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They were invented by Levi Strauss during the California gold rush and sold to miners for $1.50 a pair. In the last 150 years, they have become staples of our wardrobe, a 15 billion dollar industry. Reinvented in the 1950s, denim leg wear is now a ubiquitous part of our fashion culture. Hi-rise, mid-rise, low-rise (hip huggers), loose fit, carpenter, boyfriend, phat pants, relaxed, baggy, boot-cut, flare, wide leg, straight leg, and the immensely popular skinny leg, dark wash, light wash, the 80s classic acid wash, stonewashed, distressed. These denim demigods are still constantly reinvented with a myriad of varieties. There is a pair of jeans for everyone. Every major company and designer makes them. This is America and we are the jean culture.

Jeans have become our uniform. As our fashion tastes evolve, we shed certain trends and move on but jeans remain. Why? What we love about jeans is their neutrality; they seem to go with everything. They defy gender, age, and size. For the fashion conscious, there is a cut and a wash appropriate for every outfit. For the fashionably indifferent, they are comfortable. If you’re daring, you’ll wear that pair in canary yellow.

At my liberal, urban high school the idea of a dress code horrified us. Our clothes were a freedom of expression, of individuality. And yet, in the classroom, on the quad, everyone is in jeans. A sea of denim. I’ve seen jeans at weddings, in court, out to dinner, at a party, on a red carpet– there seems to be no limit to where they are deemed acceptable.

The beauty of fashion is variety and jeans are no exception. Big ones, small ones, some as red as your hair. And sure, that one pair of jeans makes your butt look perkier. You like the color, the not-too-baggy fit, and the comfort. But does a pair of jeans vary that much from person to person? Jeans fall along a nicely plotted graph, each denim dot indistinguishable and there exist only a few outliers. In the end, the simplicity of jeans begets their conformity.

If a university, a city, a state imposed a dress code (barring religious examples), forcing everyone to wear the same kind of shirt or pants; there would be an uproar. We would deem a strict uniform unconstitutional and unacceptable. We ideologically hold our right of choice closely to our breast but in practice, we all wear the same thing.

# In school, the argument for uniforms, is that they are one less dividing factor. Are jeans a middle ground; an item that is widely available but versatile enough to allow us to differentiate our style?