

Belt up, young man

by Alex Needham

theguardian

Florida's attempt to ban young men from "sagging" – wearing jeans so low they show their underpants – has many precedents. In 2008, on the campaign trail, Barack Obama told MTV that "brothers should pull up their pants". A year before, the mayor of Delcambre, Louisiana, said that any man who allowed his jeans to slide down his buttocks, would have to pay a \$500 fine and spend six months in jail. The sight of exposed boxer shorts has caused consternation this side of the Atlantic too: last year, 18-year-old Ellis Drummond **was threatened with an Asbo** for wearing trousers so low that they were showing his underpants.

HIP HOP CULTURE

The fact is that not only has the saggy jean proved impossible to ban from the street, it has actually mutated to survive. The look is most associated with hip-hop culture, where it originated in the early 90s. The godfather of the skinny jean, Hedi Slimane, designed his denims to sit well below the hip-bone, and a lot more brands have followed. A jean that's tight in the leg and low-slung in the crotch is not easy to wear – climbing over anything is particularly difficult – but that hasn't prevented teenage boys, or the older hipsters, buying posher versions of the look.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So why has the desire to expose one's buttocks and boxers to the elements proved so enduring? The answer is, simply, rebellion. It's well documented that the look comes from prisoners having their belts taken away in case they use them to hang themselves. Though showing your underpants to the world is only an echo of this lawless attitude, that echo is amplified when the authorities fall into the trap of trying to criminalise it. There's also the fact that showing your arse is an insult that is centuries older than hip-hop – this is simply a new version, and that's why it's so popular with teenage boys. Hip-hop has also permeated popular culture to such an extent that teenage boys pay no attention to the fact that a look which may seem threatening in Los Angeles, looks simply ridiculous in Manchester. The culture is global now.

DOUBLE STANDARDS

The responses to sagging say something about the different ways in which we regard male and female bodies. When women wear their jeans so low it shows off their knickers, it's regarded (if not intended) as sexually alluring. When teenage boys do it, it's a moral panic. Yet there's no sexual intent in sagging. We're a long way from Robert Plant and Mick Jagger with their skin-tight trousers. Most gay men have avoided the saggy-jeaned look. In fact, pointing out that in displaying your bottom you might be making it an object of desire might be one way to make teenage boys pull their trousers up. Otherwise, **no amount of nagging will stop young men sagging.**

Meet the British ‘saggers’

Manh Pham, 21, student from east London:

“Lots of celebrities wear their trousers like this. I definitely wouldn’t wear my trousers low to work, but it’s the way we all dress to go out with friends. I think the trend comes from prisons, where they take the belts off inmates – but I’m not really sure. I just do it to conform.”

Scott Giraldez, 19, chef from Skegness:

“I don’t really know why I wear my trousers like this – I’ve just been doing it since I was 14 or 15, because everyone else does it. It seems unfair for Florida to try to ban the style – I think everybody has a right to their own fashion.”

Misbah Patman, 19, student from east London:

“My family are from Afghanistan, and they all disapprove of the fact I wear my jeans low – I always have to pull them up when I get home, and I could never wear them like this to a family party. But where I live, this is how everyone wears their jeans – if you wear them pulled up high, people think you’re really uncool.”

Jamal Greenland, 20, rapper from north London:

“I’ve been wearing my jeans low since I was 14 – it’s just my style, and it goes with the kind of music I like. I wouldn’t say I wear them really low, though – and I usually have a shirt over them, so it’s not that I look indecent or anything. I don’t think the Florida law’s a bad thing, though – I never wore my trousers like this to school. That would be disrespectful.”

Ryan Warner, 21, shop assistant from south London:

“I’ve been wearing my trousers really low for about 10 years. I started when I got into skateboarding – all the skateboarders wore saggy pants. I just like the look. I don’t think they’ll need to bring in a law like the Florida one over here – in America, the style is more exaggerated. You see guys pulling their trousers down so low that you can see their whole bum. That’s going too far.”