

WHAT U WEAR

SPIFFY JEANS!

by Jerome Ryckborst

How much would you pay for a pair of Levi 501s? I paid \$38 plus busfare specifically to get a pair. That's a fair bit of money for roughly one meter of denim.

But I could have paid as much as \$50 at some stores. How can they charge that much?

Because people will pay \$50, that's why. Kathryn Chandler at the university's department of Clothing and Textiles says: "The high price is so much a part of the appeal of a product."

It's a prestige thing: wear-your-wealth. The high price is, of course, justifiable. It costs money to package, market, and ship a product. The advertising for 501s must have cost a fortune. And the image appeals to us. There's a certain status associated with brand-name products.

"The yuppie market is so interesting. We don't mind spending money on durables, expensive things like houses, cars, clothing... whereas on 'frivolous' things like travel, people don't like to spend," says Chandler. It's like people invest in clothing.

The brand-name and designer trend in clothing is related to income. Middle and lower income groups pay more attention to clothing. Generally we are a very affluent society. We have sophisticated spending habits. And we like to show off.

The status of a Ralph Lauren Polo insignia or a Lacoste alligator is well-recognized. The designer trend continues. While Lacoste may have fallen into disfavor, the popularity of Benetton and Hugo Boss is on the rise. Chandler comments: "I can't see the designer trend stopping, but at least it's not so crass anymore."

Designer insignia have become subtle and smaller. Some designers no longer advertise their name on the outside of their clothes. An exception to this trend is the HUGO BOSS items. While the European line sports the small BOSS insignia, the North American line says B—O—S—S all over it, front and back. This is mainly to introduce the name. Once it is recognized and established, we'll see the same discreet insignia as the European line.

There's a big problem with much designer clothing — and that's the big price. We know that the high price is part of the product appeal, and we like the feeling we get from

wearing a brand-name logo on our shirts, or shoes, or pants, or jackets... But what most consumers don't know about is the poor quality.

"We're so used to poor quality," says Chandler. The fact is that designer clothes often don't last longer than regular-priced items.

When a particular brand takes off, the expansion is far ahead of quality control. The pair of 501s that I bought last week only vaguely resemble the pair I bought three years ago. Oh, they look the same to the untrained eye, but my new pair has serged seams instead of bound seams, the fabric is a lighter weight (ie. thinner), the fabric around the fly doesn't appear interfaced, and the buttons look cheap.

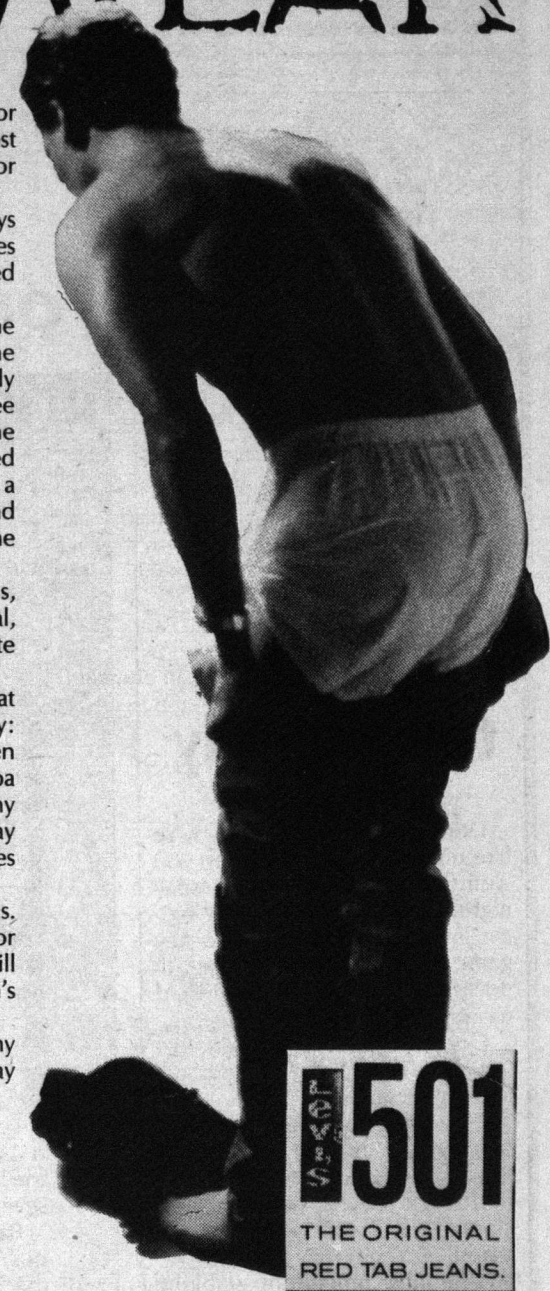
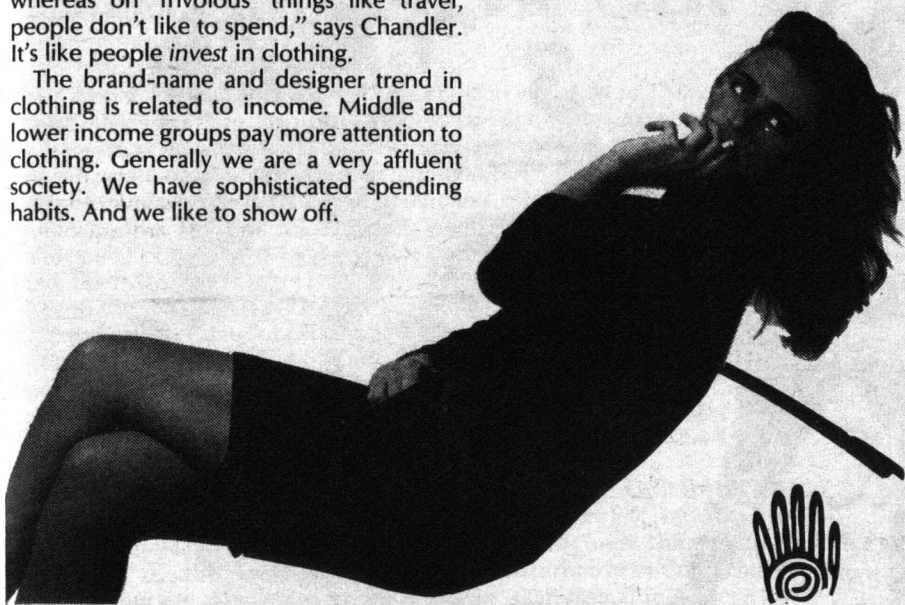
If you don't know what all of this means, then Kathryn Chandler is right: "In general, consumers don't have the skills to evaluate quality."

Personally I've come across one brand that is well-constructed and has good durability: Robe Di Kappa (say what?). I've only seen this brand in Europe. If and when Kappa crosses the Atlantic, let's hope the company maintains its standard for high quality. It may be one of the few brand-name clothing lines that is really worth the money.

Quality is a concept as intangible as status. Whether we are paying for durability or for prestige, the most popular clothing will always be higher-priced. That's Adam Smith's *invisible hand* for you!

Meanwhile, I'll just sit here wearing my Sperry Topsiders and Polo shirt, and play with my button fly.

How much do 501s cost?
 \$38 Chapman Bros. (\$43 next week)
 \$33 The Bay (\$48 next month)
 \$45 Woodwards
 \$50 Eatons
 \$1.13 at the factory (in 1915)



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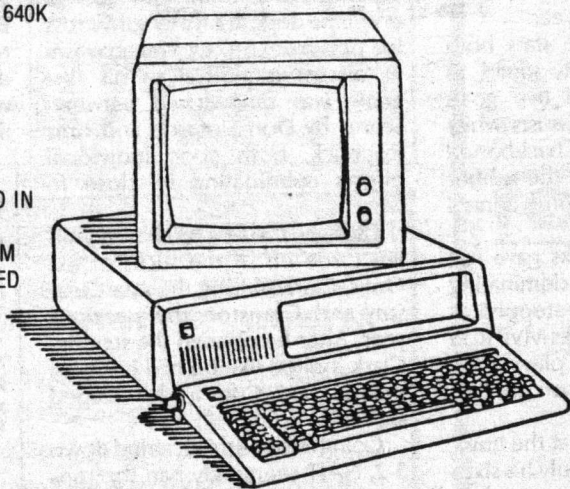
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