

# Raw Denim as a Means of Communication: Self Expression and Identity

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## Abstract

Fashion plays an important role in the self-identity formation processes. In this sense, jeans are getting increasingly popular as it has become a trend in fashion. This study examines how raw denim becomes a form of self-expression for its wearer. Applying a qualitative approach, this study has gathered the empirical data through in-depth interviews and observations to an Indonesian denim community called as INDIGO. This study shows that raw denim users have several ways to express themselves as raw denim users. Denim has characteristics that allow for personalization according to one's body shape, especially the creases and fades that mark the daily habits of the wearer. Denim becomes a representation of the wearers and a way to express their self identity. In order to show that they are a *denimhead*, one must consider every related actions they take in using raw denim, including joining in a denim community.

**Keywords:** *denim, fashion, self expression, identity, Indonesian denim community.*

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## Introduction

In the beginning of the 1800s Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis made trousers, called jeans, that were mostly used by American gold miners. Those workers liked Levi's work because the trousers are strong and don't tear easily. Levi improved the quality of his product using materials from Genoa, which later known as "Blue Jeans". Levis's is the origin of denim jeans and the world's first jeans brand. (www.marketplays.id Accessed on June, 22 2019).

The world famous designers, such as Versace and Calvin Klein, have made jeans into the high fashion lines with their respective

styles. High fashion is one of the terms to mention a currently popular, unique, and attractive mode of fashion. Jeans were very popular in 1995, particularly when they became a symbol of rebellion, portrayed perfectly in the film "*Rebel Without a Cause*", that featured James Dean. (www.marketplays.id Accessed on 22 June 2019).

Fashion plays an important role in self-identity formation, because identity constitutes one's characteristics that may be represented by the clothes he/she wears. Hence, from this perspective, one will be more familiar with their social environment when he/she wears clothes representing their characteristics. This makes jeans getting increasingly popular because it has

become a fashion trend, besides the fact that jeans are durable clothes.

Early 2009, in a forum named Darahkubiru ([www.darahkubiru.com](http://www.darahkubiru.com)), denim became a hot topic of conversation. Darahkubiru is an online magazine, with contents specialized in denim lifestyle, that is created by a group of people who are enthusiastic about denim and all things related to denim. Darahkubiru.com provides an online forum denim lover community which constitutes as the largest community about denim in Indonesia, even the largest in Southeast Asia.

Self-identity is more or less influenced by self-image, where in this case clothes have an important role. Therefore, in regard to this view, the researcher discusses denim fashion, because denim has unique characteristics that allow for "personalization". In fashion trend development, denim clothes are increasingly considered as youth clothing. Not only wearing them, these young people are even actively discussing their passion for denim and its lifestyle in virtual communities online. Thus, the problem formulation in this study is how raw denim becomes a form of self-expression for its wearer and what medium they use to express themselves.

## Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with cases study method often used in the social sciences. The qualitative approach will be used as a foundation for building better understanding. Using this method, the researcher will create a detailed picture, try to examine the informants' explanation from their point of view and obtain information on the real conditions

In conducting this research, the researcher shall fully comprehend each theory used in this research and has quite an extensive knowledge to understand the informants' condition just to get proper context to support a better understanding. make questions, analyze, and understand any information shared by the informants in order to fully obtain data for the research. Researchers will try to approach and understand any information shared by the informants in order to fully obtain data required for the research. Observations, interviews, and document searches will be employed as a means of gathering information.

A qualitative research method will be used for this study on fashion among the members of the Indonesian denim community is because exploratory methods, such as in-depth interviews, direct approach, direct observation on informants' activities, will be used for gathering data.

## Denim, Communication and Masculinity

It seems that today denim users consider that the use value of raw denim is no longer the main requirement in wearing denim, but they are more focused on the sign value. They project their self-image using raw denim, such as male, manly, and gentleman. This makes clothes as something that sticks to its wearer, as shown by denim users' behavior, such as the idea that denim should not be washed for at least 6 months. While some consider it just a kind of belief, but many of them practice it because they see self-image is a necessity. Thus, they will do everything, including any consensual belief on denim, just to be associated with certain image they would like to project and will perceived such belief as something factual.

Someone's clothes are an important part of style and trend, that in a communication phenomenon in the words of Thomas Carlyle, clothes are referred to as "a symbol of the Soul". Fashion represents who the wearer is. Like the phrase by Eco, "I speak through my clothes" (Ibrahim: 2006: vi). His words convey that fashion is a way to express or communicate himself, to show his identity.

According to Barthes (1967), in the study of semiotics, clothes are not only about its function, i.e. body cover, they also produce messages and meanings, the way a language operates. Some people see the way someone dresses (fashion) by using the same point of view. Although, there are many differences, fashion will show many signs that are relatively the same (Hall, 1997: 38).

It's the case currently where the use value of clothes is not the main requirement in wearing clothes, but rather it's the sign value. Today clothes become more and more full of meaning, that is attached to its wearer. The consumptive lifestyle has changed self-image into a necessity and artificiality is considered as truth (Piliang, 1998:35). Their consumptive behavior can also be considered as a part of their effort to attain to certain self-image they would like to be associated with. In this regard, they no longer consider the use value of raw denim so that they are willing to spend much money and conduct activities that are commonly considered not normal in order to get the image they desire.

The denim user also has strong urge to show off or be seen by others when they are wearing certain raw denim. On this, the raw denim community plays a significant role, since they often talk about styles related to denim. Photo posting is one of the main activities, where they use tagging PAHI (Pakai Apa Hari Ini, translated as what to wear today). Not only on this forum, they also repost their posts on

many other social platforms, such as Line, Square, and Instagram under hashtags #darahkubiru, #dbstyle, #pahi, and #darahkubirustyle.

Such an activity clearly shows how every member of this community has strong urge to show themselves and interact with each other in terms of fashion and style, just to prove the saying "I am stylish, therefore I am", meaning when you are not stylish, you will not be considered and your existence may not be recognized.

Denim is also regarded a symbol of masculinity, considering its history where it was closely identified with wild west culture, namely gold miners and cowboys. Therefore, when someone is wearing raw denim, consciously or not, he/she wants others to see their masculine image. This is in accordance with the concept of fashion that is currently considered as one of the nonverbal medium to project one's self-image. It is nonverbal because it doesn't use spoken or written words, but instead appearance. Appearance consists of many elements, one of which is clothes because clothes is the most visible part of one's look.

This is shown in *darahkubiru* community members activities where they show their best denim styles in every community gatherings and posting PAHI photos (Pakai Apa Hari Ini, translated as what to wear today) on Line groups and *darahkubiru.com* forum. It shows that they want to get feedback or set model to follow with regard to denim style. Thus, a person's lifestyle or someone's image is prioritized in social life. (Barnard, 1996: 26).

In the raw denim community, as indicated by the sources from the community, raw denim is said to be a workwear that makes its wearers seem tough like a hard worker. Accordingly, denim may project hard worker image as well as, as the interviewee said,

masculine impression, to look manly. Both images are closely related because toughness is identical to men and hardworking value is expected to be men main characteristics.

Raw denim seems perfect to convey hardworking image, because denim tends to fade after long-continual use. Natural fading usually takes long process and vigorous lifestyle, because basically denim is created as a garment that can last a long time for the miners. However, in fashion denim fade is also considered as a kind of denim uniqueness. For these reasons, many people start to purposely fade their jeans to show the result of their hard work, even though they are not miners nor cowboys. Among denim enthusiasts, there is a kind of belief that raw denim has to be "tortured" to get perfect fades, so they use their denim as often as possible. Thus, wearing faded denim may then help its wearers to show hardworking image through the fades they create.

### **Community as a Medium for Self Expression**

To "exist" and to "be" an individual must be aware and realize his/her own existence. It refers to a genuine existence which encourages human to dare to be themselves and take responsibility in every decision made in their lives (Rodgers and Thomson in Pratiwi, 2016). Therefore, existence is something that is flexible following the abilities of individuals who have their own potentials (Abidin, 2017).

To show that they are a true *denimhead*, taking every action when wearing raw denim is a condition for them to realize their existence. They show their existence through a media, which represents themselves in an expression in the form of denim.

Posting photos on their media is one way for them to show their existence, to shows their free spirit. The freedom to convey meaning is something important in finding one's existence. Their freedom expression implies that individuals are not dictated by any non-spiritual factor or condition from their environment. Individuals have the freedom to choose how to behave if they want to be psychologically healthy. Thus, individuals who do not have freedom will become neurotic and this will hinder the fulfillment of their potentials which in turn interfere with the attainment of life existence.

On the basis of common point of view in seeing raw denim, raw denim users embrace fanaticism because fanaticism is the cause of fanatics. Fanatical means excessive and irrational enthusiasm for something or devotion to a theory, belief, or course of actions that determine a very emotional attitude and its mission is practically without boundaries (Budi, 2004).

The enthusiasm shown by raw denim users is that raw denim is no longer the main requirement in using denim, since they put more focus on sign value. This is shown by several uncommon behaviour, such as washing denim rarely, and thus neglecting health issues, only to get faded denim and denim fashion consumerism often at unreasonable price. Denim fanatics clearly show very emotional attitude towards raw denim where they ignore any limit of their actions.

According to Haryatmoko (2003), there are four factors that may cause fanaticism, namely treating certain groups as ideologies, double standard attitudes, community being used as ethical legitimacy of social relations, and claims of organizational ownership by certain groups.

With regard to denim users' behaviour, it appears that they have fallen prey to fanaticism since they consider their community not a mere denim fanbase forum, but more as an ideology where they put their belief upon it. Fanaticism occurs because some people have an exclusive understanding of the meaning of social relations. Their similarity of wearing denim in certain way in their daily fashion has become value to trade in their social relationship. The community members' glorification for denim has led them to make raw denim an ideology.

Every community uses different standards for their respective groups. The raw denim enthusiasts have their own standard with regard to raw denim, what denim considered good to wear and how to wear them, which they mutually agreed on and approved together.

Darahkubiru.com is an online magazine that discusses topics on denim lifestyle and was created on the initiative of a group of people with high enthusiasm about all things denim. The discussion is not limited to jeans only, but all things related to denim in general, including denim production and even handicrafts made of denim.

This magazine is intended to build awareness among Indonesian youth about how interesting is denim and also to introduce denim as a lifestyle, not merely fashion statement. Since 2009, darahkubiru.com has been discussing and sharing many information about denim, from its history, its products, as well as other information sourced from domestic and global articles and news on denim. Not only as a source of information, darahkubiru.com has also developed an online denim community which constitutes as the largest denim community in Indonesia, and possibly Southeast Asia. Until today, darahkubiru.com is still providing updated information on denim and is considered as an official forum for the

INDIGO (Indonesian Denim Group) community.

INDIGO community is a response to the need of online media where they can interact with each other and find information on denim, since their members are located in various cities in Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bandung and many other cities.

INDIGO is a community that begins with their members common interest on denim, particularly raw denim. This similar interest brings them together to join on and interact in an online forum, namely bloodkubiru.com, the first online forum in Indonesia focuses on denim. In this forum they hold a discussion and chat about denim.

This online forum that was founded in 2009 has discussed and shared many information about denim, from history, products sourced from local and global news. Darahkubiru.com also develops an online denim community called Indonesia Denim Group.

This community was created based on the same culture they adopt, namely the culture of denim as workwear. In the world of denim, the idea of workwear and rugged style are very close. They feel they have the same taste and purpose in wearing denim. This shows that they live within the same culture or are in the same cultural scope.

Because INDIGO community members are located in many areas in Indonesia, they need a platform as darahkubiru.com as a media as well as a platform to interact and to find information on raw denim. They are from different backgrounds, from students to office workers, but they have common enthusiasm, namely raw denim.

As raw denim enthusiasts, they shall have good economic capacity, because they would need to pay a large amount of money to

purchase raw denims, be it jeans, truckers, or other accessories for their fashion style. The price of denim which is quite expensive means that the number of raw denim community members is not as many as other fashion-based community. This community is also not very well known because only some people have high enthusiasm about raw denim.

INDIGO members constitutes mainly those who are from various cities in Indonesia and also those who live in foreign countries. Such a difference in members distribution is very favorable, particularly in term of information exchange in which many enthusiasts of original brand of raw denim, such as brands from America and Japan, may seek direct and more reliable information on a particular brand of denim that may be answer by those members who live in where the brand of denim is originated. The media used to interact in this community is darahkubiru.com, including its online forum. In order to make their member easier to communicate, the media has integrated a chat platform channel, namely Line, with the open chat line square. This feature currently provides a faster and easier channel for community members to get information about denim, because information is always updated in real-time anytime and anywhere as long as you have an internet connection. Other social media integrated in darahkubiru.com is Instagram, which has enabled the forum to post both photos and videos as a means of disseminating information. Using Instagram, darahkubiru.com community member share infographics and post PAHI content. Such features have enabled their members to repost contents originating from the forum on Instagram platform so that it can be seen not only by those who have an account on the website but anyone and anywhere.

Based on INDIGO membership participation, which is considered the largest online denim community in Asia, virtual

communities may be well to replace organic communities and provide advantages that balance the presence of social fragmentation and individualization processes.

In 2009, a small group of denim enthusiasts gathered in Jakarta and they shared the same interest about jeans. Years after that, a thread "Denim Heads" was created on an Indonesian online forum called Kaskus (<http://www.kaskus.co.id>). Based on the thread members, it is found out that there are many denim fans in Indonesia (members of Denim Heads came from Jakarta, Bandung, Jogjakarta, Holland, Australia, America, Singapore, etc.).

The "Denim Head" thread on Kaskus online forum may inspired the birth of darahkubiru.com, an online magazine focusing on the topic of denim lifestyle. Darahkubiru.com was created on the initiative of a group of people who have common interest and high enthusiasm in all things denim. The discussion is not limited to jeans only, but all things related to denim in general, including denim production and even handicrafts made of denim.

In disseminating information on denim, raw denim users interact with each other via darahkubiru.com forum, which integrating Line Square and Instagram as its features to enable their members in distributing and disseminating information on denim easier and wider. Darahkubiru.com forum is used by its members actively as a medium to find information about denim from serious topics, such as history, to light topics daily. The Line square channel, named denimenthutiast, as a highly active virtual community has accommodated INDIGO community members to get information in real-time.

## Conclusion

The general conclusion of the research shows that raw denim users have several ways to express themselves as raw denim users. Denim has become a form of self-expression for its wearer and what medium they use to express themselves. Fashion someone wears, and thus shows, is part of the style and trend. In a communication phenomenon in the words of Thomas Carlyle, clothes are called 'symbols of the soul' that represent and define the wearer. Denim has characteristics that allow for 'personalization' according to one's body shape called creases and fades marks that are formed based on the daily habits of the wearer. Fades is part of the trend among raw denim users. Through the 'break in' process, raw denim users create the best fades they can think of as a form of struggle and their personal unique story with raw denim. Denim becomes a representation of the wearers and a way to express or

communicate their self-identity. In addition, fades are considered a story that is attached to a denim and hence makes the fades part of the wearer.

In order to show that they are a *denimhead*, one must consider every action they take in using raw denim, because it is an important condition for them to realize the existence they want to show. They show their existence by creating an online media, which represents their expressions in wearing denim. Based on their common interest and perspective in seeing raw denim, raw denim users embrace fanaticism. This ideology has then encouraged them to form a community called INDIGO which used raw denim enthusiasm as the foundation for the formation of the community. Such a common interest brings them together in an online forum, bloodkubiru.com, which is the first online forum in Indonesia focusing on denim.

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