

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

Advertising provides a unique barometer and record of social, cultural and economic change and offers countless insights into the processes and creativity involved in the construction of advertising.

HAT Archive is the memory bank of UK brands and advertising industry expertise. We aim to inspire young people by giving them access to the largest collection of British advertising in the world and presenting specialist advertising industry knowledge to support your teaching and learning programmes. In collaboration with current media teachers in Norfolk and Suffolk, and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, we have designed and tested a series of resources that bring a rich seam of authentic material into the classroom. By matching our unique advertising archives to your specific teaching needs we can provide:

- insider knowledge
- specialist support
- expert guidance
- tried and tested classroom materials.

Students will benefit from access to original source materials and information from experts, with opportunities to hear directly from industry practitioners. The resources contain advertising themed content, suitable for any area of the curriculum and are ideal for teachers who want contextual material for lesson plans and ideas for assignments, homework, activities or comparisons.

These invaluable learning tools will enable you to deliver engaging, relevant and meaningful content to your students and save you valuable time in research and development of lesson plans.

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This resource case study looks at how advertising of a popular and "classic" product reflects youth culture at different times. Successful long-term advertising manages to capture new audiences by appealing to trends of the period while maintaining a consistent message that is passed down from generation to generation.



Levi jeans had first been produced in the 1850s, but it was not until 1959 that the brand became available in Europe. The Los Angeles Times once called Levi's the "single most potent symbol of American style on planet earth" and in this period advertising reflected the increasing influence of American youth culture on Britain's youth.

Hollywood films like [On the Waterfront \(1954\)](#) and [Rebel without a Cause \(1955\)](#), where Marlon Brando and James Dean represented disillusioned and rebellious youth (wearing jeans throughout the film) is illustrative of this trend. Something Levi was to exploit in this and forthcoming decades. While their consistent message to older audiences was one of ubiquitous quality, to each new generation of potential buyers it was rebellion.

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

1. It's all in the jeans

Fashions come and go but jeans survive. They have achieved the impossible: remaining a major trend from the eighteenth century to the present day. Jeans (trousers made of denim clothing) have survived through the decades and the centuries. All trends tend to become old and eventually lose their place in society, some more quickly than others. Whether it is clothing, music, hairstyles or attitudes, all seem to have a time limit. Fashion, in any category, has often made it across borders, oceans, social classes and genders, but few have made it through time. Jeans have made it through all of the above, and more. They have made the ultimate transition from being a trend to being a classic.



The history of 'jeans'

The history of jeans is complex and goes all the way back to the eighteenth century, when the word "jean" is believed to have originated in Italy. Trousers made of this denim cloth were called "jeans" after the Genoan sailors who wore them. "Denim" refers back to a clothing material used in France called "Serge de Nimes". Trading across the Atlantic, along with European immigration, brought denim cloth and jeans to the country that would make both famous. In the USA, jeans were initially made of a combination of different materials like in Europe. But as slave labour and cotton plantations grew, cotton became the major constituent of jeans. Cotton denim's strength and durability as a material quickly made jeans popular amongst people doing physically demanding labour

In 1848 gold was found in California and the Gold Rush started. There was high demand from gold miners for clothes that would not wear nor tear and could survive harsh abuse. In 1853, Leob Strauss moved to San Francisco and started a wholesale business supplying miners with clothes. Leob changed his name to Levi, and the rest is history.

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

Advertising and popular culture

It was a great help to the popularity of jeans that advertising began to have a profound effect on society and culture around the time when jeans were still young. For example Levi's Jeans had a leather label on their jeans in 1886 depicting the jeans being pulled between two horses. The purpose of this campaign was to advertise the new clothing item as strong, made of durable material. Advertising would go on to help jeans make a smooth transition into the twentieth century. Although they had been around for quite a while, jeans were still a new and fresh idea that had a long way to go.

In the 1930s jeans took on a new role in society and popular culture; Hollywood was emerging, and Westerns was the big genre of the time. Cowboys were very popular around the nation and they were often depicted in movies wearing jeans. This boosted the popularity of jeans amongst young and middle-aged men.

For the first time, jeans gained cult status through their association with pop idols. A decade later, war broke out and, eventually, World War II engulfed the USA. Soldiers were the new national heroes, idols and role-models. The fact that they often wore jeans and overalls in their off-duty time further increased the success of jeans among the men of society who were looking to copy the heroes of the epoch. Following the war, it was common for veterans to wear jeans, especially Navy veterans.

The popularity of jeans continued into the 1950s. Teenagers began to make jeans their own. 1950s youth were the first to embrace jeans as a symbol of their generation. The appeal was caused by teenage rebels depicted on TV and in films such as "Rebel Without a Cause," whose star, James Dean, wore jeans through most of the movie. Marlon Brando, a huge star at the time, helped make Levi's the leading jeans brand by wearing them in several of his movies. The fact that jeans were not allowed in schools at the time probably increased their appeal to teenagers and solidified their connection with rebellion. The decade was also important in the history of jeans as Levi's were first sold in Europe in 1959.

During the hippie movement of the 1960s, jeans became the virtual uniform of the anti-war movement and were modified to suit the fashion of the decade; psychedelic colours, embroidery and cut-offs all became new and essential features of the popular clothing. At this time, jeans were known and loved east of the Atlantic, in countries such as Russia as well. Further modification of jeans into bell-bottom and stone-washed styles ensured the popularity of the denim trousers into the 1970s. Increasing world trade allowed jeans to be made and, hence, sold at lower prices than before, positively affecting sales.

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

Advertising and popular culture (continued)

In the 1980s, high fashion designers could no longer ignore the growth of jeans' popularity and began to adopt them into their collections. The fresh trend involved a worn-out look with holes often torn on purpose. Jeans became as popular among women as men, causing sales to rise further. They became part of high-class designer fashion as well as working-class wardrobes. The 90s were just as good for denim as previously, with the new style of baggy jeans. There are many theories as to how this started. One is that hip-hop artists began to wear them to imitate the clothes worn by prisoners, while others attribute the baggy style to the skating and snowboarding community. Either way, the style was great for jeans and helped them remain popular. While jeans started out as durable work wear, they evolved into being the symbol of comfort, leisure and youthfulness for all ages that it is today.



History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

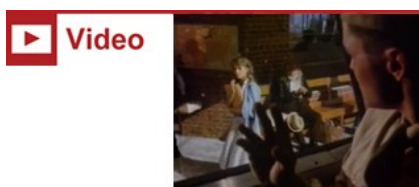
2. 1970s and 80s

Levi Strauss did not start television advertising in the US until 1966, and it was not until the late 1970s that Levi's were advertised on television in the UK. In much the same way that today's generation popularises the 1970s and 1980s as 'retro', in the late 1970s, music and themes from the late 1950s and early 1960s began to dominate youth culture with films such as [Grease \(1978\)](#)

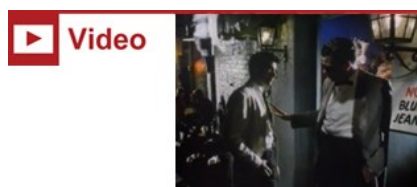


1977 Levi's - *Leader of the Pack*

However, it was not until the late 1980s that Levi began to properly capitalise on its brand. By the mid 1980s, not only were jeans changing (shrink-fit, stonewashed etc), but they were becoming high fashion clothing with fashion designers moving into the market. 'Designer jeans' began to erode Levi's market share. Levi was to hit back with a series of innovative television commercials for the 501 jeans. These commercials featured classic American rock music mixed with nostalgia and romance to re-emphasise their key messages to a new generation.



1987 Levi's - *Parting*



1987 Levi's - *Entrance*



1987 Levi's - *Refrigerator*



1987 Levi's - *Launderette*

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

3. 1990s

Although denim is never completely out of style, it certainly goes out of 'fashion' from time to time. In these years the youth market wasn't particularly interested in 501s and other traditional jeans styles, mainly because their parents: the 'generation born in blue' were still busy squeezing their aging bodies into them.



1991 Levis - Great Deal

Since no teenager would be caught dead in anything their parents are wearing, the latest generation of rebellious youth turned to other fabrics and other styles of casual trousers, such as khakis, chinos, combat and carpenters and branded sportswear. They still wore denim, but it had to be in different finishes, new cuts, shapes, styles, or in the form of aged, authentic, vintage jeans, discovered in markets, secondhand shops, not conventional shops.



1992 Levis - Pool Hall

Despite Levi Strauss advertisements reflecting this trend towards authenticity, they were hit hard and eleven North American factories closed.

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

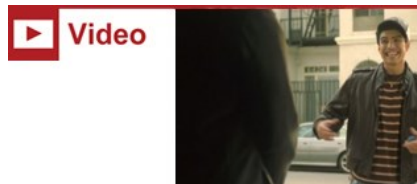
Levi Strauss and television advertising

4. The Noughties

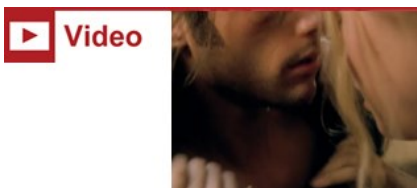
By 2005 Levi was beginning to re-connect with its target youth audience.



2005 Levi's - Bike



2005 Levi's - Doorman



2008 Levi's - Dangerous Liaisons



2009 Levi's - First Time

5. Activity

Discuss

- how Levi re-imagined itself for its target audience in the light of different periods and why was this necessary?
- In what ways did Levi 'lose its way in the early 1990s'?

6. Themes and ideas to explore with your students

Here are some questions/themes you might wish to get your students to explore using these resources:

- Did the 1980s Levi commercials affect rather than reflect youth culture in Britain at this time?
- How are young women represented in these commercials? Explore any cultural and social shift in this representation.
- How is youth and age represented through the decades in these commercials?
- Does the representation of 'youth' change as time passes eg. age of actors, situations they are in etc.. How does it stay the same?

History of Advertising Trust

Representing Youth Culture

Levi Strauss and television advertising

Links

The images and commercials used in this resource have been selected to illustrate the main points of the text.

Digital advertising images and TV commercial footage can be supplied by HAT on almost any theme at reasonable prices. You may wish to browse through HAT's [online catalogue](#) for more ideas and inspiration.

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