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Mirror, Mirror: Jeans his way is the new way



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Here I am, just getting used to skinny denim, when the fashion world starts bombarding me with another trend - the everything-is-just-a-tad-bit-oversize "boyfriend" look.

The concept behind it is simple: You spend a wonderful night at your beau's house. In the morning, instead of squeezing into your own slim-cut cords, you easily slide into his jeans, cuff the pant legs, borrow his sweater, and stylishly search his neighborhood for a latte.

So cool. So effortless.

So unrealistic.

What if it would take a tub of Crisco to work your hips into his pants? What if your boyfriend is - gasp - shorter than you? Would rolling still be an option?

Fashion designers are nothing if not persistent, so to help us achieve this look sans boyfriend, a number of denim brands, from the well-established premiums (Paige, Adriano Goldschmied, and Citizens for Humanity) to new lines such as C.J. by Cookie Johnson (a brand by Earvin "Magic" Johnson's wife and recently tagged as Oprah's favorite), are designing boyish cuts that actually forgive, if not accentuate, women's curves.

"It's the fit you get from wearing a guy's pair of great jeans: relaxed, loose, not tight," said Gigi Guerra, marketing director at Madewell - a brand founded in 1937, but in 2006 relaunched as the younger, hipper sister of J.Crew.



Boyfriend jeans have been around for a little more than two years, first spotted on Downtown hipsters, but then moved into the celebrity realm via Katie Holmes and Victoria Beckham.

This season, however, the jeans and the accoutrements - button-up tartan- or lumberjack-plaid shirts, chunky-knit sweaters with dolman sleeves and newsboy caps - are dominating women's clothing sections in mall haunts and boutiques. It appears the trend will last through summer as boyfriend purveyors such as Seven for All Mankind and Madewell introduce boyfriend cuts with slightly tapered and somewhat skinnier legs, further emphasizing the slouchy crotch effect.

Interestingly, this uber-relaxed look is flourishing alongside its body-conscious cousins. We aren't just talking about the skinny jean - these boys, according to denim marketers, remain the industry's top seller. (Have you heard of the *jegging* - a combination skinny jean/legging?) This boyfriend silhouette is a close second to today's new powersuit - the midi-length pencil skirt, cardigan sweater, and belt.

Women's jeans were introduced in 1934 with Levi Strauss & Co.'s Lady Levi's, nearly identical to today's boyfriend cut, according to company historian Lynn Downey.

"Women were wearing men's jeans on ranches," Downey said. "So Levi's created a blue jean that women could wear on dude ranches. They were prewashed and were cut loose to look like men, but there was room for the hips . . . more of a feminine cut."

But it wasn't until the 1950s when it was acceptable for women to wear the jeans off the ranch and into the fashion realm. In 1958, during the World's Fair in Brussels, Downey said, an advertisement for Lady Levi's featured a model wearing slightly oversize cuffed jeans and a plaid shirt - daring at the time. Then, the truly fashion-forward look was all about showing off your curves. Marilyn Monroe was the icon of note.

"The difference between now and then is that women are now freer to wear whatever look they want and not be labeled," Downey said.

The most important question remains: How can you wear the look without evoking the 1990s? Please tell me my years of imitating R&B band TLC are officially over.

First, wearing men's jeans just won't do. So you have to do your shopping to see what works well with your curves. Over the past four days, I tried on 23 pairs of jeans at boutiques like Charlie's in Old City and Nordstrom and Madewell in King of Prussia.

The best fit was a pair of J-Brand at Charlie's Jeans, but I couldn't invest \$266 for jeans that sag in the crotch. The best deal was Madewell's ex-boyfriend fit: \$98.50. It was a little baggy. Still, it fit well in the waist and the hips. (I was able to try on only one pair of C.J. by Cookie Johnson because Nordstrom had just one pair left in my size. The good news is I seem to be a smaller size in those jeans.)

Andrea Linett, creative director of Lucky Magazine, recommends we wear the boyfriend look one of two ways: Take it totally literal, and wear a men's style shoe, simple V-neck T, and a blazer. Or make it girly, wearing heels and fitted off-the-shoulder top. Linett says the second option is the best. I agree. I'm going to go sparkly for the holidays.

Basically, you have to pick one or the other.

"If you are like [model] Gisele Bündchen, then go boyfriend all the way," Linett said. "But most of us can't do all boyfriend without looking like a hobo."

Even though I found what could be the right boyfriend jean for me, I opted to buy some skinnies instead - a pair of cords by Madewell and a pair of Joe's Jeans at Charlie's. (The pocket placement - right in the center of my backside - was perfect.)

But I am eyeing a button-up slouchy tartan-plaid shirt. In red, of course. Now my only question is: flats or heels?