

MEN IN SKINNY JEANS: INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MENSWEAR AND MASCULINITY

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of skinny jeans for men is one of the most significant events in terms of men's fashion in the 21st century. Although there were negative social connotations linked to men wearing skinny jeans in the past, this practice has become normalized in recent years. This study investigates the role of fashion in social construction of gender; more specifically, using men's skinny jeans as a lens for studying the relationship between men's fashion and masculinity in the 21st century North America. Using theories of social construction and gender identity, I employed mixed methods of conducting a survey and follow-up interview. Men across the university were recruited to share their opinion and experiences related to men's skinny jeans. The case of skinny jeans suggests that men's fashion has the potential to allow masculinity to evolve in a more inclusive direction.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Yu is a master's student studying apparel design. He was born in Urbana, Illinois but he lived in Korea for a fair share of his life as well. He was often perceived as a feminine boy growing up, so he naturally developed an interest in the meanings of masculinity and femininity. This study of man's fashion and masculinity is an attempt to satisfy his long-standing curiosity.

Before coming to Cornell, David got his BFA degree with an emphasis in fashion design from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. David acquired various skills need for creating garments during his undergraduate years. He often designed garments that were inspired by ancient Korean art to bring his two cultures together. After graduating from SAIC, David worked at a small atelier in Chicago for 2 years. The company mainly focused on making women's custom-made evening wear with a high level of craftsmanship and unconventional twist. His responsibilities involved every aspect of garment production from designing, draping, patternmaking, to sewing.

David joined Cornell to start his master's program in the fall of 2017. His major concentration was apparel design. He minored in gender studies in order to study masculinity through the lens of fashion. With his advisors' guidance and support, he was able to finish his research on men's skinny jeans and masculinity. He also worked as a teaching assistant for various classes in the department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design and was a board member of the Korean Graduate Student Association at Cornell.

After graduating, David is planning on going back to the fashion industry as a designer. He wants to pursue menswear instead of womenswear this time as it is in line with his master's research. He might come back to school for another degree to continue his research on men's fashion and masculinity in the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of skinny jeans in menswear is one of the most significant changes that happened to men in the twenty-first century (Bowstead, 2015). In terms of lower garments, men do not have many other options but to wear pants. Before the introduction of bifurcated lower garments, there was little to no distinction between men and women's clothing (Hollander, 2016). The mobility represented by pants have since contributed to gender inequality and influenced people to see male as more active and females as passive. On the same line, women wearing pants out in public was coincided with raising awareness for women's rights. Pants were the forerunner of gendered clothing and studying pants is essential to study men's fashion. By studying men's fashion, one can explore the relation between fashion and gender. After the industrial revolution, the act of adorning one's body was mainly reserved for women only (Kidwell, 1974). There were instances like the rise of Dandyism in the early 19th century and Peacock revolution in the 1960s that have shifted men's dressing norms resulting in a significant impact on how men view fashion since. However, the changes in men's fashion that have been occurring in the twenty-first century is very distinct (Bowstead, 2018). In the twenty-first century, men openly care about their appearance and possibly objectify themselves more than ever (Barry & Martin, 2016). One of the most notable changes in men's fashion is the change in the silhouette of pants—from being loose to being much more form-fitting. One could argue that men wearing skinny jeans are simply a fashion trend or only a few men participate in this practice. However, the change in men's lower garment has impacted more than just a small subculture and re-defined the norm for menswear (Bowstead, 2015).

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Contemporary fashion studies incorporate many different disciplines other than just art and design, such as anthropology, sociology, social psychology, economics, fiber science, history, psychology, cultural studies, and many more (Kaiser & Green, 2016). Among all these different disciplines, Blumer (1969) once asserted the significance of fashion in sociology and how fashion needs to be seriously considered as a serious study topic. Studying fashion might actually be one of the best ways to study society since its changing nature reflects society at various stages of change and evolution. Modern American society is paying more attention to the concept of gender than ever, and people actually need to understand how gender works with the changing conception of gender as non-essentialist (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Taking on the sociologist view of gender as a socially constructed concept (Connell, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987), studying fashion allows a scholar to understand how the gender is conceptualized in a society.

Gender is not given at birth, instead something to be achieved through socialization (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and fashioning one's body is a way of achieving and displaying gender (Barry, 2018; Butler, 2006; Entwistle & Mears, 2013; Goffman, 1979; Green & Kaiser, 2011). Women's fashion has been closely related to the construction of femininity in many Euro-American and Asian societies (Wolf, 2002), and there are many studies that link the social construction of feminine gender to fashion. For example, Mason (2011) studied how women's fashion reflected their participation in the workforce during the second world war and the changing gender norms led by social events at the time. Bayle-Loudet (2015) and Steel (2001) each discussed the significance of corsets regarding modern femininity in their work. Though their approaches to women's corset were different, they both agreed that the corset was an

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essential part of women's fashion and that it played a significant role in the construction of femininity, both positively and negatively.

'Fashion' and 'style' are two terms that carry very feminine connotation in modern Euro-American society (Crane, 2000). In the past, shopping used to be reserved for women and men used to wear clothes that their wives or mothers have purchased for them. Advertisement firms would focus on providing women's perspective when marketing products even though the advertising industry being primarily consisted of men (Golombisky & Kreshel, 2017). However, with the rise of a concept of metrosexual men in the early 2000's, men began to care more about their appearance and participate in the act of fashion consumption (Hall, 2015). Major fashion labels such as Chanel and Armani launched their make-up and skincare brand geared towards men. Despite the rapidly growing male interest and the market size for menswear ("Luxury Menswear Growth to Outpace Womenswear," 2018), it seems that there is not enough research conducted on male identity and fashion (Barry, 2015).

Fashion being seen as a feminine concept makes people believe that men should not care about their appearance in order to achieve masculinity, yet many men still have to consider how they look in order to avoid being called feminine (Barry, 2015, 2018; Kaiser, 2012; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Men gain their power by staying "unmarked" while women "marks" themselves the others in opposition to men (Kaiser, 2012, p. 3). Clothing can unmark one's body by offering its wearer a default masculine trait. When a man is wearing a simple t-shirt, relaxed jeans, or a suit and tie, one can assume that he is being unmarked. On the other hand, one can assume that a man is being marked when he is in traditionally feminine clothing such as a skirt, high heels, or a dress. The moment when a man puts on anything other than what is considered socially masculine, he becomes marked as being different. This belief causes men to either deny

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their genuine interest in fashion and style or socially punish other men who show interest in fashion for not being masculine (Pascoe, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2013). This is problematic because it creates a conceptual dilemma of participating in a feminine activity (i.e., making masculine dress choices) in order to avoid being feminine (i.e., caring about fashion and appearance) to achieve masculinity. Through a number of previous studies on men, masculinity, and fashion, it is found that many men do care about their appearance and what they wear despite the social expectation that says otherwise (Barry & Martin, 2015; Edwards, 1997; Gough, Hall, & Seymour-Smith, 2014). Without more research to provide a better understanding of a relationship between men's fashion and their identity, however, the prevailing gap between conforming to masculine ideals and participating in the feminine act of appearance management will grow and cause more identity and mental disorders to men (Barry & Martin, 2016). Barry (2015) pointed out that researchers need to uncover how men perceive their desires to affirm to masculine ideals through a medium that is typically associated with femininity. This is a very interesting point of view because then, one will be studying how people achieve masculinity by using feminine tools and constantly renegotiate the border between masculinity and femininity in the process. Some sociologists have argued that gender inequality roots from hegemonic masculinity and its toxic nature of discriminating anything that doesn't conform to the hegemonic masculinity and how it seeks dominance over other forms of gender. According to this theory, it is crucial to study masculinity in fashion as a scholar (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Green and Kaiser (2016) identified four words that are commonly associated with masculine clothing—classic, professional, simple, and traditional. This means that while men are being discouraged from caring about their appearance, there still exists a certain masculine

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dressing norm. Again, men are expected to take part in this “feminine” activity of making fashion choices in order to pass as being masculine. Kidwell (1974) stated that “[m]en preoccupied with business no longer felt the need to dress with individuality” (p. 37). However, there is a need to reconsider this sentence and question whether these men did not need to dress with individuality or were forbidden from doing so. Men are still required to care about their looks to present themselves in a socially scripted masculine way, yet they face a fear of being labeled feminine the moment they start caring too much about their appearances. Men are under constant pressure to adhere to specific clothing style that conforms to the masculine gender norm (Barry, 2015).

Studying young men’s perception of skinny jeans for men helps people better understand how the social norm of masculinity is changing at an intersection of gender, fashion, and generation. It also provides a chance to see whether men’s dressing norm has truly changed and how it is re-constructing masculinity in a broader sense. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) once said, “[t]he qualities seen as constituting a masculine self can vary historically and culturally ... [and t]he practices that are interpreted as signs of a masculine self can also vary depending on other features of the actor (age, race, ethnicity, class), the audience, and the situation” (p. 280). Examining these young men’s lived experiences and opinions related to men in skinny jeans contributes to an understanding of what it means to be masculine in twenty-first-century North America. Men wearing skinny jeans started as a minor trend that existed as a subversion of masculinity in the early 2000s. Then it gradually gained its popularity among the general audience and became the new norm for menswear (Bowstead, 2015). What was once considered feminine and inferior to the western hegemonic masculine norm now acts as an alternative symbol of new masculinity in the 21st century (Bowstead, 2015; Rees-Roberts, 2013).

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This study aims to investigate the role of fashion in the social construction of gender—focusing on the relationship between menswear and masculinity specifically, further limiting the scope to skinny jeans for men and masculinity in the 21st century North America. In order to achieve the aim of this study, the following research questions were proposed: (1) what is masculinity? (2) who and what gets to decide what masculinity is? (3) what is the relationship between fashion (menswear) and gender (masculinity)? (4) Can fashion influence masculinity to evolve in more inclusive and less toxic direction? The questions are answered by taking a sociological approach to gender construction and connecting the theories to the field of fashion studies.

To address these crucial research questions, existing sociological gender theories were brought to the field of apparel design to understand of how fashion not only reflects the socially constructed gender norm but also influences the process of gender construction as well. Then, the researcher reviewed existing scholarly work that links fashion and gender to see how these concepts have been related in the past. Additionally, a survey about men's fashion interest, the correlation between jeans fit and masculinity, and social perception towards men wearing skinny jeans was conducted to provide a general understanding of how society views menswear and masculinity. Lastly, a focus group interview revealed men's lived experiences regarding wearing or not-wearing skinny jeans to highlight how fashion and gender played at an intersection of age, class, sexuality, race to create and change one's identity.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Theories

People are born into a binary society which assigns male or female sex at one's birth (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Gender becomes salient at the moment of birth and every member of society plays their role to achieve gender; whether it is becoming men, women, or others. Members of a society learn to distinguish men and women based on existing gendered scripts. For example, people are more likely to identify a little kid with long hair wearing a pink t-shirt as a girl rather than a boy. Boys are told to be more efficacious and girls learn to value their appearance (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This strong stereotypical link between sex categorization and gender makes gender seem almost essentialist. However, many scholars have argued that gender is socially constructed instead of being essential (Connell, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kaiser, 2012; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Multiple subject positions held by an individual, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, and sexuality, can intersect to create an individual's identity, which can cause different kinds of inequality in the society (Collins, 2015). Studying fashion can let people go beyond the binary opposition prevailing in modern Western society considering fashion is about negotiating different subject positions (Kaiser, 2012).

Doing gender is a sociological concept which proposes that an individual achieves one's gender by performing certain gendered activities in their daily interactions rather than being born with one (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As members of society perform gendered activities, existing gendered scripts are used to routinely evaluate whether they successfully performed gendered behaviors that are appropriate for their assigned sex category (West & Zimmerman,

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1987). The social norm of gender heavily influences a person's behavior, and it reifies the existing gender ideology. Hence, it is tough to disturb the existing gender norms even though social constructionist view perceives gender as a fluid concept. West and Zimmerman (1987) claimed that social change must be pursued both at the institutional and individual level since sex categorization and doing gender is tightly knitted. However, individual interactions of doing gender still have the power to initiate a social change and to positively re-shape existing gender order considering how there is no such thing as a masculine or feminine nature. Butler (2006) asserted that what people take as the natural reality of gender is changeable. Unpacking how gender is constructed and exposing the fragility of existing gender norms can challenge the accepted form on gender in the society and the violence enacted by such norms.

Connell (2005) established that hegemonic masculinity prevails as a superior form of masculinity that is set to dominate other variations of masculinity despite various kinds of masculinities existing across society. Other forms of masculinities become subordinate to the hegemonic masculinity and this could cause social injustice and inequality, such as homophobia and violence. Hegemonic masculinity put many men under pressure to conform to the existing hegemonic masculine ideal, although not everyone can achieve it, and this power-seeking nature of hegemonic masculinity at others' subordination is described as toxic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Toxic masculinity is an element of hegemonic masculinity that seeks to maintain its power through violence and discrimination, and it is believed to be a reason for gender inequality as well.

Hybrid masculinity is created as a result of the selective hybridization of multiple subordinate forms of masculinities and privileged gender identities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) worry that hybridization of masculinity, instead of broadening the

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spectrum of socially acceptable forms of masculinity, could obscure what causes marginalization in the society and strengthen the notion of hegemonic masculinity. For example, heterosexual men adopting a homosexual style might make it seem like society is more open to different forms of sexuality, but it might not be necessarily true. Similarly, white men appropriating black hip-hop culture does not necessarily mean that a society is functioning beyond racism. In a way, hybridization of masculinity helps hegemonic masculinity prevail by masking and modifying what is creating the marginalization in society.

Pascoe (2005) showed how high school boys in Riverton built their masculine gender identity through “the continual repudiation of ‘fag’ identity” (p. 329). These boys felt that they became more masculine by calling another person a “fag.” Pascoe (2005) pointed out that the word “fag” is “a fluid identity which boys constantly struggle to avoid” (p. 338). The fear of being labeled discourages boys from performing acts that are seen not as masculine. In their culture, men should not care too much about his clothing nor dance with the same-sex partner. In this way, the boys Pascoe studied used the concept of sexuality as a tool to achieve masculinity. The intersection of gender and sexuality can be also seen from the examples of Brazilian transgendered prostitutes. There is a clear distinction between Euro-American and Latin American approach to gender. Kulick (1997) argues that Brazilian transgendered prostitutes approach gender in a way that is heavily informed by one’s sexuality. They define man as someone who penetrates during sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, oral) and woman as anyone who is penetrated regardless of their biological sex (Kulick, 1997). This story clearly shows that gender and sexuality are two different concepts even though they are very closely related to each other. Inclusive masculinity theory posed by Anderson (2010) examined the relationship between homophobia and construction of masculinities. He argued that stratification of different

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masculinities decreases in the absence of homophobia. With a better understanding of gender and sexuality, people can realize that being feminine and being gay are two different things. This phenomenon could lead to acceptance of femininity in men and non-conforming forms of gender as well (Anderson, 2010).

Reconstruction of Masculinity through Fashion

The term masculine is defined as “having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man” (“Definition of MASCULINITY,” n.d.). Many traits could be considered masculine such as being physically strong, emotionally distant, not caring about fashion, having a short haircut, having a deep voice. However, by definition, masculinity is not a fixed concept and what is considered masculine naturally changes depending on time and space. For example, domestic childcare used to be considered a feminine activity, but more people are accepting that it’s not only reserved for women. Aristocrats during the baroque and rococo period in Europe wore highly ornate clothing, while men in the twenty-first century tend to be dressed in simpler looking garments.

Men can establish their masculine gender identity through fashion (Edwards, 1997). As a way of doing gender, men are achieving masculinity by participating in men’s dressing activity. Men become more masculine by wearing socially appropriate menswear; at the same time, certain clothing items also become more masculine because men are wearing them. In this cycle of doing gender, one can eventually re-define masculine style and masculinity.

Hollander (2016) talked about how men’s suit as a visual form can serve as a symbol of masculinity in modern society. The suit itself being masculine is an example of fashion items becoming gendered in the repeated cycle of doing gender and how certain gender norms can be scripted in the process. What is masculine or feminine style and its dressing norm can vary

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according to different time and space. Since the introduction of *le smoking* by Yves Saint Laurent in 1966, women have appropriated men's tailored jacket and the masculinity it symbolized in order to take a step towards gender equality. One can deconstruct the unequal power structure by seeing fashion beyond existing masculine/feminine categorization (Kaiser, 2012). Lady Gaga even mentioned how wearing men's suit made for a woman was an empowering moment during her Women in Hollywood acceptance speech in 2018 (Fisher, 2018).

The shift in gendered dressing norm around bifurcated lower garment was significant in modern Western history. Public display of the silhouette of men's legs was actively encouraged and stockings used to be closely associated with a masculine ideal in eighteenth-century Europe (Gerner, 2015). Women, on the other hand, were forbidden from revealing their legs for a long time since the separation of menswear and womenswear after the invention of bifurcated lower garments in medieval Europe (Hollander, 2016). However, the gendered dressing norm differed in the twentieth century and almost became the opposite of how it used to be in the past. Leggings, skinny jeans, and short shorts that expose more than half of their thighs were mostly reserved for women and men were discouraged from exposing their legs. Men did still wear leggings and shorts occasionally, but they would balance the feminine connotation of wearing such items with masculinity represented by sports and athleticism in order to compensate their masculinity and avoid being marked as feminine (Kaiser, 2012; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Men performing masculinity through fashion are constantly reifying and negotiating gender norms by marking and unmarking their body (Barry, 2018; Kaiser, 2012; Kaiser & Green, 2016).

Barry (2015) claimed that the hegemonic masculinity prevails in men's fashion consumption and it influences their clothing choices. Hegemonic masculinity not only regulates

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how men engage with fashion but also how much they care about fashion. Because fashion is imagined to be more feminine in modern Euro-American society (Crane, 2000), the idea of men's fashion causes a conceptual clash between femininity and masculinity (Edwards, 1997; Kaiser, 2012) and makes men believe that they should not care too much about style and appearance as discussed in the previous chapter. The toxic nature of hegemonic masculinity, then, prevents men from actively engaging in making fashion choices and restricts men to conform to the existing dressing norms. While it has been recognized that the changing and self-reifying nature of hegemonic masculinity makes it very hard to challenge it, one can say that "fashion and dress hold potential to help transform the gender order" (Barry, 2018, p. 660).

The Burning Man Festival shows how men can have more freedom to express their identity and even attempt to reconfigure masculinity through fashion when they are away from the heteronormative society that suppresses their daily clothing practices (Figure 1). Green and Kaiser (2011) conceptualize it as "a 'transformative space'—enables men to rethink masculine style-fashion-dress in more plural or open-ended terms" (p. 2). The importance of context and specificity is often emphasized in gender studies (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Kaiser (2012) pointed out how fashion differs by time and space and works to negotiate one's subject position as well.



Figure 1. Image from Burning Man 2017. Retrieved from *the Burning Man Journal*, by Z. Lomax, 2017, <https://journal.burningman.org/2017/08/black-rock-city/survive-and-thrive/dress-to-impress-bless-and-process-clothing-as-ritual-in-black-rock-city/>.

Burning Man is a place where the link between one's socially constructed masculinity and the society that framed it could temporarily break. One can explore gender outside the boundaries drawn by certain social norms because of this gap. Male participants of the Burning Man try out various styles to re-negotiate their masculinities and exhibit how they could be portrayed through fashion. Participants of this festival question the existing Western gender norm when they make dressing choices, and these men's exploration of masculinity does not end at the festival. Green and Kaiser (2011) further emphasize the significance of participating in the invention of new fashion and how these experiences influence the attendee's dressing choices once they go back to their original society: "once within the space, he became open to possibilities otherwise seemingly outside of his realm of visual expression" (p. 12). One of the significant findings of their study is that gender non-conforming clothing practices in a temporary setting such as Burning Man eventually let men negotiate their style when they go back to their everyday lives. Exposure to these different forms of fashion eventually contributes

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to the broadening of masculine style, thus expanding the spectrum of non-marginalized masculinity and disrupting the existing gender order.

Men wearing skinny jeans is another example of renegotiating and reconstructing gender through fashion. Men's jeans, before the introduction of skinny jeans in the early twenty-first century, used to consist of looser fit which was in tune with utilitarian and functional masculine dressing norms. Jeans were not offered in many different silhouettes to begin with. Even when they were, tightly fitting jeans were closely associated with indie music sub-culture and homosexuality. The late 1990s was a dark age for menswear. Bowstead (2015) stated that "it was a period in which arid and lifeless ideas were recycled on a seemingly endless loop" (p. 27). Big, boxy, and strong silhouettes predominated men's fashion. Hedi Slimane is believed to be a designer who brought men's skinny jeans to mainstream culture and also introduced the garment silhouettes that were considered feminine in the past and change in perception of masculinity since his debut at Dior Homme in 2001 (Figure 2). Slimane is known for his use of "slim silhouette, precise tailoring, and androgynous flourishes" (Bowstead, 2015, p. 23). Before Slimane who adventurously explored with the precarious nature of socially constructed masculine dressing norm and successfully broadened the horizon of men's fashion (Park & Yim, 2017), men's fashion focused on emphasizing the sporty muscular male figure conforming to the Western hegemonic masculinity. He hired skinny androgynous models to walk down the runway in skinny jeans for Dior's fashion show, and this has influenced the image of the ideal male model as a result. A kind of fashion that was looked down upon for not being masculine enough has been newly established as a new norm for fashion. Many menswear designers still get inspiration from his legacy even today (Bowstead, 2015; Park & Yim, 2017). Slimane has successfully blended traditionally "masculine" elements (e.g., tailoring and monochromatic color

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scheme) and “feminine” elements (e.g., drapery fabric and tight pants) of clothing to create a new kind of masculinity.



Figure 2. A look from Dior Homme Spring 2005 Collection. Retrieved from *VOGUE.com*. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2005-menswear/dior-homme/slideshow/collection#40>.

Bowstead (2015) asserted “fashion can be ‘read’ as an authored text as much as analyzed as subtext, and can act as an intervention in culture as much as a reflection” (p. 39). This quote reveals how fashion does not function as a mere reflection of society, but also as a force that has a potential of initiating social changes. Fashion, then, can renegotiate gender (masculinity) by subverting the existing gendered dressing norms (menswear).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Several scholars have mentioned men's skinny jeans to address the influence of Hedi Sliman in men's fashion, but there have not been many studies that specifically focused on how skinny jeans re-negotiated masculinity in the twenty-first century (Bowstead, 2015; Rees-Roberts, 2013). To further analyze the relationship between men's skinny jeans and masculinity in the twenty-first century North America, a survey and follow-up interviews regarding men's perception of men wearing skinny jeans were conducted. The survey and interviews offered deeper insights of how men's fashion and masculinity is changing within a framework of doing gender and whether men's fashion has a potential to influence masculinity to evolve in a more inclusive direction.

Survey

An online survey targeting self-identified men was created using Qualtrics and promoted across the university campus for several months, recruiting 80 men in total. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions (Appendix B). The questions were divided into four groups; the first part of the questionnaire being questioned about the participant's demographic information such as race/ethnicity, year of birth, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

The second part of the survey asked each participant to self-report how important fashion is to himself. Then, respondents answered various questions regarding fashion/style/appearance management, such as how many pieces of clothing they owned and how much time they spend in the morning getting dressed, to reduce personal bias and provide more objective data. Each

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survey participant provided examples of what they considered as masculine clothing item in this section of the survey as well. The number of responses per person for this question was not limited, allowing each participant to come up with multiple examples of masculine clothing.

In the third part, respondents were expected to look at two different groups of images of jeans and answer a series of questions about jeans and masculinity. The images were divided according to the different silhouette in terms of the fit of jeans; one group being skinny and the other being less form-fitting. A multiple selection questions of choosing words that best described these jeans followed the images. Words provided included masculine, slim, normal, gay, fashionable, comfortable, manly, strong, big, feminine, loose, straight, weird, stylish, uncomfortable, fragile, tight, and weak. The number of selections was not limited, and participants could also choose 'other...' to add their own choice of word. After answering the previous question, participants were asked to evaluate how masculine each group of jeans were in the year 2019 and answer whether they would agree that those jeans were not masculine about ten years ago or not. Participants were also asked to answer what elements of each group of jeans made them look more or less masculine.

The last part of the survey consisted of open-ended questions about personal experiences related to wearing skinny jeans as a man. The first set of questions were about whether they do or do not wear skinny jeans, and around which year they started wearing them If they do. The questionnaire also offered a section for the respondents to report any episodes or social interactions that might have been caused by wearing skinny jeans in the year 2019 and back in the 2000s. Participants who said that they did not wear skinny jeans were directed to a different question which inquired about what stops them from wearing skinny jeans.

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Interview

Once the survey was completed, a set of follow-up interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth data about men wearing skinny jeans. While the purpose of conducting a survey was to provide a general overview of how men view fashion, the interview unpacked more personal opinions and experiences regarding men's skinny jeans and dressing norm. Survey respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in the follow-up interview at the end of the survey, and some of them were contacted by the researcher to be a part of the interview. The focus group was carefully selected based on the participants' survey responses. The researcher made sure to include both group participants who either did or did not wear skinny jeans to minimize the potential of having biased responses. The age of interviewees was limited to people who were born between 1981 and 1996 to focus on stories of Generation Y men. Total of 5 participants from the survey has ended up participating in the interview. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private setting and all five interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed.

During the interview, participants were given questions and encouraged to talk freely about each question (Appendix C). The interviews followed the format of open conversation while making sure to address important topics. Some crucial questions included why participants' decided to take part in the study, how much they care about other people judging them based on appearance (i.e., how much they conform to existing dressing norms), what might have caused the change in perception of people of men wearing skinny jeans over time, and their personal experiences with wearing or not wearing skinny jeans. The interview offered a chance for the participants to think more in-depth about their lived experiences related to wearing skinny jeans.

CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

Survey Findings

49 (61.25%) of participants out of 80 were born between 1981 and 1996. There were 24 (30%) participants who were younger (insert the age range here] and 7 (8.75%) participants older (age range); youngest born in 2000 and oldest in 1959. 55 (68.75%) out of 80 participants answered that they were native speakers of English while 25 (31.25%) said that English is not their first language; suggesting that they might come from a different country. Participants' sexuality also varied; Majority of participants were heterosexual (80%), homosexual (11.25%), bisexual (6.25%), and sexually fluid (2.5%) (Table. 1).

Table 1

Survey Participant Demographics

	Response	% (total=80)
Age/Generation		
Younger than Gen. Y (born after 1996)	24	30%
Generation Y (born between 1981~1996)	49	61.25%
Older than Gen. Y (born before 1981)	7	8.75%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	38	47.5%
Asian	31	38.75%
Hispanic	7	8.75%
Black	2	2.5%
Indian	1	1.25%

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Asian/White	1	1.25%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	64	80%
Homosexual	9	11.25%
Bisexual	5	6.25%
Sexually-fluid	2	2.5%

None of the participants claimed that fashion was not important to them while the degree of importance varied; extremely important (12.5%), very important (32.5%), moderately important (42.5%), and slightly important (12.5%). No participant indicated that he does not pay attention to other people's appearance at all, yet 1 (1.25%) person answered that he does not care about how other people perceive him based on his fashion/style/appearance at all. As far as where men get their fashion/style inspiration, it was discovered that out of 287 answers, street (18.8%), friends (18.5%), social media (14.3%) were the most significant while blogs (1.4%), catalogs (2.1%), and printed magazines (2.8%) only contributed a little. Multiple selections were allowed for this question.

When it comes to examples of masculine clothing, participants have included responses like suits, pants and jeans, loose clothing, functional clothing, button-down shirts, athletic clothing, muscle-revealing clothing, leather, simple clothing, military or police uniform, and men's boxers. The responses are listed from the most picked to the least in descending order, excluding responses that were only selected by either 1 or 2 participants.

Participants used words like fashionable, hipster, stylish, gay, skinny, confidence, uncomfortable, feminine, trendy to describe men in skinny jeans when they weren't looking at

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particular images (Figure 3). Participants looked at two different sets of images—one being skinny jeans and the other being less form-fitting jeans (Figures 4 & 5). Participants selected words like slim (19.2%), tight (18.8%), stylish (12.3%), fashionable (11.6%), uncomfortable (9.6%), feminine (7.2%), gay (4.8%), normal (4.1%) (out of 292 responses) to describe skinny jeans illustrated in Figure 4. 27.54% of participants (19 out of 69) thought that skinny jeans are not masculine in the year 2019, and 86.96% (60 out of 69) of participants answered that skinny jeans were not considered masculine ten years ago. For the second group of images illustrated in Figure 5, participants used normal (20.2%), comfortable (15.6%), masculine (10.6%), fashionable (9.9%), straight (9.1%), loose (8.7%), slim (6.5%), stylish (6.1%), manly (4.6%) (out of 263 recorded responses) to describe the less form-fitting jeans. Only 2.86% (2 out of 70) of participants stated these jeans are not masculine in the year 2019, and 22.86% (16 out of 70) of respondents said they would have considered these pants not masculine about ten years ago.



Figure 3. Wordcloud generated using NVivo based on open-ended responses to the survey question “What words come to your mind when you hear a phrase ‘men in skinny jeans?’”

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Figure 4. Skinny Jeans. Original images before cropping from ASOS, Saint Laurent, ASOS (left to right).



Figure 5. Less Form-Fitting Jeans. Original images before cropping from G-Star Raw, Calvin Klein Jeans, Levi's (left to right).

A potential generational difference was detected as well. For the skinny jeans (Figure 4), only 25.58% (11 out of 43) of participants who were born between the year 1981 and 1996 answered that they were not masculine at all. Similarly, 20% (4 out of 20) of respondents who

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were born after 1996 responded that those jeans were not masculine at all. Yet, 66.67% (4 out of 6) of participants who were born before the year 1981 said that skinny jeans are not masculine at all. A clear link between the silhouette of the jeans and masculinity was discovered from the survey as well. Participants, overall, perceived skinny jeans to be less masculine than less form-fitting jeans. Although skinny jeans for men are more broadly being accepted in the late 2010s, participants still considered less-form fitting jeans to be more masculine than skinny jeans (Figures 6 & 7).

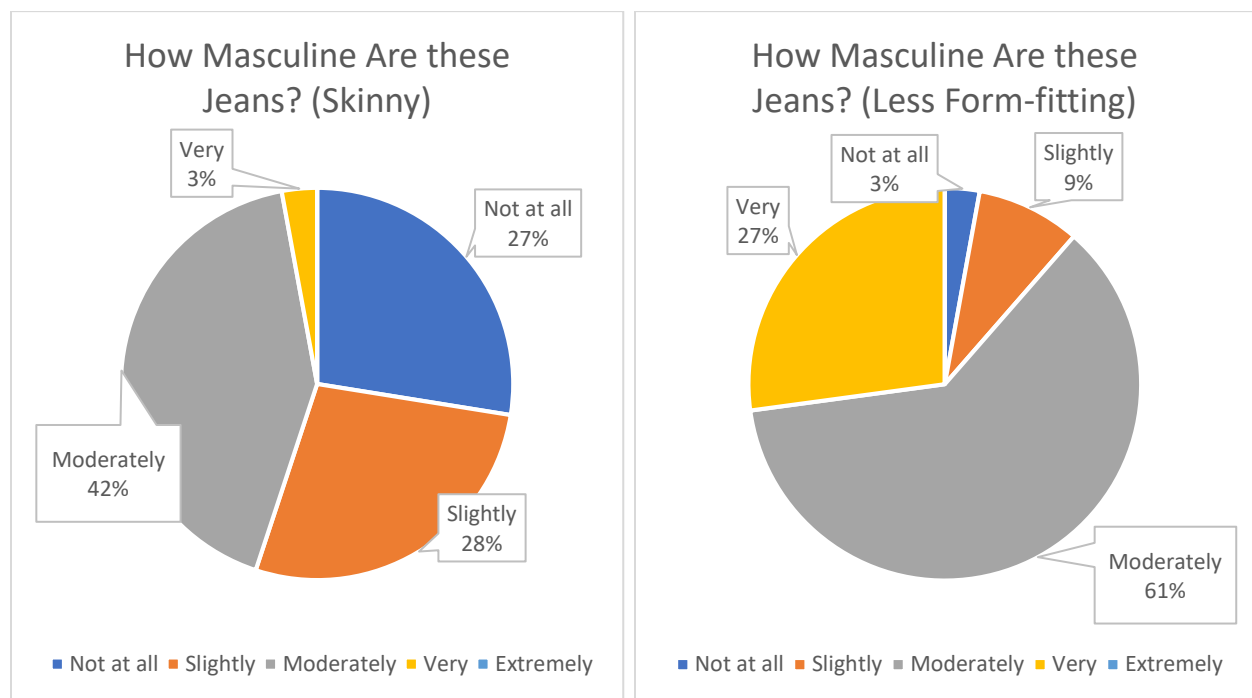


Figure 6 (left). Survey responses to how masculine skinny jeans are in 2019.

Figure 7 (right). Survey responses to how masculine less form-fitting jeans are in 2019.

While 27% of the participants still think skinny jeans are not masculine in the year 2019, it is notable that 59.42% of the participants' perception of men wearing skinny jeans has shifted in the past ten years in a more accepting way. This number is especially impressive, considering that only 50% of participants answered that they wear skinny jeans.

Interview Findings

There were five interviewees who came from a somewhat diverse background except for their age and race (Table 2). The age range of interviewee was limited to focus on the experiences and opinions of Generation Y men. All five interviewees were born between the year 1984 and 1995. There were three heterosexual, one bisexual, and one sexually-fluid participant. They came from various countries; the United States of America, China, Netherlands, and South Korea. The focus group lacked in racial diversity though; 3 of them were Asian, and 2 of them were white. Each participant has spent a different amount of time in the United States as well; varying from 2 years to 35 years.

Table 2

Interview Participant Demographics

	Year of Birth	Sexual Orientation	Country of Origin	Race/Ethnicity
Interviewee #1	1995	Sexually-fluid	China	Asian
Interviewee #2	1990	Heterosexual	South Korea	Asian
Interviewee #3	1984	Heterosexual	USA	White
Interviewee #4	1991	Heterosexual	South Korea	Asian
Interviewee #5	1984	Bisexual	Netherlands	White

In the following, the findings from the interviews are presented according to different themes that emerged from the conversations. Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was done using NVivo software. Segments of conversations were coded according to each question and the themes were identified afterward. Some emerging topics include the meaning of moderately masculine, public perception and dressing norm, men’s opinion on men in skinny jeans, cause for the shift in men’s perception of men in skinny jeans, fashion and gender identity

construction. Each finding is crucial to understanding the relationship between men's skinny jeans and masculinity.

Motivation to participate in the study

Each interview started with asking interviewees about their motivation to take part in this study. All five interviewees expressed their interest in fashion as a reason for their participation. Interviewee 1 has mentioned that he wore skinny jeans and cared about fashion enough to find the research topic interesting. Interviewee 5 expressed that he was already interested in fashion and the notion of masculinity in general. Aside from their interest in fashion, Interviewee 3 and 5 also expressed that they find value in participating in researches that are being conducted in the university. Interviewee 3 said, "I enjoy being part of the college and also assisting in research as much as possible in a research-driven institution." It was surprising to see that every participant was interested in fashion, contrary to a common belief that men do not care about their appearance.

Defining moderately masculine

Upon reviewing the survey responses, a question was raised regarding participants' responses about jeans' fit and masculinity. Most participants have selected "moderately masculine" for both groups of images (Figures 4 & 5). 42% of participants considered skinny jeans moderately masculine and 61% of participants thought that less form-fitting jeans were moderately masculine. The researcher presumed moderately masculine as a state of being normal—neither too masculine nor not masculine, but it was only one person's perspective. Thus, each participant was asked to elaborate on what they meant by "moderately masculine" in the survey. Every interview participant has selected moderately masculine as a response at least once, so it was possible to gather insights from all five interviewees.

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Interviewee 1 used his observation around the school campus to answer this question. He described the less form-fitting jeans as moderately masculine. Moreover, the reason for doing so was because he felt that those were the types of jeans that he sees the most on campus. He interpreted moderately masculine as being common. Interviewee 2 also said, “I think if any guy wearing these jeans, I would think they are like a normal guy. I go neither like too masculine nor feminine.” As far as skinny jeans (Figure 4), he said that he sees more women than men wearing skinny jeans, so he relates them more to femininity, but he acknowledged that they are also masculine because he also sees many men wearing skinny jeans on campus. Interviewee 2 also described the less form-fitting jeans as moderately masculine using terms like ordinary, neutral, normal, common to articulate what he meant further. Interviewee 4 also used the term “normal” to describe moderately masculine and further elaborated by saying, “they are neither like too masculine nor like too feminine. They are just like normal like in-between kind of.”

Interviewer 3 and 5 offered somewhat different perspectives than the other three interviewees who described the skinny jeans were feminine. They both have answered skinny jeans were moderately masculine. Interviewee 3 emphasized the significance of who was wearing skinny jeans and did not really want to separate jeans from their wearers. He mentioned that the definition of masculinity is very vague, and he thought the skinny jeans were moderately masculine because men were wearing them. Along the same lines, Interviewee 5 said,

“I think I have a far more open-ended sense of what masculinity is nowadays. And if you would have asked me when I was 16 or so and I think I would have considered them less masculine than I do now I feel like. Well, I don’t really care that much about what masculinity has to be like.”

Instead of directly answering what he meant by moderately masculine, he decided to talk about the concept of masculinity and how he sees any clothing that men wear as somewhat masculine. All interviewees agreed on that moderately masculine means something is neither too

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feminine or masculine and does not necessarily trigger any question about one's appearance. These responses are congruent with the researcher's assumption. Being moderately masculine can be interpreted as being normal, neutral, and default, which is essentially being unmarked in terms of fashion and gender.

It was discovered that interviewees found men wearing skinny jeans to be a normal phenomenon in the year 2019. They had different opinions on exactly how masculine or feminine it was, but all five interviewees shared a view that it was at least normal enough not to provoke any particular thoughts when they saw other men wearing skinny jeans. Interviewee 3 said,

“... it's not surprising anymore to see something like that. It's completely normal and okay in society's view for men to wear tighter fitting clothing. And I saw that in within this society.”

Interviewee 4 also said that he does not care whether someone is wearing skinny jeans or not and he thought it was normal. What is very interesting about their comments is that they are both straight men and stated that they do not wear skinny jeans themselves. This proves a shift in people's perception further by showing how men who do not wear skinny jeans also find wearing skinny jeans to be acceptable.

Public perception and dressing norm

It was interesting to find that the interviewees had different answers to this question while admitting that there is a social pressure for men to dress a certain way and that there is a disadvantage for not conforming to such dressing norm. Interviewee 1, for example, does wear skinny jeans but he would not wear them every day. He said that he feels like people pay more attention to him when wearing skinny jeans, so he does not want to draw unnecessary attention to himself by wearing them. He also mentioned that only brave people could wear skinny jeans.

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Interviewee 2 and 4 had very interesting responses to this question. They both have answered that they do not care much about how other people perceive their style as long as they are looking clean and professional. Interviewee 2 particularly mentioned that how others perceive him did not affect his dress decisions much. After continuing the conversation, however, he revealed a story from 2009 when he was about to go to college, where he had to modify his style based on the social dressing norm. Interviewee 2 said,

“So my friends told me because I was to go to study abroad, and they were like saying you know make sure you don’t wear skinny jeans because they’re going to just treat you as a homosexual person. First, I just felt like you know what it’s like in the States. And actually, I sort of refrained myself from wearing like that during my freshmen... during undergrad, yes, basically. But as time passed like you know, I see more and more people and my perspective on skinny jeans changed. And I personally don’t like sort of dragging or sort of like saggy kind of style. I’m fore like a fit like sharp. I like that kind of style. And that I always wanted to wear like a slim style. I’ve always looked for a slim style, but back then, I think I was just more worried about you know what others perceive.”

During this conversation, he unpacked how fear of being associated with homosexuality, which he later described as unwanted assumptions, stopped him from wearing skinny jeans in the year 2009 even though he already knew that loose clothing was not suitable for him. He also realized later that he might still care about how others perceive him these days, but he did not have to be as careful when making dress decisions as he did 10 years ago because the style he desired was already within the boundary of socially acceptable men’s clothing.

Interviewee 4 shared a similar episode. He previously stated that how others judge him based on his fashion and style did not affect his clothing choices much. However, that statement came out to be false when he shared the following story. He said that he tried his first pair of skinny jeans around the year 2009 and he immediately stopped wearing them after getting some negative comments from people. In his case, it was not about the link between skinny jeans and homosexuality, but about how people perceived him as weak. Interviewee 4 put it like this, “I

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just wanted to be strong not the weak so that's why I just changed. I didn't want to be wearing really skinny-skinny jeans." Then, he went ahead to talk about what happened in the year 2015. After serving in the military and gaining more muscle, he gained the confidence to put skinny jeans back on his body because he was not afraid of being perceived as a weak person anymore. What is also interesting about Interviewee 4 is that he still thinks that he does not wear skinny jeans to this day. When he came to the interview, he was wearing very slim jeans which were somewhere between the jeans from Figure 4 and Figure 5, yet he did not realize that they would be considered skinny jeans by many people.

Men's opinion on men in skinny jeans

Interview participants were invited to talk about how men might perceive other men who wear skinny jeans. The purpose of this conversation was to see how the toxic nature of hegemonic masculinity might impact men's dress decisions regarding wearing skinny jeans. 4 out of 5 interviewees expressed that men might tend to link wearing skinny jeans to homosexuality. Interviewee 2 said, "I feel like guys would jump right to like the masculinity or like homosexuality issue." Once a member of the society recognizes this, then the fear of being labeled as homosexual could stop him from wearing skinny jeans. Interviewee 5 also had an interesting point of view. He said that men might consider other men who wear skinny jeans as not "real men" in comparison to men who wear suits or loose jeans. This notion of real or non-real man puts men to question their masculinity and become more insecure about their gender performance.

Two of the interviewees also pointed out that time and location matters and people would have a different opinion about men wearing skinny jeans depending on where they live or how old they are. Interviewee 1 elaborated,

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“Cornell peers? I definitely don’t think they’re gonna think it’s a big deal. Even if they think it’s feminine they wouldn’t say it. It’s like me. I slightly feel that these jeans are feminine but I never would say it. [...] Yeh. For Cornell people, I think, uh... wearing skinny jeans doesn’t really mean anything. I see people wearing skinny jeans all the time. But for my dad, I don’t think he’s gonna like it. Because I think for their age it’s kind of more conservative.”

Interviewee 4 also said that people do not really care these days anymore, but 10 years ago wearing skinny jeans was related to being homosexual.

It seems like interviewee 1 has a more traditional binary sense of masculine and feminine gender role. On the other hand, Interviewee 3 and 5 had different opinions about straight men wearing skinny jeans. They used examples like hipsters, K-Pop, and J-Pop to explain how the desired form of masculinity could change over time. They said, because many women approve these men who wear skinny jeans as potential boyfriends, some men also start changing themselves. There was also an argument made about the divorce between masculinity and heterosexuality, which could also reduce some pressure for men to conform to hegemonic masculine norms. Interviewee 5 elaborated,

“... for example, East Asian music K-Pop or J-Pop and so on. There are kids in Netherlands who listen to that now who are not necessarily Asian descent, And you know girls are into it, so the boys want to be into it as well kind of to put it in the stereotypical ways... if they’re worried about their heterosexuality. Which also because like the long... I guess for a long-time heterosexuality... which is a part of masculinity, but not necessarily. All of it ties into this quite interestingly. And I think the idea of masculinity being heterosexual is also disappearing. That that also is part of the spectrum change, I think. And that you can... They can be super straight while wearing skinny jeans and not just say an artist or gay or something like that you know...”

Cause for the shift in men’s perception of men in skinny jeans

After analyzing the survey results, a significant shift in men’s perception of men wearing skinny jeans was detected. The percentage of survey participants who considered skinny jeans to be not masculine has reduced by approximately 50% over the past decade. Such change was

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expected, but not to this degree. As a result, the researcher had decided to ask this question to find out what might have caused so many people to change their thoughts regarding men wearing skinny jeans over the past decade or so.

All five interviewees emphasized exposure as a critical factor—being exposed to the idea of men wearing skinny jeans and having men’s skinny jeans as a purchasable option in the market. They suggested that people get used to men wearing skinny jeans as more and more people start to adopt them. In addition, men wearing skinny jeans become more normalized and acceptable once the number of men who wear skinny jeans grows. They claimed that they do not have any specific thought on men wearing skinny jeans anymore because a lot of men wear skinny jeans now. Interviewee 2 revealed that he used to consider men wearing skinny jeans very feminine, but his perspective has changed over time because of the increased number of male friends in skinny jeans around him. Other interviewees shared similar insights. Their words can be summed up to “you get used to what you see.”

Celebrity influence was another term that was brought up a lot. This could be seen as an expansion of exposure mentioned in a previous paragraph. Celebrities (and athletes) hold a unique space in contemporary society because they have the potential to reach out to millions of people through mass media and they seem to have a considerable influence on the general public. People care about what celebrities wear. Interviewee 4 said that once he saw male performers wearing skinny jeans on TV, he started thinking that it was normal to wear skinny jeans as a man. Interviewee 3 brought up athletes to elaborate on this matter. Athletes are traditionally considered to be very masculine because of the way they look and the kind of activity they are associated with. Their association with a skinny silhouette for men could definitely cause a change in people’s mind. Here is what Interviewee 3 shared about celebrities and athletes:

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“You know you have celebrities who are wearing more fitted clothes. Now you have athletes even that are wearing more fitted clothes now. Like if you look at soccer jerseys for example or soccer kits from the 90s, and then you look at them today. You know they are all fitted. They’re not necessarily like skin-tight but they’re fitted they’re streamlined. You get the same thing with basketball. You know Michigan University. You look at that when they were in the final four in the 90s you know they all had the huge shorts that went down below the knees and everything was too baggy. But now you look at like the NBA player playoffs and everything was like streamlined...”

Interviewee 5 also shared his insights on celebrity influence. He actually brought up how Hedi Slimane transformed skinny jeans that used to belong to an indie music sub-culture to a mainstream fashion. Interviewee 5 suggested that specific values were added to men’s skinny jeans through repetitive exposure of skinny jeans as a mainstream runway fashion.

While the interviewees emphasized exposure as a key reason, other reasons were proposed as well. Interviewee 1 and 4 brought up a wider range of selection available in the market as a reason. Interviewee 4 said that they are not forced to choose between skin-tight skinny jeans and loose jeans anymore because there is a variety of skinny jeans in terms of fit. According to Interviewee 4, industry offering more options to consumers also changed people’s perception. Interviewee 1 and 5 mentioned that notions of masculinity have changed to shift how society views men in skinny jeans. Interviewee 1 said, “people are becoming more open and less conservative.” They went to talk about how young members of society are more aware of the concept of diversity when it comes to performing gender. Interviewee 5 elaborated,

“... if masculinity used to be cool, playing with masculinity is cooler now. I think so that you can still be a very masculine guy, but then also care about your appearance or care about fashion or care about what used to be perceived as maybe conventionally feminine things. And that. Yes, caring about your body I think. Caring about yourself, appearance, and your hygiene, and that kind of thing. I think that used to be definitely more feminine... femininely perceived practice. [...] I think men were also allowed to have bodies more if that makes sense. I mean as in that you were allowed to. That this shift happened and that men were allowed to have bodies as in they were allowed to show it and care about it and maybe enjoy it rather than this kind of... you know ‘I just dropped something off to myself. I don’t care about my appearance. I like my out of bed look is cute’ or something like that...”

Skinny jeans, fashion, and gender identity

All five interviewees agreed that wearing skinny jeans could be both a trend and part of someone's identity and that it depends on how much someone cares about fashion. Interviewee 1, though, expressed that he saw it more as an identity than a fashion trend. He used fashion to make himself stand out from the crowd. He proposed that he can create his identity by intentionally putting on a certain type of clothes:

“... I think it definitely helps build your feminine side. If you want to show people that you are... you're not a typical masculine guy. You could definitely put on a pair of skinny jeans and show. When I want to show people that you have a good sense of fashion. You are... you're trendy. But I think most guys are kind of afraid of wearing skinny jeans. Like if you show that you dare wear them, it's a good sign that you're fashionable or you're trendy or you're at the forefront of fashion. Yeah, I think I sometimes put on skinny jeans just to show people that I'm really... I'm more fashion than other guys. Yes, sort of to build that kind of...”

Interviewee 2 suggested that people use fashion to express their identity. Every person puts different weight on fashion in terms of how they utilize fashion to express oneself, but it seemed they all use it as a tool for self-expression. Interviewee 2 said that there is a group of people who cares about fashion very much and actively uses fashion to navigate their identity, whereas there is another group of people who tend to follow the dressing norm and trend. He proposed that an expansion of dressing norm could happen as a result of the former group playing with fashion. As people get exposed to a different style, they subconsciously get more used to such styles; becoming normalized in a way. Then, the latter group of people who conform to the dressing norm also gets the freedom to express themselves more. Interviewee 2 elaborated using an example of skinny jeans,

“I think those who wanted to wear skinny jeans but couldn't because of the social sort of like the social binding or social stigma in a way are now seeing that it's more allowed. So I think they are more... I guess they are expressing themselves more because it's

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allowed. So that they have more freedom in choosing what they wear compared to like maybe 10 years ago when like I guess people were thinking guys should wear like the traditional like straight fit jeans.”

Interviewee 4 responded that he never really thought about how fashion can create one’s identity, but it was proven that he subconsciously used fashion to negotiate his masculinity from the story he shared. During his college years, he avoided wearing skinny jeans and purposefully put on multiple layers of clothing to portray himself as a physically stronger person than he was and build a more masculine identity.

4 out of 5 interviewees also acknowledged that men have the capability to re-define what is considered as masculine clothing. Skinny jeans used to be considered as a feminine fashion item, but men have gendered them to be masculine by putting them on their body. It only makes sense when one thinks about the fluid definition of masculinity. As more men wear skinny jeans, they start to get associated with men more and become more masculine. Interviewee 2 explained how he thought skinny jeans themselves were not very masculine, but he started to question himself and believe that they, indeed, are masculine because he had seen so many men wearing skinny jeans. Interviewee 3 elaborated,

“... you look at different styles. You go to New York and you look at the punk rockers you look at like the new punk people and like the people in Brooklyn and whatnot. And then a lot of them are wearing the skinny jeans. You know what a lot of them are... They do stereotypically masculine things. They are the ones who are smoking. They are the ones who are drinking the whiskey. You know they are bringing the craft brews back in all that kind of stuff. So, does that necessarily mean in any way that it’s feminine? You know, no.”

Interviewee 2 also had something to say about this matter. He pointed out that what is socially acceptable for men to wear is expanding, and he feels that because of that, more forms of masculinities are being accepted in society. He is a very slender guy, and he used to be perceived as not being very masculine 15 years ago. However, as time progressed, he mentioned

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that slim clothing was not looked down upon anymore and felt less pressure to stay away from wearing them.

Other interesting findings

In addition to the findings presented above, several interesting facts about men wearing skinny jeans emerged from these conversations. Individual body type influences men's decision whether to wear or not to wear skinny jeans and sub-group of society to which an individual belongs could influence their dress choices. Location specificity of masculinity was brought up during the interviews as well. Some of these points already might have been discussed above briefly, but it seemed important to cover them again in a different context.

First, the physical reality of body was another topic that was brought up during these interviews. 4 out of 5 interviewees commented about the relationship between the individual body and skinny jeans. Some participants mentioned that when someone with a more muscular body wears skinny jeans, it makes skinny jeans appear more masculine. Because then, they are showing off their muscle, which is considered a masculine trait, by wearing skinny jeans.

Whereas some other interviewees felt that they need to have a slim physique in order to look good in skinny jeans. Interviewee 3, who used to be a personal trainer and has a quite well-developed physique, commented on how some skinny jeans become way too tight around his legs and it could stop him from wearing them.

Second, the importance of being around people who share similar values was brought up quite often during the conversations. 3 out of 5 interviewees have expressed that a specific crowd they hang out daily could influence their dress decisions. A group's shared understanding of masculinity could either encourage or discourage men from wearing specific items. Interviewee 1 recalled how he had a friend who moved from Taiwan to the United States and was influenced

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by Interviewee 1's dress choices. After hanging out with interviewee 1 for a while, his foreign friend adopted interviewee 1's style and started wearing slim and skinny jeans instead of loose straight jeans. Interviewee 5 shared his insight on the importance of social context in terms of dressing as well,

“... Your friend group or whatever is generally like edgier men say who are into rock music of some sort. Then like then it's fine like then it's actually perfectly masculine to wear skinny jeans because all men are wearing skinny jeans and then it's assumed that everybody is straight. [...] So that the fear of being less masculine is not there in a group like that. But if you then take that skinny jean-wearing rock kid and make him be in a community that doesn't have that many kinds of rock kids, I'm sure they would. They would... They might eventually... They might not necessarily but might eventually get this kind of move towards like 'OK, maybe I can't wear these things anymore because that's just how this group operates.' [...] I mean sometimes you hear that like friends who moved to other towns and they don't necessarily like immediately radically change their wardrobe, but they might.”

How a collective understanding of gender can affect people's behavior could be found from an example of parenting as well. It is known that negotiating gender role is much easier when someone is surrounded by like-minded people who also share the same initiative to challenge the prevailing gender norm (Fox, 2001). Just like changing any other gendered script, it makes sense that changing gendered dressing norm would require a similar setting.

Lastly, time and location also need to be considered when studying masculinity because the context is essential when it comes to studying gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). What is considered masculine in each society could be different and these societies could be small or large in scale. While acknowledging a global change in people's perception of men wearing skinny jeans over time, all five interviewees also realized that there were different kinds of masculinities being cultivated in each culture. For example, Interviewee 3 pointed out how people will react differently to men wearing skinny jeans if he went out further into the rural area of upstate New York in the year 2019. Interviewee 2 had an experience that was specific to him

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moving from Korea to the United States. This could imply that wearing skinny jeans was not necessarily linked to being homosexual in Korea because Korea used to be a lot more conservative when it came to openly talk about one's sexual identity. Whereas in the United States, there were plenty of conversations happening about people's sexuality and many stereotypes linked to one's sexual identity. Each interviewee had a different view on how tight jeans must be to be considered as skinny jeans. It was also revealed that what participants considered as skinny jeans have changed over time. Interviewee 4 agreed that what he was wearing during the interview would not be called skinny jeans in 2019 but they would have been considered as skinny jeans in the early 2010s.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings from both survey and interviews are further analyzed using existing masculinity theories. The nature of men wearing skinny jeans is examined at both theoretical and practical level to offer a clearer understanding of the influence of men's fashion on masculinity and the relationship between fashion and gender.

Prevalence of Hegemonic Masculinity in Men's Dressing Norm

Hegemonic masculinity and its toxic, violent nature are considered as a root of many social inequalities related to gender (Connell, 2005). It was revealed that many of the survey and interview participants were influenced by hegemonic dressing norm, and a number of them admitted that their dressing choices had been governed by such norm. Majority of the survey participants expressed that there was a social stigma related to wearing skinny jeans about ten years ago as well. Men who actively wore skinny jeans during the late 2000s to early 2010s were often punished for not conforming to the masculine norm. Repercussions of wearing skinny jeans included becoming victims of hate speech, being made fun of, and false accusation of being gay. Wearing skinny jeans was considered a subordinate form of masculinity, and it stopped many men from incorporating skinny jeans as part of their wardrobe.

Although many of the study participants were aware of the presence of hegemonic dressing norm, it was discovered that not every participant realized how much of their personal clothing practices were being governed by the prevailing gender norm. While some interview respondents admitted to consciously adjusting their fashion choices to achieve masculinity, others made such changes to their daily wardrobe without realizing the presence of hegemonic masculinity in men's dressing norm. With or without deeply thinking about it, these men

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subconsciously realized that masculinity is a temporary achievement, therefore, it can be stripped away from them at any moment they stop conforming to the existing gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity utilized this fear of men to strengthen the existing gender order in the realm of men's fashion. Men's dressing norm governed by hegemonic masculinity has been so deeply engraved in the society that it is influencing men's style without them even realizing it.

Changing Relationship between Fashion, Gender, and Sexuality

Fashion has been labeled as a feminine concept, and it was also closely associated with male homosexuality in the past (Cole, 2000; Crane, 2000). However, it is found that the link is not so strong in the year 2019 as it used to be in the past. Only about 20% of the survey participants claimed that they did not care about fashion and appearance management. It was also proved from the survey that skinny jeans in particular have a history of being closely related to femininity and homosexuality but there was a change in recent years. This argument can be further supported by the changes happening in the industry. Luxury men's fashion market is growing faster than women's market and some market researchers predicted that it might even outperform women's line in a few years ("Luxury Menswear Growth to Outpace Womenswear," 2018). Botox cosmetics aired a TV advertisement promoting men to get cosmetic treatments in the year 2018 and major luxury fashion brands introduced a skincare and make-up lines for men.

Being gay and being feminine have been used as synonyms in the past. Shaming gay men has been a powerful policing principle of hegemonic masculinity (Pascoe, 2005). Men used to reinforce their own masculinity and gain power by calling other men gay and securing their own position as a heterosexual male. This was only possible because there was an underlying assumption of homosexuality not being masculine. However, there is a clear distinction between gender and sexuality, and both survey and interview responses show that more men recognize

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the distinction between these two concepts. A number of survey participants who considered wearing skinny jeans to be gay was different from the number of survey respondents who considered them to be feminine (Figure 3). It was also brought up during the interview that being heterosexual is not necessarily a prerequisite for achieving masculinity in 2019. This suggests that these men acknowledge the distinction between gender and sexuality.

Anderson (2010) asserted that in a society without homophobia, men feel more welcomed to express their true feelings and different forms of masculinities. Several interviewees mentioned that what stopped them from wearing skinny jeans in the past was the strong relationship between skinny jeans and homosexuality and the fear of being labeled as gay. As more men make a clear distinction between gender and sexuality, shaming gay men would lose its power as a policing tool of reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Once men are free from continually having to worry about being marked as homosexual, whether it is true or not, they would be able to play with more diverse style and eventually diverse forms of masculinities.

Fashion as a Force of Gender Reconstruction

Gendered meaning of clothing can change through the routine process of doing gender. Men achieve masculinity by successfully performing gendered activities in their daily interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Wearing socially acceptable masculine clothing is one of the ways of doing gender. Men become more masculine by putting on masculine clothing. Yet, the notion of such masculine clothing is as fluid as the definition of masculinity. It was stated earlier that fashion items could also become masculine as they start to get more associated with men. Men achieve masculinity through clothing (men's fashion) and men's fashion become more masculine by men (Figure 8). The shift in people's perception of men wearing skinny jeans is an example

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of such change. The idea of men wearing skinny jeans became more masculine through hybridization of masculine style and repeated exposure men wearing skinny jeans in daily lives.

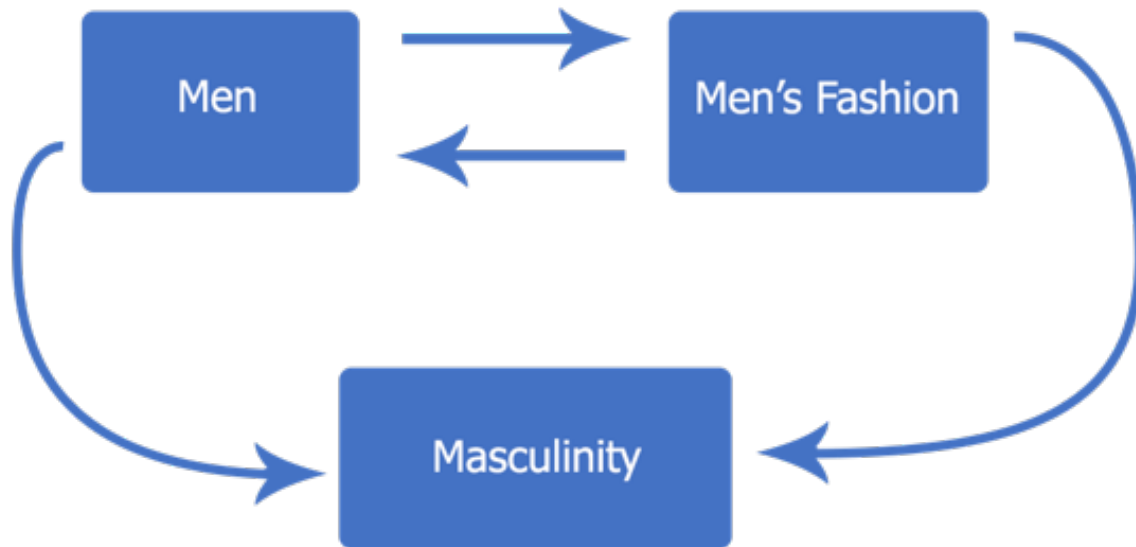


Figure 8. Doing Masculinity through Men's Fashion.

Hybridization of masculine fashion can happen within men's fashion as well by incorporating different visual elements. Most of the interviewees acknowledged how men adopted different elements of the masculine look and mixed them up with skinny jeans to create a new form of socially acceptable masculine fashion. There are many pieces of evidence which support that men do hybridization of masculine fashion by styling skinny jeans with conventionally masculine clothing, putting them on a muscular body, or engaging in stereotypically masculine activities while wearing skinny jeans. Russell Westbrook, an American basketball player with about 13.3 million followers on Instagram, is famous for his love for skinny jeans (Figure 9). This tall, muscular, heterosexual athlete incorporates skinny jeans while performing conventional masculine traits related to athletic body. Similar to Russell Westbrook,

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men utilized existing gendered scripts to make the idea of men wearing skinny jeans socially acceptable.



Figure 9. Russell Westbrook wearing skinny jeans. Retrieved from *USA TODAY*. By E. Gay. 2016. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2016/09/25/nbas-king-of-fashion-westbrook-talks-style/91074376/>.

As men get more exposed to the idea of men wearing skinny jeans, it becomes more normalized and acceptable in society. Majority of interviewees mentioned seeing other men, especially male celebrities, in skinny jeans as a key reason for how skinny jeans became normal in 2019. Male celebrities are often promoted as examples of masculinity, and what they wear could influence what normal men wear. It is also known that celebrities play a significant role in the fashion industry. Fashion houses invite celebrities to the front row of their fashion shows, and red carpets are the best place to showcase the designer's new creations and gain media exposure. Influence of international celebrities such as K-Pop artists widely recognized in the fashion industry as well (Cheng, 2018). International celebrities who come from a different

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cultural background could challenge the existing dressing norm as they travel between different countries and expose the public to different forms of masculine style. South Korean music performers such as G-Dragon, SHINee, and BTS often wore skinny jeans, incorporated many colors to their outfit, and heavily accessorized themselves to a point where they would appear very feminine to Western eyes (Figure 10). They are creating a virtual transformative space where men can escape from the social binding of their own society and re-negotiate masculine style in a way. International celebrities then have this leeway to navigate themselves in terms of style in a foreign culture, yet they can still influence people's dressing choices.



Figure 10. G-Dragon posing at Chanel's Fall 2017 women's collection. Retrieved from *VOGUE.com*. By Getty Images. 2017. <https://www.vogue.com/article/g-dragon-wears-chanel-womenswear-at-spring-2018-collection>.

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As more men introduced skinny jeans as part of their masculine self-presentation, skinny jeans started to be associated with masculinity in the process. Once skinny jeans have become normalized for men to wear, men had more freedom to explore their masculinity within a much broader spectrum through clothing. They did not have to worry about whether to wear skinny jeans or not based on how other people would perceive them anymore. Acceptance of skinny jeans in men's wardrobe expanded the other subordinate forms of masculinities that are closely related to skinny jeans as well. For example, slender men who did not conform to the traditional masculine ideal feel less pressure to hide their physique since skinny jeans have been socially accepted. Renegotiating gendered meaning of men wearing skinny jeans has allowed men to express themselves without worrying about repercussions of not conforming to the hegemonic masculine ideal.

Limitations

There were several limitations when it comes to conducting this study. Survey and interviews were promoted using a flyer across the university campus to recruit participants and it was obvious that this study was about fashion (Appendix A). There is a possibility that only people who were already interested in fashion have participated in this survey leaving out people who might not openly express their interest in fashion. This assumption could be supported by the survey result since only 20% of the participants responded that they care little to none about fashion.

It is possible that small sample size might have skewed data in some ways. While it was noted that there was a potential generational gap between people's perception of men wearing skinny jeans, the sample size of men who were older than Generation Y was very small. This result might change if more data were to be collected from more participants. There was also a

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significant number of international participants who did not necessarily spend enough time in the United States to observe the change in men's fashion that took place over the past decade.

Ithaca being a rural college town was another limitation. Most students are not initially from Ithaca, and they moved to Ithaca to attend college. This means that participants who are from the United States also come from different parts of the country, making it harder to limit the geographical scope and accurately depict the changes that happened over time. People who live in rural settings, in general, are perceived to be less sensitive about fashion as well. Another limitation related to the location where this study was conducted was the fact that participants of this study were undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff at Cornell. Most of the participants are very highly educated and likely to come from families with high socioeconomic status compared to the rest of the United States. The population represented in this study is very specific and the result might differ significantly if it was to be conducted again in a different setting with a more diverse sample.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given that this study only represents a small portion of the population, it would be beneficial to conduct the same research in a different location with a more diverse age range and bigger sample size. Cross-generational comparison of men's perception of skinny jeans might be helpful since this study mainly focused on generation Y men's lived experiences. A potential generational difference between men's perception of men in skinny jeans was suggested from the survey but the sample size was too small.

It would also be interesting to study different fashion items that are/used to be associated with certain gender focusing on design elements other than fit. Pink clothing for men could be an example. In modern America, boys are encouraged to wear blue while girls are expected to

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choose pink over blue. It wasn't always the case though. When people first started using blue and pink as gender signifiers in clothing, they reserved blue for girls and pink for boys ("Blue for Boys and Pink for Girls," 2013). It would be very interesting to do a study about the usage of pink in men's clothing and its gendered meaning considering how menswear designers are starting to incorporate pink back in their designs.

Since celebrity influence was brought up as a key reason for the shift in people's perception, reviewing more theories about how celebrity influence works in this society—especially in regards to fashion and style—and interviewing people more in-depth about how they were personally influenced by celebrities would be very helpful. This would provide a better idea of how one could utilize celebrity influence in order to reconstruct gender norms; not limited to fashion. Additionally, analyzing personal styles of fashion-forward gender-bending male celebrities such as Billy Porter and Ezra Miller and seeing whether their extreme sense of fashion can influence how general public view masculinity and fashion would be beneficial.

Research about international celebrities' role in cultural exchange between different countries regarding different gender norm would be very timely considering that Korean boy band BTS is becoming very popular globally and they often wear traditionally not-masculine clothing on stage. It would be great to study how men navigate their masculine identity by putting make-up on their face since South Korea is being recognized as a capital for men's beauty products.

A study comparing social media influencers and traditional celebrities would be beneficial. Social media influencers also have a similar kind of influence that celebrities have over other people — studying the difference between mass media celebrities and social media influencers, especially considering how influencers might have more authorship when it comes

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to generating fashion contents. Investigating how different people, not necessarily famous influencers, promoting various understanding of gender can contribute to creating a more egalitarian society would be interesting as well.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between men's fashion and the social construction of masculinity through a case of men's skinny jeans. Masculinity is a fluid concept which varies according to time and space, yet there is a presence of hegemonic masculinity which governs men's dressing norm. Men's fashion is heavily influenced by the societal understanding of masculinity, at the same time, it has the potential to challenge and broaden what is considered masculine in society.

Men wearing skinny jeans started as a subordinate form of masculinity in the early 2000s in terms of mainstream fashion, and the prevailing gendered dressing norm at the time prevented many men from wearing skinny jeans. The social stigma of being feminine or gay related to men wearing skinny jeans in the past caused men to alter their personal style to fit into the conventional masculine style. A number of men who found skinny jeans to be appealing for aesthetic reasons had to stop themselves from wearing them after considering the social repercussions of wearing skinny jeans.

Although many men still do not wear skinny jeans, it was established in this study that the general acceptance of society towards men wearing skinny jeans has remarkably increased over the past ten years and that men wearing skinny jeans became a part of socially acceptable men's dressing norm in the year 2019. Such change was made in the process of daily interactions of doing gender; through hybridization of style and repeated exposure to the idea of men wearing skinny jeans, men started to accept wearing skinny jeans as another form of masculinity. More advanced understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality fueled this shift as well.

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As men's skinny jeans are more broadly accepted by society, so are the different masculinities related to wearing skinny jeans. What is noteworthy about this change is that this new dressing norm didn't completely replace the existing norm. Instead of having to choose one style, men are being offered a larger selection of jeans to choose from. Whether they wear baggy jeans or skinny jeans, they are still masculine. Having more options in the wardrobe allow men to explore their masculinity with greater freedom. This study only focused on men's skinny jeans, but similar change regarding men's fashion and the notion of masculinity could apply to other types of clothing as well. One must recognize the possibility of fashion acting as a positive force in the social re-construction of gender. Men's fashion can influence the society to be more inclusive and accept a wider range of masculinities by expanding the spectrum of socially acceptable masculine dressing norm.

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Appendix A

Survey Promotional Flyer

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(Image Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:30_tiny_jeans_street_style_013040_3xwallpaper_4xwebp_2801.jpg)

Share your **EXPERIENCE** with wearing skinny jeans
& your **OPINION** about other men who wear them!

Online Survey Link: <https://goo.gl/EkrDej> Or Use **QR Code** Below ↓

Duration: February 7th ~ March 27th

Eligible Participant: Adult men (over 18)

2 Randomly selected Survey participants will receive
Google Home (\$129 value) 

& Every Follow-Up Interview participant will be given
\$25 VISA gift card



Appendix B

Online Survey Questionnaire

QA What is your email address?

QB Do you agree to be contacted by email if you win a Google Home as a prize?

Yes

No

Q1 Race/Ethnicity

Asian

Black

Hispanic

White

Other _____

Q2 Are you a native speaker of English?

Yes

No

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Q3 Gender Identity

- Man
 - Woman
 - Non-Binary
 - Other _____
-

Q4 Year of Birth

Q5 Sexuality

- Heterosexual (Straight)
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Sexually Fluid
- Prefer not to answer
- Other _____

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Q6 How important is fashion/style/appearance management to you?

- Extremely important
 - Very important
 - Moderately important
 - Slightly important
 - Not at all important
-

Q7 How many pieces of clothing do you own?
(excluding underwear, socks, and accessories)

- Less than 20 items
 - 20 to 40 items
 - 41 to 60 items
 - 61 to 80 items
 - 81 to 100 items
 - Over 100 items
-

Q8 How much time do you spend getting dressed every morning?
(clothing, accessories, hair, shaving, grooming, make-up, etc.)
The answer can be in either minutes or hours

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Q9 How much do you pay attention to other people's appearance? (fashion & style)

- A great deal
 - A lot
 - A moderate amount
 - A little
 - None at all
-

Q10 How much do you care about public perception of your fashion/style/appearance?

- A great deal
 - A lot
 - A moderate amount
 - A little
 - None at all
-

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Q11 What influences your dress choices? Where do you get fashion/style inspiration?
(Choose all that apply)

- Magazines (Offline)
 - Magazines (Online)
 - Television
 - Online Community
 - Blogs
 - Street
 - Social Media
 - Store Display/ Sales Associate
 - Catalogs
 - Friends
 - Spouse (Significant Other)
 - Other _____
-

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Q12 If you chose magazines as an answer, which magazines do you read? (Choose all that apply)

- Arena
 - Dazed
 - Esquire
 - GQ
 - Men's Health
 - L'officiel Homme
 - Nylon
 - Men's Vogue
 - Other... _____
-

Q13 How do you define masculinity?
(You can leave this question blank)

Q14 What are some example of "masculine" clothing?

Image 1 For Question 15, 16, 17, 18

MEN IN SKINNY JEANS

Image Credit: ASOS, Hedi Slimane



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Q15 Which adjectives or nouns best describe the jeans above?
(Choose all that apply)

- Masculine
- Slim
- Normal
- Gay
- Fashionable
- Comfortable
- Manly
- Strong
- Big
- Feminine
- Loose
- Straight
- Weird
- Stylish
- Uncomfortable
- Fragile

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- Tight
 - Weak
 - Other... _____
-

Q16 How masculine do you think these pants are?

- Extremely masculine
 - Very masculine
 - Moderately masculine
 - Slightly masculine
 - Not at all masculine
-

Q17 If someone told you about 10 years ago that these pants were NOT masculine, would you have agreed?

- Yes
 - No
-

Q18 What elements of these pants do you think make them look more or less masculine?

MEN IN SKINNY JEANS

Image 2 For Question 19, 20, 21, 22

Image Credit: G-Star RAW, Levi's, Calvin Klein



MEN IN SKINNY JEANS

Q19 Which adjectives or nouns best describe the jeans above?
(Choose all that apply)

- Masculine
- Slim
- Normal
- Gay
- Fashionable
- Comfortable
- Manly
- Strong
- Big
- Feminine
- Loose
- Straight
- Weird
- Stylish
- Uncomfortable
- Fragile

MEN IN SKINNY JEANS

- Tight
 - Weak
 - Other... _____
-

Q20 How masculine do you think these pants are?

- Extremely masculine
 - Very masculine
 - Moderately masculine
 - Slightly masculine
 - Not at all masculine
-

Q21 If someone told you about 10 years ago that these pants were NOT masculine, would you have agreed?

- Yes
 - No
-

Q22 What elements of these pants do you think make them look more or less masculine?

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Q23 What words come to your mind when you hear a phrase "men in skinny jeans"?

Q24 What do you personally think about men wearing skinny jeans today?

Q25 Would you have thought any differently in the past? (about 10 years ago) How?

Q26 Do you wear skinny jeans?

Yes

No

Q27 If you wear skinny jeans, around which year did you start wearing them?

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Q28 If you wear skinny jeans today, have you had any skinny jeans-related experiences or interactions with other people worth mentioning? If so, please describe it.

Q29 If you wore skinny jeans back in 2000's (around 10 years ago), were you perceived any differently because of your dressing choices?

Q30 What stops you from wearing skinny jeans?

Q31 Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up interview?
The interview will happen in March ~ April and will last for approximately 1 hour.
There will be a \$25 VISA gift card compensation and you will be contacted via email if you are selected to participate in the interview.
If you choose yes, please leave your name/initial OR nickname in the box below.

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Thank you for your time.

Yes _____

No

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What made you decide to take the survey/interview?
(Interest in the topic – why & how much)
 - 1.5 How long have you lived in US? And where did you before you moved here?
 2. How do you define “moderately masculine”? (if they chose this response from a survey for one of the questions)
 3. How much do you care about how other people perceive you (vs. you seeing yourself)?
 4. How does answer from Q3 impact your dress decisions? (and how much?)
 5. What do you think other men would think about (perceive/judge) men wearing skinny jeans?
 6. What do you think other women would think about (perceive/judge) men wearing skinny jeans?
 7. What do you think caused the change in people’s perception of men wearing skinny jeans? (91% of survey participants used to think skinny jeans were NOT masculine 10 years ago. 27% survey participants still think skinny jeans are NOT masculine in year 2019.)
 8. Is wearing skinny jeans simply a fashion trend or a part of one’s identity?
 9. If Identity – how does it help form your identity? (make sure to talk about gender)
 10. If you don’t wear skinny jeans, what stops you from wearing them? (in-depth personal reasons/experiences)
- OR
11. If you wear skinny jeans today, are there any skinny jeans-related experiences or interactions with other people worth mentioning (positive & negative)?
 12. If you wore skinny jeans back in 2000’s (around 10 years ago), were there any skinny jeans-related experiences or interactions with other people worth mentioning (positive & negative)?