



Fashion as Material Culture Project

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Abstract

This study focuses on the cultural biography of donkey leather jackets, exploring their evolution from functional workwear for the British working class in the 19th century to a contemporary fashion item. Through Kopitov's "cultural biography" theory and Appadurai's "paths and bifurcations" theory, the classification and reclassification of donkey leather jackets in different periods are analyzed, revealing their dynamic transformation from workers' clothing to subcultural symbols and then to high-end fashion items. This evolution not only reflects the changes in social values but also shows the important role of objects in shaping identity, class, and cultural symbols while revealing the adaptability and recontextualization process of objects in different historical and cultural contexts. The case of donkey leather jackets shows that the life of objects is not limited to their original functions, but is deeply rooted in complex social and cultural systems, providing important theoretical support and practical inspiration for material culture research, and also highlighting how fashion carries multiple historical memories and cultural values through objects, providing a unique way of expressing social dynamics.

Keywords

Material Culture; Working-Class Fashion; Fashion History; Reclassification of Objects; British Labor History

1. Introduction

This essay will explore the cultural biography of a vintage Donkey jacket, a quintessential fashion artifact originating from the United Kingdom. By examining its classifications and potential reclassifications in the post-consumption phase, this study aims to trace the object's journey beyond its initial production cycles. By delving into its extended lifecycle, a nuanced understanding of its transformation and cultural significance will emerge. Drawing upon a range of academic sources—including the works of Kopytoff, Lury, and Woodward—alongside relevant existing research, this essay will construct a comprehensive narrative of the commodity's evolving identity within and beyond its original context.

2. Research Background

Some study points out that since the late 1980s, the social life of objects has gradually been studied through an anthropological perspective (Clark, 2017), extending from the production stage to the post-consumption stage, revealing the interaction between material objects and social and cultural meanings.

Based on the theoretical framework (Kopytov, 1986), this paper analyzes the cultural biography of donkey leather jackets and explores their reclassification in different historical stages. Kopytov proposed that biographies can be constructed through personal narratives, standardized models, or theoretical frameworks to explore the ideal biography and actual deviations in society.

By depicting the biography of donkey leather jackets, this paper traces their evolution in cultural and social contexts,

reveals the interweaving of their material transformation and symbolic meaning, and shows their leaps in functional and cultural fields.

3. Historical Background of Donkey Jacket

The Donkey Jacket stands as an emblematic garment intricately woven into the fabric of British working-class history. Evolving from its origins as durable workwear for manual laborers to a cultural and societal icon, its journey mirrors the complex interplay between material culture and social transformation. Exploring the origins, design evolution, and shifting symbolic meanings of the Donkey Jacket offers valuable insights into how objects surpass their utilitarian purposes, adopting new identities and significance within varying social and historical landscapes.



Figure 1. Donkey Jacket produced in the 1800s by Arthur Miller.

The vintage jacket in Figure 1 is from the 19th century. It was made by Arthur Miller of Sheerness, Kent, England, for the London Borough of Lambeth. The jacket was created for manual laborers like miners and dock workers. It represents toughness and practicality. It has a strong connection to the British working class (Glazebrook, 2024). Over time, this jacket became more than workwear. It became a cultural symbol of working-class identity and heritage.

There are fewer records of donkey skin jackets. They were practical clothing, not fashion items. In the late 1880s, George Key, a small manufacturer, designed a jacket for Manchester's harsh winter construction sites. He was inspired by the "linen coat" of the mid-Victorian period. This jacket became popular among canal workers for its durability and protection (Creases Like Knives, 2016).

The donkey skin jacket changed with demand and industry (Skippen, Collier, & Kithuka, 2021). Its strong structure and waterproof material made it suitable for harsh environments. Its low cost kept it accessible to workers. Over time, it became more than functional clothing. It is now a symbol of authenticity, resilience, and British heritage. This jacket shows its lasting value in both practical and cultural ways.

Donkey leather jackets became popular because they were durable and cheap. Workers in hard jobs used them. Jackets for miners had orange shoulder pads (Joey, L., 2024). Some had "NCB" logos and reflective strips on the arms and shoulders. Jackets for navy workers and cleaners came in black, navy blue, or dark brown. Prisons also used these jackets. They became a symbol of working-class clothing. Workers needed strong clothing. Tough materials were important for harsh conditions. Donkey leather jackets were the best choice. Workers liked practical designs. Factories focused on simple and strong features.



Figure 2. Workers wearing donkey jackets in the United Kingdom in 1820.

Someone said these jackets were durable, adaptable, and low-cost (Gunn et al., 2012). Early jackets used waterproof waxed cloth. This material was cheap and easy to make. Factories produced many jackets. Workers in different jobs needed different designs. Factories made versions for these needs. Popularity grew. Workers liked the low price. These jackets became part of daily working life. Mass production helped more workers own them.

Donkey leather jackets became more than work clothes. They showed workers' strength and unity. Research said an object's story shows its meaning (Kopitov, 1986). Donkey leather jackets changed from workwear to cultural symbols. This balance of function and meaning proves their lasting value. Workers respected these jackets. The jackets showed their struggles and strength. Workers felt proud to wear them. Factories kept making them. The design stayed iconic.

4. Reclassification in the 1970s

By the 20th century, the donkey leather jacket changed with social and cultural shifts. In the 1970s, it became popular in youth subcultures like skinheads (Ztts Yttt, 2023). Skinheads started in London in the 1960s among working-class youth. They were known for short hair and working-class clothing. The donkey leather jacket became iconic for its toughness and connection to the working class. It was often worn with green overalls and denim jackets. This created a gritty, street-style look. The jacket changed from workwear to a symbol of subculture.

Today, the donkey leather jacket is popular in street fashion. Its image is now very different from its past as workwear. British youth wear it to show rebellion and unity. This agrees with Woodward's (2007) idea about the "existence and generation" of objects. Mixing donkey leather jackets with other workwear created a unique street style. This style had a big impact on British youth. It combines old workwear with modern trends. The jacket became a way for young people to express their identity.

During the skinhead movement, the jacket symbolizes the group. It became part of cultural reclassification. The donkey jacket is still linked to skinheads. It shows the subculture's identity. Research explains that clothing is not just practical (Lury, 2007; Woodward, 2007). It shows social identity and meaning. The history of the donkey jacket shows its dual role. It is both useful and symbolic. It adapts to changes in society. The jacket stays important in fashion. It connects workwear and personal identity. It reflects the values of the wearer.

5. Political and Social Impacts

The donkey jacket caused controversy in politics. In the mid-1980s, Labour leader Michael Foot wore one to a Remembrance Day ceremony in London. The media criticized him as sloppy and inappropriate, making the jacket a

symbol of the Labour Party's negative image. Although it was later revealed as an expensive jacket chosen by Foot's wife, public opinion was already influenced. The jacket became seen as unsuitable for formal events. This incident, while not directly causing the Labour Party's election loss, showed the jacket's controversial role in politics (Walesonline, 2013).

Woodward explained this through totemism, arguing that objects like clothing symbolize social groups and strengthen identity (Woodward, 2007). Delicate clothing is linked to femininity, while rough clothing represents masculinity or the working class.

The donkey jacket has different meanings. In youth subcultures, it shows strength and rebellion. In formal events, it is seen as improper. This reflects how cultural objects carry different meanings. The jacket's meaning depends on its context and users. It links to social values and power systems. It balances personal expression with social norms. The jacket's history shows its cultural and social importance. It helps explore identity and social change. It remains a symbol of material culture.

6. Modern Reclassification and Fashion Evolution

The donkey jacket has become less visible since the Michael Foote incident. Its cultural importance seems to have decreased. The jacket is no longer a key symbol in public discussions. This suggests a stage of "de-commodification." In recent years, the donkey jacket has followed a different path. New styles have appeared online and in stores. This shows a renewed interest in the jacket. People now reflect on how industrialization and modernization changed material culture. Woodward (2007, p. 19) used the idea of the "social life" of objects to study these changes. The donkey jacket has mostly been linked to male workers. Women rarely used it. This shows that society saw workwear as a symbol of masculinity. Negative links with hard labor and political events made the jacket less appealing. It remains unattractive to women and other groups. The jacket's ties to its origins limit its reach. Modern consumers prefer versatile clothing. The donkey jacket's strong connection to labor history creates barriers. Designers attempt to refresh its image. These efforts add modern elements. Its return brings discussions about tradition and change. The jacket highlights the balance between heritage and innovation. It reflects how material culture adapts to modern tastes. This example offers insights into shifting social values. The donkey jacket remains a subject of cultural study.

The transformation of the donkey-skin jacket from a functional work garment to a commodity re-launched on the market today illustrates the complex interaction between material culture and social change. By studying its circulation and reclassification, we can better understand how objects like the donkey-skin jacket adapt and evolve in changing cultural and economic environments. This suggests that to understand the life cycle of material heritage, it is necessary to analyze it in the context of historical context and modern developments.



Figure 3. Sandro dual material jacket style cardi-coat.



Figure 4. French connection men's black donkey jacket.

7. Cultural Pathways and Diversions

David pointed out that gender-neutral fashion has not been a mainstream trend in the past 150 years (David, 1994). In recent decades, changing social roles have blurred gender boundaries. Clothing with gender characteristics has become popular among those seeking unique styles. The fashion industry has expanded designs to include neutral styles. This caters to diverse consumers and promotes innovation in traditional clothing culture. It reflects society's redefinition of gender roles and shows how clothing expresses identity.

For example, the British brand French Connection designed a men's coat inspired by traditional donkey jackets. In spring 2019, Sandro introduced a cardigan-style jacket combining soft knitted fabrics and denim shoulder details. Inspired by the classic donkey jacket, it focused on comfort and style for casual use. Sandro's design replaced rough workwear with refined materials. This reinterpretation transformed the jacket into a modern item, mixing tradition with innovation.

The donkey jacket's history shows how social and cultural trends shape its identity. Initially, it symbolized practicality and strength for workers. Later, youth subcultures adopted it as a sign of rebellion. Fashion trends redefined its role, reflecting the emotions and ideas of each era. Appadurai's theory of "paths and deviations" explains this change (Appadurai, 1986). The jacket followed its original purpose as workwear before taking on new roles in fashion. Designers adapted it from functional clothing to a versatile style item.

Modern designs use better fabrics and focus on aesthetics (McCartney & Tynan, 2021). Historical elements mix with modern techniques to attract consumers valuing both nostalgia and style. The donkey jacket's evolution connects past and present, showing layers of cultural meaning. Gender also influenced its appeal. Its association with male labor limited its popularity among women. Connections to hard work and political events further shaped its image.

Designers now position the donkey jacket for casual use, reflecting changing social and economic values. Its story highlights the mix of tradition and innovation. Each stage adds new meaning. Fashion adapts old features to modern tastes, showing the value of material culture. The donkey jacket reflects identity, history, and evolving social values. Its journey continues to inspire cultural and design discussions.

8. Conclusion

From its origins as a functional workwear garment designed for Manchester laborers to its contemporary reinterpretation in fashion, the donkey jacket's cultural biography vividly illustrates how material culture evolves to reflect and

shape social values. This transformation is closely related to Kopytoff's concept of 'cultural biography' and Appadurai's theory of 'paths and forks', revealing the dynamic interaction between objects and their social context. Over the years, the donkey jacket has undergone multiple classifications and reclassifications. Initially, it was a utilitarian garment that symbolized the resilience of the British working class. In the 1970s, the jacket was adopted by youth subcultures such as skinheads and transformed into a cultural totem of rebellion and identity. In recent years, it has been reinterpreted by high fashion as a neutral and versatile garment that reflects contemporary shifts in gender and style norms. These stages of reclassification are a testament to Kopytoff's idea that objects, like individuals, have multifaceted cultural biographies. The donkey jacket's evolution also echoes Appadurai's theory of objects moving from traditional uses (paths) to interrupting and redefining their original contexts (forks). Although this article explores several key stages in the cultural biography of the donkey leather jacket, there are still many potential classifications and meanings to be discovered. As Kopytoff pointed out, individuals have multiple and selective life histories, and objects also contain unrevealed cultural, social, and economic narratives. Future research can focus on how the donkey leather jacket continues to evolve in the global market or as a nostalgic symbol in popular culture.

In short, the cultural biography of the donkey leather jacket is a microcosm of how material culture adapts, struggles, and redefines itself in time and social structures. Tracing its evolution from workwear to fashion, we can not only gain a deeper understanding of how objects reflect social values but also see how they actively participate in the shaping of social values.

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