21%)	10 (13.2%)	37 (48.7%)	24 (31.6%)	5 (6.6%)	\$98	\$90
	<i>Non-Tight</i>	102	79	12 (15.2%)	5 (6.3%)	18 (22.8%)	56 (70.9%)	0 (0%)	\$353	\$379
TOTAL	-	195	155	28 (18.1%)	15 (9.7%)	55 (35.5%)	80 (51.6%)	5 (3.2%)	\$226	\$235

Note. All differences are statistically significant at  $p < 0.01\%$