

Representation of Jeans as a Form of Resistance in Jakarta Demonstrations 1970-1998

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Received 16 June 2025; Received in revised form 18 August 2025; Accepted 19 August 2025

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran celana *jeans* sebagai simbol perlawanan sosial dalam demonstrasi mahasiswa di Jakarta pada tahun 1970-1998. Awalnya dilihat sebagai ikon modernitas dan globalisasi, *jeans* seiring berjalannya waktu menjadi identitas bagi para mahasiswa dan aktivis yang menentang kebijakan represif Orde Baru. Selama Demonstrasi Malari 1974, para mahasiswa mengenakan *jeans* sebagai bentuk kritik terhadap ketergantungan ekonomi terhadap modal asing, dan menandakan solidaritas mereka terhadap para pekerja yang terkena dampak ketidakadilan ekonomi yang sedang berlangsung. Pada masa Reformasi 1998, celana *jeans* muncul kembali sebagai simbol perlawanan terhadap pemerintahan Soeharto yang dianggap otoriter dan korup. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian sejarah dengan pendekatan sejarah sosial. Proses penelitian meliputi pengumpulan sumber data (heuristik), analisis keabsahan data (kritik sumber), penafsiran makna simbolik celana *jeans*, dan penyusunan narasi sejarah (historiografi). Dengan mengacu pada konsep sejarah sosial Sartono Kartodirdjo, hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa budaya material, seperti celana *jeans*, tidak hanya menjadi bagian dari gaya hidup, tetapi juga menjadi salah satu bentuk alat ekspresi politik dalam gerakan mahasiswa. Adanya penelitian ini dapat menunjukkan bahwa pakaian juga dapat berperan dalam membentuk identitas kolektif dan menyuarakan aspirasi perubahan sosial di masyarakat.

Kata kunci: celana *jeans*, identitas, orde baru.

Abstract

This research examines the role of jeans as a symbol of social resistance in student demonstrations in Jakarta in 1970-1998. Initially seen as an icon of modernity and globalization, jeans over time became an identity for students and activists who opposed the repressive policies of the New Order. During the 1974 Malari Demonstrations, students wore jeans as a form of criticism against economic dependence on foreign capital, and signaled their solidarity with workers affected by ongoing economic injustice. During the 1998 Reformation, jeans reappeared as a symbol of resistance against the Soeharto government, which was considered authoritarian and corrupt. This research uses a historical research method with a social history approach. The research process includes collecting data sources (heuristics), analyzing data validity (source criticism), interpreting the symbolic meaning of jeans, and compiling historical narratives (historiography). By referring to Sartono Kartodirdjo's concept of social history, the results of this study show that material culture, such as jeans, is not only part of the lifestyle, but also a form of political expression tool in the student movement. The existence of this research can confirm that clothing can also play a role in shaping collective identity and voicing aspirations for social change in society.

Keywords: jeans, identity, new order.

INTRODUCTION

In every era, clothing often represents a condition that serves not only as a means to protect the body but also as a medium

for expressing personal identity. In social and political history, clothing has functioned as a symbol of the dynamics of power, class, and culture within society. It

represents meanings tied to identity and interest (Nordholt, 2005). One example is jeans in Jakarta between 1970 and 1998, which not only became part of an urban lifestyle but also evolved into a symbol of resistance against injustice and the authoritarianism of the New Order regime. This aligns with Nordholt's assertion that clothing acts as a kind of social skin and is a part of culture itself (Nordholt, 2005). In other words, clothing can be understood as an extension of the body that not only connects the individual to their social environment but also serves as a boundary between the two (Nordholt, 2005; Wilson, 1985).

Historically, jeans were first designed by Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis in 1873 in the United States to meet the need for durable workwear for gold miners in California during the Gold Rush (Brands, 2002). These pants were made to last and reinforced with rivets at points that were prone to tearing, such as the pockets. This innovation proved successful and led to their patent on May 20, 1873, which subsequently launched jeans into global popularity, eventually reaching Indonesia (Fadlia, 2007). In Indonesia, jeans were introduced in the 1950s and were known as *celana jengki*. However, during the 1970s, with the rise of global pop culture through media and the entertainment industry, jeans became increasingly widespread, particularly among urban

youth in Jakarta (I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021).

The use of jeans in Jakarta cannot merely be seen as a fashion product; it also held distinct sociopolitical meanings. From the 1980s up until the peak of in 1998 reform, jeans were commonly worn by students and activists as a form of anti-establishment expression. The casual and informal style of jeans stood in stark contrast to the neat and uniformed image of New Order bureaucrats (Farchan, 2022). In various student demonstrations, including those leading up to the May 1998 riots, many protestors were seen wearing jeans as a symbolic marker of solidarity with the common people and as a rejection of formal institutions perceived as corrupt and authoritarian (Ricklefs, 2008). This phenomenon drew the author's attention to how jeans, which originated from Western mine workers, transformed into a symbol of solidarity and struggle among demonstrators in Indonesia's political landscape particularly in Jakarta between 1970 and 1998.

Jeans, as a representation of resistance, have deep roots in youth culture, where clothing is used to express a nonconformist attitude toward prevailing conditions. During the Soekarno administration, the use of Western style clothing was banned by the government, as it was considered an imitation of Western lifestyles and a potential manifestation of neo-colonialism (Pertiwi,

2014). Jeans were among the items prohibited at the time (Lubis, 2008a). However, under the New Order regime, President Soeharto allowed Western culture to flourish again. The government did not anticipate, however, that this policy would have adverse effects on youth behavior. This eventually led to repressive actions by the New Order government against youth who were perceived as rebellious. These actions, in turn, prompted young people to become creative in criticizing state policies one such form of expression was wearing jeans as a symbol of resistance during protest actions, such as the Malari demonstration in 1974 and the Reform movement in 1998 in Jakarta.

The period from 1970 to 1998 was chosen as the timeframe for this study because it represents a significant era in Indonesia's socio-political history, marked by shifts in the dynamics of resistance and modernity. The 1970s signified the beginning of the entry of global pop culture into Indonesia, including the widespread adoption of androgynous fashion and jeans, which were embraced as symbols of modernity and new identity (I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021). Simultaneously, the 1974 Malari incident reflected social tensions caused by economic inequality and the dominance of capitalist economic systems, which further reinforced the position of jeans as a symbol of resistance. Meanwhile, 1998

serves as a fitting endpoint, as it marked the peak of the Reformation movement that successfully overthrew the New Order regime. This timeframe was selected to explore how jeans evolved into a symbol of protest during the Jakarta demonstrations from 1970 to 1998.

Several previous studies have been used as comparative references for this research. These include the study by Putri (2021), titled *Celana dan Jeans: Trend Mode Androgini Anak Muda Surabaya Tahun 1970-1998*, which discusses how the androgynous fashion trend shaped the clothing identity of youth in Surabaya between 1970 and 1998. Kurniawan (2020), in *Jeans Sebagai Gejala Syndrome Post-Colonial Negara Dunia Ketiga*, argues that jeans are a form of economic neo-colonialism that reinforces colonial mentalities. Nordholt (2005), in *Outward Appearances: Trend, Identity, Interest*, examines the relationship between clothing and the dynamics of power and identity in society. Hansen (2004), in *The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture*, discusses fashion, clothing, and culture from an anthropological perspective. Reynolds (2010), in *Mode Dalam Sejarah: Jaket dan Celana*, highlights how fashion reflects particular societal symbols. Thus, through this article, the author seeks to contribute further to the discourse on how fashion trends can serve as symbols of resistance

among demonstrators in Jakarta from 1970 to 1998, with a particular focus on the evolution of jeans during this period and their role as a symbol of resistance in demonstrations especially the 1974 Malari protests and the 1998 Reformation protests in Jakarta.

METHODS

This research employs a historical methodology, beginning with the collection of historical data (heuristics), followed by source criticism, interpretation, and concluding with the writing process. One of the most crucial stages in this process is the search for and collection of historical sources, as it is through these sources that facts can be uncovered and used as the foundation for reconstructing past events (Herliana, 2020; Kartodirdjo, 1993). Data collection was carried out by tracing various primary and secondary sources, including photographic archives from contemporary magazines and newspapers. In addition, this study also utilizes secondary sources such as books, academic journals, and articles from electronic media, which provide additional analysis and perspectives. The research sources were obtained from various institutions, including the National Library of Indonesia, Salemba Library, the Library of the State University of Jakarta, and the Library of the University of Indonesia, all of which offer access to documents and

archives that support this study. Once the data was gathered, the validity of the sources was verified through both internal and external criticism. Internal criticism aims to assess the content and credibility of the sources, while external criticism is used to determine the authenticity of the documents and the context of their creation. The verified data was then analyzed using a cultural historical approach to understand jeans as a form of expression, modernity, and social class dynamics. The final results are presented in an analytical-descriptive historiography that reconstructs the social meanings behind clothing practices during the New Order period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Development of Jeans in Jakarta, 1970-1998

Jeans were originally made from denim or twill cotton, woven from blue or indigo and white threads. In the early 16th century, a fabric called "jeans," made from a blend of linen and wool, was produced in Genoa, Italy, and later exported to England by the end of the 17th century (Puspo, 2013). The term "denim" is derived from *Serge de Nîmes*, a textile from Nîmes, France, made from 100% cotton fibers and woven using a special technique to produce a durable fabric. Initially, jeans were worn only by Genoese sailors as practical workwear due to their resistance to damage and the fact

that they did not require frequent washing. In the 18th century, jeans began to be produced in Lancashire, England, using 100% cotton, and gained popularity for their renowned durability (Fadlia, 2007).

Jeans saw rapid development in the United States, with Levi Strauss emerging as a key figure in their evolution. Upon arriving in San Francisco during the Gold Rush in the 1850s, he began producing work pants from brown canvas, which he later replaced with denim to meet the needs of miners. Together with Jacob Davis, he created denim trousers reinforced with metal rivets, which became the prototype of modern jeans and led to the founding of Levi Strauss & Co. In the 1930s, jeans gained further popularity thanks to Hollywood cowboy films. By the 1940s, denim had evolved into a fashion material used to create dresses, skirts, jackets, and trousers, becoming a global clothing icon. Over time, the function and meaning of jeans also transformed. Originally worn by gold miners in North America, jeans became a fashion symbol after being popularized by Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* 1953 and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* 1955 (Fadlia, 2007). These figures symbolized the post-World War II youth's search for identity amid societal changes. In 1957, Elvis Presley introduced black jeans in *Jailhouse Rock*,

making black a popular alternative color for jeans (Harris, 2002).

In Indonesia, the history of clothing began to develop in the 20th century, and the influence of the Dutch East Indies played a role in shaping fashion trends at the time (Kusumawati, 2020). This was evident, for example, in the adoption of Western clothing by urban men, which gradually influenced rural fashion as well. This clothing typically included shirts, trousers, and dresses commonly worn by urban dwellers. In daily life, trousers and shirts began to be worn regularly, while formal events called for suits and ties. Prior to European influence, wearing trousers extensively in Java and other islands was still considered a novelty (Lombard, 1996). At that time, urban men were considered impolite if they wore sarongs the traditional male garment in Indonesia when going out, leading them to adopt trousers as everyday attire. This marked the beginning of a cultural exchange between 19th-century Dutch and Indonesian fashion norms.

Westernization was one of the impacts of colonialism that helped introduce foreign cultures (S. M. Putri, 2024). The process of modernization cannot be separated from the social and cultural changes occurring within society. The modern era began with the Industrial Revolution in Western countries, which brought technological advancements across various sectors, including the

fashion industry. Gradually, long-established traditional cultures began to be influenced by modernization, which often leaned toward adopting Western lifestyles. In Indonesia, where clothing traditions had long been established, this influence expanded fashion styles and gave rise to new clothing trends in specific periods.

The Rise of Jeans in Jakarta, 1970-1998

In the 1970s, Jakarta began to experience regional modernization and increasing openness to Western culture (Westernization). This was in contrast to the Sukarno era, during which Westernization was banned to prevent a new form of neocolonialism, as emphasized by the issuance of the *Cultural Manifesto*. This manifesto called for resistance against foreign cultural influences, particularly those from Western countries, to avoid Western neocolonialism and imperialism. The stance was further reinforced by Presidential Decree No. 11 of 1963, which prohibited the circulation of Western music, especially rock music from the United States and the United Kingdom. The ban on wearing jeans, sporting long hair, and listening to Western music became symbolic of resistance to Westernization during the 1950s in Jakarta.

At that time, there were specific raids targeting tight trousers under

Sukarno's administration. These raids were carried out by police and military personnel who targeted tight pants and blue jeans, known locally as *celana jengki*. The tightness of the jeans was measured by inserting a bottle into the pant leg; if it could not fit up to the thigh, the pants were immediately cut by the authorities (Lubis, 2008a). This indicates that jeans already existed in Jakarta during Sukarno's rule, although their use was prohibited. In the 1960s, jeans were not commonly worn by university students. This was due to their high cost—since jeans had not yet been produced domestically and because the Sukarno government did not permit them, viewing them as part of Western culture. As a result, students generally wore trousers made from cotton drill fabric instead (Lubis, 2008a).

When Sukarno was no longer in power, political policies shifted under the rule of Suharto. During his administration, Western culture was allowed to enter Indonesia, resulting in a proliferation of Westernized products in society, particularly in Jakarta, which became the epicenter of urbanization, modernization, and globalization. The influence of Western pop culture grew stronger through film, music, and international media, significantly altering urban lifestyles and consumer habits, including fashion trends. One such trend that had previously been banned wearing jeans

reemerged and became highly popular among young people (Lubis, 2008b).

In the 1970s, jeans reached the height of their popularity as they began to be mass-produced (Fadlia, 2007). The prevailing style of jeans in Jakarta was the *cutbray*, which featured a tight fit around the thighs and a flared cut from the knees to the ankles. This popularity was supported by the growing influence of androgynous fashion, which entered Indonesia in the 1970s, along with the emergence of the "flower generation" (I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021). Androgynous fashion refers to individuals embracing both masculine and feminine elements in a balanced way (Lipsitz Bern, 1981; I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021). Meanwhile, the flower generation consisted of subcultures with distinct fashion styles, such as the hippies, who also influenced the development of jeans fashion at the time. The hippies were known for their long hair, loose trousers, and colorful clothing. Evidence of their influence in Indonesia can be traced to Bandung with the formation of the music group *The Prophecy* in 1973 (I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021). Moreover, an Indonesian film also helped boost the popularity of jeans—*Cintaku di Kampus Biru* 1976, starring Roy Marten, who wore jeans and a T-shirt in the film. After its release, jeans became a favorite among Jakarta's youth (Fadlia, 2007).

The development of jeans continued into the subsequent decades. In the 1980s, jeans had become a staple fashion item among the youth, worn daily to events such as futsal matches, New Year's celebrations ("Malam Tahun Baru," 1984), and even by factory workers ("Antri Menjelang Pukul 12.00 Slang, Para Karyawan Bulog Berdatangan Ke Lantai 7," 1985). The fashion trend evolved towards straight-cut or loose-fitting jeans, which led to the preference for lightweight denim fabrics (Puspo, 2013). As demand for jeans increased due to their popularity, this created opportunities for the local textile and apparel industries to produce jeans under local brands such as *Lea* and *Tira*. This shift was prompted by the high cost of imported jeans, which could sell for around 100.000 rupiah, with international brands like Levi's costing even more ("Artikel Tanpa Judul," 1997).

In the 1990s, the evolution of jeans in Jakarta became one of the most popular fashion icons of the time, particularly among the youth. One standout style from this era was the baggy jeans, characterized by its loose cut and often paired with oversized t-shirts. This fashion trend reflected the strong influence of Western pop culture, particularly from the global rise of hip-hop and grunge music. Baggy jeans were not only popular among teenagers but also became a symbol of freedom of expression through clothing (Elmira, 2021). In

addition to baggy jeans, other styles such as high-waist jeans and straight-cut jeans also gained popularity. These styles were frequently worn on various occasions, both casual and semi-formal, indirectly demonstrating the versatility of jeans as a fashion item. During this period, jeans were available in a wide range of colors and designs, from classic blue denim to washed-out tones.

The popularity of jeans among Jakarta's youth was also supported by media exposure, including fashion magazines and television programs that often showcased celebrities wearing jeans as part of a modern lifestyle. One such influential magazine in Jakarta was *Hai*, which covered fashion trends of the time. *Hai* magazine featured youth-oriented entertainment topics such as music, film, fashion, entertainment, and school life, particularly in Jakarta. First published in 1977 and headquartered in Jakarta, *Hai* played a significant role in shaping youth fashion culture. Moreover, a private university in East Jakarta became known as a hotspot where students wore jeans and t-shirts, even though many of their lecturers disapproved of such attire ("Jins Dan T-Shirt Jadi Ciri Khas Remaja," 1997).

Jeans increasingly became part of everyday wear and were widely adopted as a fashion trend among various groups in Jakarta, from youth to working professionals. This shift demonstrates how

jeans, which were originally designed as functional mining workwear, underwent a transformation in meaning over time—evolving into a symbol of casual attire commonly worn in daily life. In this context, jeans represented a renewal in fashion meaning, an openness to new styles, and a tendency toward choices that are efficient and flexible in terms of clothing especially through the use of jeans. The simplification of style and emphasis on functionality in fashion reflect the spirit of modernity, with jeans serving as a prime example of this representation.

Jeans as a Symbol of Resistance

Clothing and personal character are closely intertwined. A person's character can often be reflected through the clothes they wear. For adolescents and university students, who are in the stage of identity formation, clothing serves as one of the key elements that supports this process. The transformation of jeans from workwear into a symbol of modern lifestyle reflects a broader shift in the meaning of fashion. Beyond representing efficiency and openness to modernity, jeans have also played a role in the socio-political dynamics of society. Between 1970 and 1998, jeans became part of the identity of protesters, symbolizing resistance against authority and injustice during that era. As Wilson suggests, fashion is not merely a matter of clothing

but can function as a medium for social and political expression by individuals or groups (Nordholt, 2005; Wilson, 1985). At the time, jeans had become one of the visual icons of demonstrators.

Jeans as a representation of youth expression and rebellious spirit had already emerged in the West as early as the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, a cultural group known as the Hippies rose to prominence in the United States. This group embodied a spirit of resistance, particularly as a reaction to the ongoing Vietnam War. What began as a youth symbol of defiance expressed through jeans evolved into a distinctive identity of the Hippie movement itself. In 1969, their presence was especially noticeable during the legendary Woodstock rock concert in New York, where they were dubbed “jeans wearers.” They deliberately tore their jeans as a form of protest against existing social structures and established norms. In addition to rejecting war and social conformity, they also actively criticized Western consumer culture. Similarly, the “Blue Generation” in the U.S. adopted jeans as everyday clothing or as a symbol of rebellion during anti-Vietnam War protests and in opposition to paying taxes used to fund the war (Laurence, 2001).

For those born in the 1920s and 1930s, jeans were merely seen as casual wear and often viewed with skepticism (Fadlia, 2007). However, for the post-World War II generation, particularly

youths of the 1960s, jeans symbolized a rebellious attitude and protest against prevailing norms (Piras & Roetzel, 2002). People usually wear uniforms or dress similarly to show their belonging to a particular group. If someone fails to follow the group’s dress code, they may be seen as different or even ostracized. On the other hand, the concept of the *fashion victim* (Schiermer, 2010) refers to someone who constantly tries to dress according to their environment but often ends up looking forced or lacking individuality. Sometimes, the way someone dresses becomes a form of rebellion against societal or fashion norms. For example, the punk style, though not based on a specific uniform, is easily recognizable with its ripped clothes, pins, and unique hairstyles. This dress code was developed by British designer Vivienne Westwood as part of the anarchist movement that rejected the neat, conventional appearance of the mid-1970s (Fadlia, 2007).

In the 1980s, jeans became a prominent trend among Jakarta’s youth and gained popularity as part of their fashion identity. This rise was influenced by the spread of androgynous fashion, which saw many teenagers drawing inspiration from Western culture (I. F. Putri & Moordiaty, 2021). According to Reynolds (2010), many youths at the time adopted an androgynous mindset inspired by Western pop icons of the 1980s such as

Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Marlon Brando. Additionally, policies under the Suharto regime that promoted modernization and openness to Western culture further supported the widespread adoption of jeans.

Under Suharto's regime, modernization and Westernization were indeed promoted as part of national development. However, on the other hand, the government began to express concern over the influence of Western culture, which was perceived as a potential catalyst for uncontrollable social change. These anxieties became more evident when jeans started to emerge as a signature item of clothing worn by student protestors who actively voiced social injustices. In the 1970s, criticism was still largely implicit, as seen in the music of Benny Soebardja and Gank Pegangsaan, as well as in theatre productions such as *Mastodon and the Condor Bird* by Rendra, which criticized authoritarianism and led to his brief imprisonment (Lubis, 2010).

Furthermore, the *New Art Movement* (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru) in 1975 in Jakarta showcased artworks that highlighted the social inequalities resulting from modernization. By the 1990s, criticism became increasingly explicit, particularly through the music of Iwan Fals and Slank, whose lyrics addressed widespread injustice and corruption (Wiyanti & Hidayat, n.d.). Theatre performances by *Teater Koma*,

such as *Opera Kecoa* and *Sampek Engtay*, also demonstrated bold critiques of the government, while Wiji Thukul's poem *Peringatan* became a symbol of student resistance at the time (Prastiyo, 2020). Street art, including political graffiti and student theatre, also began to emerge in the lead-up to the Reformation movement. While criticism in the 1970s was largely veiled due to strict censorship, by the 1990s expressions of dissent became more open, especially through music, theatre, and street art.

In this context, clothing can serve as a form of artistic critique representing resistance to government policy. A concrete example is the use of jeans, as captured in Kompas newspaper editions from 1970 to 1998 in Jakarta. Photographs in the newspaper depicted how student protestors wore jeans as their attire of resistance. However, the use of jeans as a uniform for demonstrators and a symbol of defiance had earlier roots, dating back to the late 1950s when Permesta rebels in North Sulawesi wore jeans as part of their gear (Sulu, 1997). This phenomenon did not end in the 1950s; jeans continued to be a symbol of resistance in various major protest movements, including the Malari demonstrations of 1974 and the 1998.

Jeans in the 1974 Malari Demonstration and 1998 Reformation

Before delving into how jeans were worn by demonstrators, particularly among

students during the 1974 protests known as the Malari incident, it is important to understand the socio-political context of Jakarta in the 1970s that influenced this phenomenon. At the time, the First Five-Year Development Plan (*Repelita I*), which began in 1969 and concluded in 1974, was underway. In any government era, public criticism is inevitable as a means to correct policies perceived to be detrimental to the people. Likewise, students—who functioned as critical agents of change—actively responded to the prevailing social conditions. Student affiliates from various universities convened to discuss their critiques. In Jakarta, several student groups were formed, including Makara UI, Kelompok Cipayung, HMI, PMII, GMKI, and PMKRI. These groups also involved prominent political figures, scholars, and public intellectuals such as Sarbini Sastrosatomo, Ali Sastroamidjojo, Subadio Sastrosatomo, T.B. Simatupang, Sjahrir, and others (Lubis, 2010).

Their criticisms of New Order development policies included demands for a more socially just development agenda, a rejection of abuses of power which had led to rampant corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), protests against the unchecked rise in prices of basic necessities, and calls for equitable distribution of development outcomes throughout the country (“Artikel Tanpa Judul,” 1974). The development model

had created widening disparities between a small wealthy elite and the majority poor population. The weakening of the rupiah further exacerbated the situation, leading to significant increases in prices of staple goods such as rice, cooking oil, sugar, and laundry soap. Rice prices increased by 13.89%, cooking oil by 5.54%, sugar by 0.54%, and laundry soap by 2.50% (“9 Bahan Pokok Naik Di Djakarta,” 1970). Additionally, reports indicated that 70% of the annual targets of *Repelita I* in the agricultural sector had not been achieved, as reflected in project reports up to January 1970 (“70% Target Tahun 1 Pelita Dibidang Pertanian Belum Terjapai,” 1970). These conditions contributed to growing political and economic instability in 1970s Indonesia.

Public dissatisfaction peaked with the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka to Indonesia on January 14, 1974. Japan was viewed as a primary supporter of the New Order’s economic policies and as the largest foreign investor dominating the Indonesian market at the time (Lubis, 2010). Students had planned a demonstration at Halim Perdanakusuma Airport to protest Tanaka’s arrival, but due to heavy security presence, they were unable to proceed. The following day, January 15, 1974, a major student demonstration broke out in Jakarta, voicing sharp criticism of development policies and rejecting Japanese dominance. The protest was led by

Hariman Siregar, head of the University of Indonesia Student Council. The march began at the Faculty of Medicine in Salemba and grew as students from other universities joined the march toward the Presidential Palace.

However, the demonstration turned violent and was suspected of being manipulated by political scapegoats seeking to escalate the chaos. Riots broke out across Jakarta, marked by widespread vandalism and arson targeting Japanese-owned companies and Japanese-made vehicles, looting, and the burning of shopping centers, especially in the Pasar Senen area. Radio broadcasts that afternoon amplified the sense of crisis, describing Jakarta as being heavily damaged and engulfed in flames (Lubis, 2010). Official data recorded 11 deaths, 177 people seriously injured, 128 lightly injured, 775 arrests, and 595 vehicles, mostly Japanese brands damaged or burned. Additionally, 144 buildings were destroyed, and 160 kilograms of gold were looted from jewelry stores (“Keadaan Jakarta Raya ,” 1974; Lubis, 2010). This incident marked one of the most severe urban riots since the start of the New Order regime and throughout 1974.

The violence of the Malari incident not only revealed socio-economic tensions but also highlighted the rising expression of student resistance, including through the visual symbols of unity and protest they adopted. One of the most striking

symbols at the time was the wearing of jeans. Amid the escalating unrest, jeans were not merely a fashion choice but a statement of defiance. Originally a product of Western culture and a symbol of modernity previously worn in anti-war protests such as those in Vietnam, jeans were now embraced by Jakarta students as a sign of resistance against New Order authoritarianism and foreign economic dominance, especially from Japan. Jeans became an unofficial uniform for those who refused to conform to a system seen as unjust and unrepresentative of the people's interests. On the turbulent streets of Jakarta, demonstrators wearing jeans visually reinforced the notion that resistance was not only voiced in slogans but also embodied in how they dressed carrying with them a spirit of freedom, equality and opposition to authoritarian power.



Figure 1. The University of Indonesia campus on Jl. Salemba under heavy security after the Malari incident
Source: Kompas, Newspaper, January 18, 1974.



Figure 2. The Malari 1974 Protest, General Soemitro of the Indonesian National Armed Forces calming the crowd on Jl. MH Thamrin, Central Jakarta
Source: Special Archive via detikcom

The Malari 1974 incident provided a lesson for the government to reconsider their policy system. The incident was handled with caution, with around 775 people arrested and interrogated, and 50 people officially detained (“50 Tahun Malari: Represi Negara Belum Banyak Berubah,” 2024; Lubis, 2010). However, there was no evidence of military involvement, and no armed members were called as witnesses. In August 1974, Hariman Siregar, the chairman of the University of Indonesia Student Council, was designated as the first defendant. This led students to believe that the judicial authorities were attempting to cover up the presence of factions within the military elite, while the government, on the other hand, constructed a narrative that the incident only involved civilians (Gunawan, 1975). Referred to as an anti-Japanese capital protest, this event caused the relationship between the Indonesian government and Japan to become strained after the incident ended.

However, Japanese capital continued to flow into Indonesia (Khairani, 2016).

Such patterns of unrest would continue when the government was seen by the public as failing to maintain economic stability and security. This is also closely linked to the democratic principles that form the government system of the Republic of Indonesia. However, even though the protests by students during the Malari 1974 incident had passed, the spirit of resistance against injustice remained strong among students. This was once again evident during the large demonstrations of the 1998 Reformation in Jakarta, when jeans, which had previously been associated with modernity and resistance, were once again worn by students as a symbol of their struggle against the New Order regime. Clothing attributes became a familiar form of resistance continuously voiced by young people, especially students, at the time.

In the 1990s, Indonesia's economy grew rapidly, reaching 7-8% per year. However, this growth was not supported by a strong foundation. Practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism were rampant, the banking system was weak, and there was a high dependence on foreign capital, which weakened Indonesia's economy. When the Asian financial crisis hit in mid-1997, it also affected Indonesia's economic condition. The crisis began with the depreciation of

the Rupiah against the US Dollar in July 1997. In a short time, the Rupiah continued to weaken, reaching IDR 17,000 per US Dollar in January 1998. This situation caused investors to panic and withdraw their funds from banks and the stock market. This resulted in a liquidity crisis and a decline in confidence in the banking and financial sectors (Sunardi et al., 2024).

The uncontrollable economic crisis made life increasingly difficult for the people, especially for the lower and middle classes. The prices of basic necessities such as rice, cooking oil, and sugar rose drastically due to inflation exceeding 70%. This led to a decrease in purchasing power and many families falling into poverty. Furthermore, this crisis revealed the weakness of Indonesia's economy, which was overly reliant on foreign debt and natural resources. The widespread corruption and the close ties between officials and businessmen with Soeharto made the economy unjust. Students, as agents of change, felt that this situation only benefited a few people, while the majority of the people suffered ("Artikel Tanpa Judul ," 1998a). Additionally, the political crisis further exacerbated the situation leading up to the 1998 Reformation. Soeharto, who had been in power for over 30 years, ran an authoritarian and centralized government, prompting students and much of the population to call for a change in

leadership. Moreover, the military also held dual functions through the ABRI (Indonesian National Armed Forces) dual function doctrine, giving them not only security duties but also political involvement.

This situation led to renewed demonstrations by students across Indonesia. Students in Jakarta began their free speech actions on March 16, 1998. Several campuses that held these actions included the University of Pancasila, IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, and Mercu Buana University. Meanwhile, the UI Student Senate formed the Cabinet Development VII Work Monitoring Team ("Mahasiswa Jakarta Kembali Demo ," 1998). However, this action was considered ineffective in making the government listen to the people's voices at the time. On May 12, 1998, a call for a nationwide student movement emerged, centered in Jakarta, to protest the New Order government. On the same day, four Trisakti University students were shot dead while peacefully protesting ("Artikel Tanpa Judul ," 1998a). This then triggered outrage among many students, especially in Jakarta, to voice their aspirations more strongly and demand that Soeharto's regime step down. This action resulted in large-scale riots in Jakarta, with looting of stores and neighborhood residents conducting patrols ("Artikel Tanpa Judul ," 1998b).

Demonstrations continued throughout Soeharto's regime, peaking

during the 1998 Reformation events, which took place from May 12 to May 24, 1998. In these various actions, the author observed a recurring pattern, including in the clothing worn by the demonstrators, which was also evident during the Malari 1974 incident. During this period, jeans were once again widely worn by students and young people as a symbol of cultural identity and a statement of stance against the evolving socio-political situation. This made clothing not only serve as daily wear but also represent the spirit of resistance against authority in a given condition (Lubis, 2010). The jeans worn by the demonstrators in 1998, especially in Jakarta, had a straight cut, differing from the jeans of 1974, which had a cut-bray style ("Artikel Tanpa Judul ,," 1974; Fadlia, 2007). Aside from having symbolic meaning, the strong denim material, which was durable and resistant to tearing, was chosen by them to participate in street protests, facing various conditions, including hot weather and the riots occurring during the actions.



Figure 3. Students being evacuated from the MPR/DPR complex by buses provided by the Marine Corps
Source: Kompas, Newspaper, May 24, 1998



Figure 4. Jeans worn by students in Jakarta on May 18, 1998
Source: Kompas, Newspaper, May 19, 1998

This shows that in various social movements, clothing is often used as a symbolic tool of resistance aimed at strengthening the group's message and identity. Jeans, initially workwear for the labor class, later evolved in meaning to become a symbol of freedom and resistance, particularly among students during the 1974 Malari and the 1998 Reformation demonstrations. History shows that clothing can serve as a form of political expression, as noted by Wilson (1985), who stated that fashion often functions as a reflection of social and political tensions within a society. In the context of the Malari 1974 event and the 1998 Reformation, the wearing of jeans not only signified unity among the demonstrators but also as a form of disobedience against the oppressive order. This phenomenon aligns with Goffman's theory in his research *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which explains that individuals use clothing as part of their social appearance to assert a particular

position or attitude in the public sphere (Goffman, 2023). Therefore, the use of jeans in demonstrations was not merely functional but also carried a strong ideological meaning in the struggle for change.

Thus, jeans can also be understood as part of material culture that functions not only as a wearable item but also as a medium for symbolic communication. As Koentjaraningrat (2009) explains, material culture encompasses all human creations that have a physical form and are used in everyday life, including clothing, which can represent values, attitudes, and social identities. The choice of jeans by the demonstrators during the 1974 Malari and 1998 Reformation movements shows how elements of material culture can be reinterpreted to respond to ongoing socio-political dynamics. Jeans, as a global popular culture product, were utilized by resistance groups to mark a break from formal symbols of power and assert their position as part of the civil society movement demanding change. In other words, jeans in this context represent a cultural resistance to state hegemony while serving as a visual tool to communicate solidarity and demands for social justice (Ratna, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The development of jeans in Jakarta from 1970 to 1998 not only reflects changes in lifestyle and consumer culture but also

became a symbol of social resistance in demonstrations. As a product of Western culture, jeans were initially associated with modernity and globalization in Indonesia. However, over time, jeans became an identity for students and activists who opposed government policies, particularly during the repressive New Order regime. In the Malari 1974 demonstration, students wore jeans as a form of criticism against an economy overly dependent on foreign capital. This event stemmed from dissatisfaction with social inequality caused by Soeharto's development policies (Adam, 2004). In this context, jeans signified the students' solidarity with the workers and the lower class, who were adversely affected by economic injustice. Meanwhile, during the 1998 Reformation, jeans resurfaced as a symbol of student resistance against the Soeharto regime, which was perceived as authoritarian and rife with corruption. The use of jeans in these demonstrations further emphasized the symbolic character of clothing as a political expression against state hegemony. This approach aligns with the concept of social history, which places material culture as part of the dynamics of societal resistance. Sartono Kartodirdjo (Kartodirdjo, 1993) explains that in social history studies, symbols and cultural artifacts, including clothing, play a vital role in shaping collective identity and serve as a medium for articulating

resistance against dominant power. In this context, jeans became part of a social representation that transcended its practical function as clothing, also embodying aspirations for social change.

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