

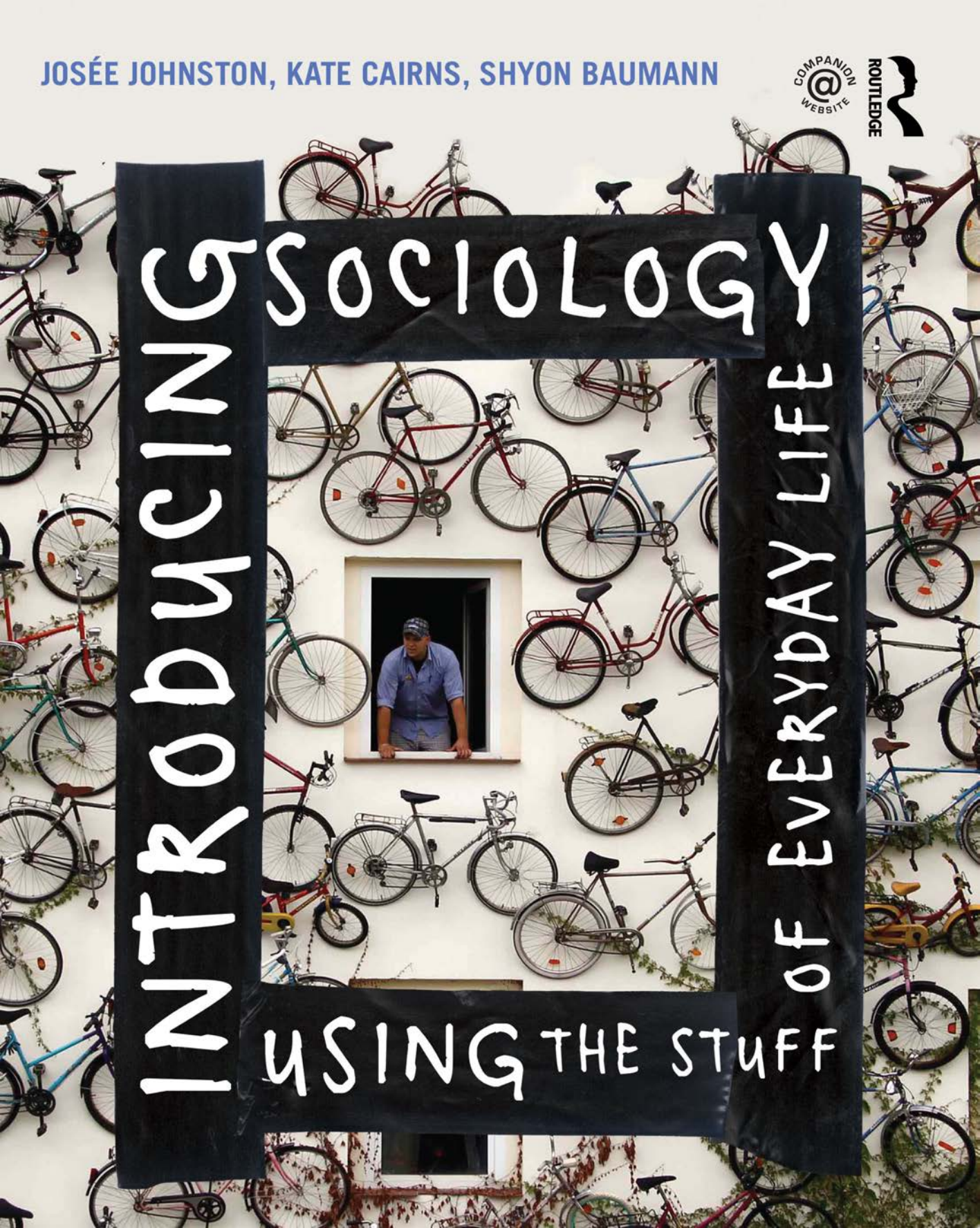
JOSÉE JOHNSTON, KATE CAIRNS, SHYON BAUMANN

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ROUTLEDGE

INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY

OF EVERYDAY LIFE
USING THE STUFF



“From designer jeans to iPhones, cultural understandings and material arrangements come together to shape what we buy and why. With a remarkable gift for storytelling, the authors show us how the things we use reflect the conflict between our private lives and the public issues structuring them. After reading this book, it will be impossible to see a marketing campaign or a PR event in quite the same way. I can’t wait to teach *Using the Stuff of Everyday Life* in my classroom!”

Frederick F. Wherry, Yale University

“Johnston, Cairns, and Baumann have produced something that Introductory Sociology instructors have long needed: a text that integrates the many diverse topics covered by sociology into a unifying theme. By focusing on the social processes surrounding consumption and consumerism—the literal ‘stuff’ of our students’ everyday lives—the authors help students explore important sociological subjects such as globalization, inequality, subcultures, gender, identity, and much, much more. This is an exciting, creative contribution to the same-old, same-old landscape of introductory sociology texts, and one certain to get students exercising their sociological imaginations right away.”

Daniel Winchester, co-editor of *Social Theory Re-Wired*
(Routledge 2016)

“Remarkably well-written and cleverly organized, *Introducing Sociology Using the Stuff of Everyday Life* demonstrates the relevance of a wide range of sociological concepts to such routine occurrences as getting a cup of coffee, playing sports, and getting married. The authors’ presentation of ‘thinking frames’ and ‘active learning’ suggestions for each chapter provides students with rich opportunities to test and apply their knowledge and understanding. An excellent introductory text!”

David Karen, co-editor of *Sociological Perspectives on Sport*
(Routledge 2015)

“*Introducing Sociology Using the Stuff of Everyday Life* succeeds where other ‘non-traditional’ textbooks have failed. Johnston, Cairns, and Baumann have compiled truly compelling chapters that apply core sociological concepts to the stuff—clothes, food, cars, music, phones, etc.—that surrounds our students today. Their focus on ‘stuff’ allows instructors to go beyond concepts covered in traditional sociology textbooks to emphasize contemporary ideas that sociologists actually use when we ‘do sociology’. This is the first non-traditional textbook I’ve seen that really breaks the standard textbook mold and engages students in the practice of thinking sociologically!”

Julie A. Pelton, University of Nebraska Omaha

“Thanks to *Introducing Sociology*, your students in Introductory Sociology will never be able to look at their ‘stuff’ in the same way. This text will leave them thinking about sociology when they pick up their phone, eat a burger, pull on their jeans, and ‘conspicuously consume’ their lattes. Johnston, Cairns, and Baumann offer a unique approach to the introductory course that covers essential sociological concepts in an engaging and meaningful way.”

Suzanne Hudd, Quinnipiac College

INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY

A Guide to Sociological Concepts and Methods Covered

CHAPTER TITLE	FOCUS	CONCEPTS	METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES
1 A Day in the Life of Your Jeans: Using Our Stuff to Discover Sociology	The SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION inspires us to find new meanings in the stuff of consumer culture	KEY: agency, sociological imagination, social structure, consumer culture capitalism, conspicuous consumption, globalization, microsociological, macrosociological, research method, social location, wage labor	<i>Founders of sociology</i>
PART I: SURVIVING (AND THRIVING) IN CONSUMER CULTURE			
2 You Are What You Eat: Culture, Norms, and Values	Everyday food choices are illuminated through a SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CULTURE	KEY: commodity fetishism, culture, cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, norms, values deviance, Durkheim, empirical, ethnographic, femininity, feminism, Marxism, micro-sociological, macrosociological, normative, qualitative interviewing, subculture, theoretical perspectives, totem	<i>Qualitative interviews</i>
3 Fast-Food Blues: Work in a Global Economy	The WORLD OF WORK is explored through the lens of a fast-food burger	KEY: alienation, class, ideology, McDonaldization, wage labor bureaucracy, capitalism, commodity chains, commodity fetishism, cultural imperialism, ethnography, Global North, Global South, hegemony, iron cage, social location, social movements, transnational corporations, Weber	<i>Ethnography</i>
4 Coffee: Class, Distinction, and "Good" Taste	Your coffee order reveals the connections between CULTURE, CLASS, and STATUS	KEY: class, conspicuous consumption, cultural capital, status deviance, commodity chains, economic capital, ethical consumption, globalization, Global North, Global South, social capital, public space, quantitative research, sample, surveys, third place, upscale emulation	<i>Survey research</i>
PART II: FITTING IN: BEING PART OF THE GROUP			
5 Shopping Lessons: Consuming Social Order	Shopping can teach us about SOCIAL GROUPS, SOCIAL SOLIDARITY, and SOCIAL ORDER : consumers go shopping to get stuff, but also to form group identity and deal with anomie	KEY: anomie, individualism, social order, solidarity, social facts agency, capitalism, collective conscience, consumer dupes/heroes, consumer sovereignty, cultural relativism, focus groups, functionalism, gentrification, longitudinal, mechanical solidarity, new consumerism, organic solidarity, public space, rational choice, social problem, social mobility, stigma, theoretical perspective, totems, upscale emulation	<i>Focus groups</i>
6 Get in the Game: Race, Merit, and Group Boundaries	The world of sports illuminates core concepts relating to RACE and SOCIAL GROUPS	KEY: race, racism, racial discrimination and segregation; social constructionism assimilation, bridging / bonding social capital, deviance, essentialism, imagined community, gender binary, in-group and out-group distinctions, laws, minority group, patriarchy, social boundaries, social capital, social location, social norms	<i>Field experiments</i>

CHAPTER TITLE	FOCUS	CONCEPTS	METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES
7 Barbies and Monster Trucks: Socialization and “Doing Gender”	Toys shed light on gender SOCIALIZATION and DOING GENDER	KEY: doing gender, gender roles/identity, patriarchy, sex/gender, sexism, socialization agents of socialization, causation, correlation, cultural capital, (in)dependent variable, gender binary, ideology, intersex, pseudonyms, race, social stratification, stereotypes, cisgender, transgender	<i>Correlation versus causation</i>
8 Dreaming of a White Wedding: Marriage, Family, and Heteronormativity	Weddings are an industry and a ritual that codifies our ideas of FAMILY and relationships	KEY: marriage, family, heteronormativity, ritual deviance, hegemony, heterosexual privilege, ideology, individualism, masculinity, new consumerism, nuclear families, patriarchy, second shift, social reproduction, socialization, stigma, upscale emulation	<i>Historical comparative research</i>
9 I<3 My Phone: Technology and Social Networks	Our relationships with technology reveal changing ways of making SOCIAL NETWORKS , SOCIAL CAPITAL , and COMMUNITY	KEY: community, social capital, social networks, public sphere alienation, anomie, Frankfurt School, hegemony, homophily, individualism, moral panic, social change, social problem, prosumers, technological determinism, virtual community	<i>Social network analysis</i>
PART III: STANDING OUT: INDIVIDUALS NEGOTIATING THE SOCIAL WORLD			
10 Branding Your Unique Identity™: Consumer Culture and the Social Self	Brand culture is used to explore SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF THE SELF	KEY: brand, dramaturgical theory, identity, lifestyle, looking-glass self, stigma brand community, collective identity, discrimination, generalized other, photo elicitation, prosumers, symbolic interactionism, status, stereotyping	<i>Photo elicitation</i>
11 Looking Good: Ideology, Intersectionality, and the Beauty Industry	Social ideas of beauty reveal the importance of an INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH IN SOCIOLOGY , and demonstrate how gender, race, and class work together	KEY: body work, ideology, social constructionism, race, intersectionality, stereotypes consumerism, content analysis, fashion cycle, gender, hegemony, lifestyle, racism, sexism, social location	<i>Content analysis</i>
12 What’s On Your Playlist? Subcultures, Racism, and Cultural Appropriation	Musical tastes provide an insight into the formation of SUBCULTURES , as well as INSTITUTIONAL RACISM and CULTURAL APPROPRIATION	KEY: cultural appropriation, institutional racism, subcultures, white privilege art, color-blind ideology, commodities, discrimination, fashion, oligopoly, prejudice, status, social location, subcultural capital, taste, youth control complex	<i>Textual analysis</i>
13 Our Love–Hate Relationship with the Car: Masculinity, Industry, and Environmental Sustainability	Car culture is a way to understand SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE ECONOMY , and the connections between the economy, symbols, and the environment	KEY: economic sociology, Fordism, post-Fordism, masculinity archival research, aspirational good, bridging good, commodity, environmentalism, ethnicity, functionalism, globalization, hegemony, mass consumption, mass production, path dependence, post-materialist, sharing economy, social movements, stereotypes, subcultures	<i>Archival research</i>



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INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY USING THE STUFF OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The challenges of teaching a successful introductory sociology course today demand materials from a publisher very different from the norm. Texts that are organized the way the discipline structures itself intellectually no longer connect with the majority of student learners. This is not an issue of pandering to students or otherwise seeking the lowest common denominator. On the contrary, it is a question of again making the *practice of sociological thinking* meaningful, rigorous, and relevant to today's world of undergraduates.

This comparatively concise, highly visual, and *affordable* book offers a refreshingly new way forward to reach students, using one of the most powerful tools in a sociologist's teaching arsenal—the familiar stuff in students' everyday lives throughout the world: the jeans they wear to class, the coffee they drink each morning, or the phones their professors tell them to put away during lectures.

A focus on consumer culture, *seeing the strange in the familiar*, is not only interesting for students; it is also (the authors suggest) pedagogically superior to more traditional approaches. By engaging students through their stuff, this book moves beyond teaching *about* sociology to helping instructors teach *the practice of sociological thinking*. It moves beyond describing what sociology *is*, so that students can practice what sociological thinking *can do*. This pedagogy also posits a relationship between teacher and learner that is bi-directional. Many students feel a sense of authority in various areas of consumer culture, and they often enjoy sharing their knowledge with fellow students and with their instructor. Opening up the sociology classroom to discussion of these topics validates students' expertise on their own life-worlds. Teachers, in turn, gain insight from the goods, services, and cultural expectations that shape students' lives.

While innovative, the book has been carefully crafted to make it as useful and flexible as possible for instructors aiming to build core sociological foundations in a single semester. A map on pages ii–iii identifies core sociological concepts covered so that a traditional syllabus as well as individual lectures can easily be maintained. Theory, method, and active learning exercises in every chapter constantly encourage the sociological imagination as well as the “doing” of sociology.

Josée Johnston is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto. She is co-author of *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape, second edition* and *Food and Femininity*.

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INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY USING THE STUFF OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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Test questions and a wealth of additional instructor support materials, prepared by Ivanka Knezevic, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, are available on a password protected website www.routledge/cw/johnston to faculty and administrative staff who have been approved to request review copies by Routledge.

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PREFACE: FOR INSTRUCTORS

THE CHALLENGES FACING SOCIOLOGY INSTRUCTORS: A STRATEGY OF “STUFF”



Anyone who has taught an introductory sociology class knows that this can be a formidable task. Such classes frequently bring together students who are at very different levels academically. Standard sociology textbooks sometimes introduce conceptual material in a dry (dare we say *boring*?) manner that is disconnected from students' lives. What's more, we face the challenge of teaching students to think *structurally* after years—or even a lifetime—of socialization within a culture of individualism that fosters simplistic responses to complex social problems. Our classrooms often reflect the narratives in mainstream media and elsewhere in society that prioritize individualizing, anecdotal reactions to multifaceted structural issues like racism, poverty, unemployment, and gender discrimination. Sometimes the Nike slogan—*Just do it!*—seems to resonate more in the classroom than Marx's famous aphorism, “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” Sometimes, just introducing topics like Marx, history, or structure feels like a challenge.

These pedagogical challenges form the launching pad for this book. We suggest that one way to tackle these issues is to connect sociological thinking to the *stuff* of everyday life—stuff like cars, hamburgers, and basketball jerseys. Our fundamental goal—and challenge—is to showcase the utility of a sociological toolkit for understanding the world around us, starting with the cultural and material stories of our stuff. This approach opens up a range of opportunities for the introductory sociology classroom. To engage students from different academic levels, we provide examples from consumer culture that capture the attention of less prepared students, while prompting more advanced students to think deeply about sociological concepts and knowledge. Consumer culture is fundamentally rooted in a culture of individualism, and we use those examples to encourage students to reflect on the prioritization of the “self” in contemporary life. As we suggest in the introductory chapter, sociological thinking is fundamentally about *seeing the strange in the familiar*.

We believe that the best way to spark students' sociological imaginations is to invite them to see the strangeness of the familiar stuff in their everyday lives: the jeans they wear to class, the coffee they drink each morning, or the phones their professors tell them to put away during lectures.

Consumer culture is one of the most powerful tools in our teaching arsenal. We know from our work in the classroom that starting with the stuff of consumer culture is often seen as a more engaging entry point than seemingly dry academic concepts. In our experiences with students we have been struck by the powerful presence of consumer culture in their lives. They—we—live in a world where brands, products, and marketing pitches powerfully shape our sense of self, as well as our ideas about life possibilities, other people's identities, and the larger social world. Some of the most engaging stories shared in our classrooms are about the stuff students hope to buy one day, memories of stuff given and received, and the profound disappointment and frustration that can result from being denied access to desirable consumer experiences. These experiences are not simply personal shopping narratives, but entry points to the demanding work of sociological thinking. Using the stuff of consumer culture, this book encourages students to put sociological concepts and theories to work in order to make sense of the multiple contradictions of social life.



LEARNING THROUGH CONSUMER CULTURE: SEEING STUDENTS AS AUTHORITIES AND PROMOTING THE PRACTICE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING

When you read about the centrality of consumer culture in contemporary life, it might be tempting to dismiss these observations as the lament of curmudgeonly, left-leaning professors (“Ah, kids these days! All they care about is online shopping, Kardadshian selfies, and Mixed Martial Arts matches—why won't they listen to me talk about Weber?”). To be clear, when we talk of consumer culture, we are talking about a relationship that is bi-directional. When we engage with students on topics of consumer culture, we understand their social worlds better, we gain valuable insights into the social relations and processes that surround all of us, and most importantly, we feel better equipped to deliver sociological concepts that help students make sense of their lives. This strategy also signals the rich intellectual possibilities opened up for the *sociology instructor* through a dialogue on consumer culture. This dialogue is frequently surprising, enlightening, and challenging. Many students feel a

sense of authority in various areas of consumer culture, and they often enjoy sharing their knowledge with fellow students, and with us. One student has a vast understanding of sneaker culture, another is an expert on online make-up vloggers, while another can give an impromptu lecture on car modifications. Opening up the sociology classroom to discussion of these topics validates students' expertise on their own life-world. We, in turn, gain insight from the goods, services, and cultural expectations that shape their lives. (One of us—Josée—learned from her students how the word “basic” is associated with UGG boots, pumpkin spice Starbucks lattes, and white femininity. She also learned that masculine car owners talk about “modifying” their cars, and certainly do not “accessorize” them.) These insights provide us with valuable entry points to explore questions of agency (e.g. how much power do you have to resist an effective marketing pitch?); technological determinism (e.g. has your iPhone changed the world on its own?); as well as gender and social class (e.g. what car brands communicate wealth, masculinity, and status?).

By building on our students' insights into consumer culture, we believe that this book represents a distinct pedagogical innovation. While this text is designed to be a useful and comprehensive resource for undergraduate teaching, it does *not* present sociology as a laundry list of fixed ideas, concepts, and thinkers to be “deposited” in the empty heads of students. A critique of the “banking model” of education was famously theorized by Brazilian educational thinker, Paulo Freire, in the late 1960s, and remains highly relevant today. To illustrate, we can apply Freire's words to the traditional sociology approach to pedagogy: “the [sociologist] talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else [the instructor] expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students” (Freire 2014 [1968]: 71). Taking inspiration from Freire's critique of traditional education, this book is about using the stuff of everyday life to teach sociology in a way that is directly relevant to students' existential experience. Our thematic focus on consumer culture has the advantage of being deeply interesting to students because it encourages a commitment to understanding the life-world—the trials, tribulations, and pleasures of everyday life.

A focus on consumer culture is not only interesting for students; it is also (we would argue) pedagogically superior to more traditional approaches. By engaging students through their stuff, we seek to move beyond teaching *about* sociology (e.g. simply memorizing the names of scholars and theories), to teaching the *practice of sociological thinking*. Rather than simply describing what sociology *is*, this book teaches students what sociological thinking

can do. We encourage students to think sociologically by showing them how to use a wide range of the discipline’s most effective tools—tools that allow them to think critically about knowledge, rigorously evaluate evidence, and reflect on the meaning and structures that shape their lives. Put differently, this book is designed to get students to learn and *apply* sociological concepts and perspectives to the material goods and cultural products that surround them. Our focus on the stuff of everyday life has an added advantage: it sharply illustrates the dynamics of inequality, which are so central to our discipline. Consumer goods like toys, coffee, and iPhones present us with vivid examples of stratified labor systems, life choices, and consumption patterns. Linking sociology with the study of stuff can help students think through and make sense of the vast, multifaceted inequalities that characterize our social world.



THE POTENTIAL AND PROMISE: FLEXIBLE AND VISUAL, CRITICAL, AND ENGAGING

As is now clear, the book’s central premise is that we can understand sociology—and sociological thinking—by looking at everyday consumer stuff. While an academic text will never resemble a big-budget action movie or a Mac product launch, we wanted the book to reflect something of the spirit, vitality, and visual appeal of consumer culture itself. For that reason, each chapter begins with an accessible introduction that invites readers to imagine how they (or another student) might fit into the phenomena being discussed. To enhance this invitation, the text is deliberately designed to be visually appealing. Images are not put forward as “filler”, but as tools to elicit sociological insight or pose sociological questions. The book as a whole is designed to be colorful, attractive, engaged with various elements of youth culture, and affordable for students.

Most chapters are organized around a common item, like a phone or a car, but some chapters are centered on a larger consumer phenomenon, like shopping, weddings, or sports. A typical chapter begins with a consumer case study to engage and interest the student, and then proceeds to analyze the consumer item using key aspects of a sociological toolkit. Each chapter also profiles a prominent sociological method, and ends with suggestions for “active learning” exercises that encourage students to develop their sociological analysis further—outside the classroom, on the Internet, and through dialogue with fellow students.

A Guide to Sociological Concepts and Methods Covered

While we have deliberately crafted an unorthodox introduction to sociology, we have designed the book to make it as useful as possible for instructors aiming to build core sociological foundations in a single semester. The Guide to Sociological Concepts and Methods Covered on pages ii–iii of the book outlines the key lessons of each chapter as well as the core sociology concepts covered. This guide helps instructors identify the sociological theme, concepts, and method(s) covered in each chapter; it is designed to facilitate an easy transition to a course organized around central sociological subjects like theories of the self, gender, race, and class inequality. Practically speaking, instructors can scan the guide to identify the key ideas covered in each chapter, and then organize the syllabus—as well as individual lectures—accordingly. For students, an extensive glossary/index can be found in the back pages so they can refresh their memory on key sociological concepts as they come across them in various chapters.

How the Book is Organized

The chapters are organized into three sections. After an introductory chapter (chapter 1) that uses the case of jeans to introduce the sociological imagination, **Part I** of the book focuses on the basics of consumption: eating and drinking. These chapters introduce students to the sociological study of culture, norms, and values through the world of food (chapter 2), to theories of labor through the lens of the fast-food worker (chapter 3), and to studies of class and status through the lens of coffee culture (chapter 4). By the end of Part I we hope to have convinced students that everyday consumer items cannot be taken for granted, and hold significant potential for understanding the structure of the social world.

Having made the case for a sociological approach to the stuff of sustenance in Part I, the remaining sections explore how commodities connect to two key social dynamics: fitting into a group (Part II) and standing out from the crowd (Part III). More specifically, in **Part II**, we use the example of shopping (chapter 5) to introduce key sociological ideas about group life and social solidarity. We then explore processes of group membership, exclusion, and inequality using examples of sports (chapter 6), toys (chapter 7), weddings (chapter 8), and phones (chapter 9). Through these examples, we demonstrate how consumer culture marks some groups as more worthy than others, and

how social relationships stratified by race, gender, and sexuality are intertwined in our consumer dreams and practices. Part II makes clear that while individuals experience a desire for belonging on a personal level, the forces that enable individual belonging have broader social underpinnings.

In **Part III** we focus on the question of crafting a unique, individual identity—a focus that is kick-started with a chapter on brands and their relationship to sociological theories of the self (chapter 10). From there, we examine how individuals differentiate themselves based on their physical appearance (chapter 11), music (chapter 12), and modes of transport, such as cars (chapter 13). Broadly speaking, the chapters in Part III encourage students to reflect on the choices they make to add style, meaning, and distinction to their lives, while also encouraging reflection on how these lifestyle choices intersect with larger structural forces—such as institutional racism, beauty ideologies, and economic downturns. To supplement the 13 case-study chapters, we have also included a substantive appendix on sociological methods. This appendix uses a case study of advertising to introduce methods of data collection and analysis within sociology, and can be assigned as a chapter in its own right.



THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY AS A COMPREHENSIVE GOAL

Beyond the thematic focus on consumption, a key feature that sets this book apart from other introductory texts is the three “thinking frames” that unify sociological content across the chapters. From the outset, we made a deliberate decision not to organize chapters around the classic “trifecta” of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, although these are theoretical perspectives that we do introduce at different points in the book. Talking with colleagues and fellow instructors, it became clear that this “trifecta” did not reflect the way most working sociologists think about the discipline, or the core challenges involved with getting students to think sociologically. We instead designed the book to focus on a set of three core tensions or dualisms that are central to virtually all sociological thinking:

- 1) the relationship between *material* and *cultural* analyses of social life;
- 2) the tension between an analysis of social *structure* and individual *agency*; and
- 3) the different sorts of inquiries and insights made possible by *micro-sociological* and *macrosociological* research.

By highlighting these thinking frames within each chapter, we encourage students to engage in the practice of *sociological thinking*, rather than passively receiving sociological content. At the end of each chapter, we present a chart that relates the three thinking frames to the sociological case study and invites students to draw additional connections. This may involve reflecting upon the material and cultural dimensions of a commodity like jeans, questioning the extent to which individual consumer actions can promote social change, or investigating the relationship between broad economic patterns and everyday social interactions. These are challenging sociological questions, but the consumer case studies help to ground them in the context of everyday life.

When we have shared the ideas for this book with our colleagues—informally, at conferences, and through formal reviews—we have been encouraged by their enthusiastic responses. It seems that many instructors are ready for something new. While not every one of our classroom lectures is a home run, we are heartened by the positive response of students to this approach. Many of our undergraduates report that they enjoy the process of thinking about sociology by reflecting on the commodities and cultural practices of consumer society. They also tell us that moving from one piece of consumer culture to another each week works to keep things fresh. We hope that this book provides a resource to enliven the sociology classroom, and inspires students to look anew at the stuff of their everyday lives. We also hope that our experiment with reimagining the nature of the introductory sociology textbook is not only pedagogically effective, but also makes for a rewarding and spirited teaching experience.

INSTRUCTOR SUPPORT MATERIAL AVAILABLE WITH OUR BOOK



Ivanka Knezevic, a fellow Instructor in Sociology at the University of Toronto, has worked closely with us to produce a wealth of support material for teachers interested in assigning our book to their students. These include a complete range of test materials, both essay-type and objective, and prepared so they can easily be imported into any learning management system without negatively affecting their format. Other materials include an additional annotated list of web-links (beyond those already in our book), and suggestions for their effective use; a guide to the use of classroom response systems (“clickers”) for introductory sociology; unusual PowerPoint slides for each chapter; useful information on how to adapt our book’s use to various introductory course syllabi. We are very grateful to Ivanka.



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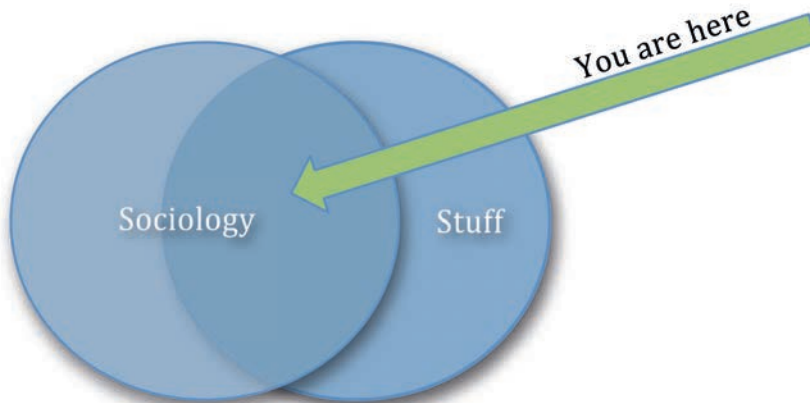
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PREFACE: FOR STUDENTS

This is NOT just a book about sociology. It is also not just a book about the stuff of consumer culture (e.g. toys and sneakers and cars and make-up). This is a book about the intersection of these two arenas, as you can see in the diagram below. More specifically, it is about *thinking sociologically* about the stuff of our everyday lives.

Venn Diagram of Sociology and the Stuff of Everyday Life



What can you expect in the pages that follow? We think (and hope) that you can expect to be reasonably entertained. Of course, reading sociology is not like the latest Jason Bourne movie or _____ (insert example appropriate to your life). However, we have deliberately written this book so that it will resonate with your everyday experiences in consumer culture. While many of us don't always know what we want to "be" when we grow up, many of us have dreams, or ideas about the next thing we will buy—or the thing we *wish* we could buy, if only we could afford it. This makes intuitive sense. Consumer culture often gives us ideas for short-term gratification ("Hello cheeseburger!"), while larger structural forces can make it difficult to know exactly how we will be making a living in 25 years. We hope to inspire you to think about why, when, or how you developed the consumer dreams and aversions you now

possess. At the same time, this book asks questions about who can finance common consumer lifestyles, who is excluded, and who are the people making the stuff more affluent consumers covet and collect. Just as the Disney movie *Toy Story* allowed us to imagine the secret lives of toys when people left the room, we hope that our book will encourage you to imagine the secret lives of commodities. How did all the stuff that surrounds us come to occupy space in our drawers, our homes, and in our collective consciousness? Why do we want the stuff we want, and how does it relate to our sense of self, as well as our role as a member of various social groups like families, communities, ethnic groups, and nations?

In each chapter, you will engage with a particular consumer item or phenomenon. We will ask you to first imagine why this consumer item is important, to think about how it relates to your life, or the lives of people around you. Then we will introduce some key sociological concepts, thinkers, theories, and research methods that allow you to understand this item better, and in the process, understand the social world more deeply. At the end of each chapter, we summarize the case study in relation to three key “thinking frames” that organize our analysis in each chapter. These thinking frames encourage you to explore the same topic from different angles—by focusing on its material or cultural dimensions (material/cultural); by emphasizing individual actors or structural forces (structure/agency); and by studying small-scale or large-scale social processes (micro/macro). At the end of the chapter we will also ask you to extend your knowledge of the consumer phenomenon—and the sociological theory—beyond the text. We provide you with questions to take your analysis outside the pages of this book, finding other examples of this consumer culture in the “real” world of everyday social relationships as well as the virtual or mediated worlds consumed via our televisions, cell phones, or laptops.

Many students have told us that introductory textbooks tend to be boring and out of touch. If you opened this book with that assumption, we hope to prove you wrong. We’re not saying that reading this book will be easy: in the pages ahead, we ask you to confront some difficult realities (like persistent racism, sexism, and worker exploitation), and ask you to think through some hard questions. But rather than feeling like a chore, we hope this challenge will provide you with new tools to see the world around you. This is a much more important skill than doing well on a test or passing a course (although those things are important, too). While reading this book, we hope you find yourself bringing a new perspective to everyday life, as you let your sociological

imagination run wild. What do we mean by sociological imagination, you ask? You'll have to read the next chapter to find out.

One last thing: When teaching sociology through the lens of consumer “stuff”, we have been continually amazed, surprised, shocked, and inspired by the stories that our students tell in class. As you read through this book, you will hear the voices of many of our students as they make their way through a world of exciting consumer goods and limited resources. While we know that you have plenty to do getting through your first sociology class, we invite you to share your stories with us, as well as your suggestions on how to make this book better.



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Chapter 1

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF YOUR JEANS: USING OUR STUFF TO DISCOVER SOCIOLOGY

INTRODUCING KEY CONCEPTS

*This introductory chapter uses the case study of blue jeans to introduce the concept of the **sociological imagination**. A sociological imagination allows you to connect private troubles to public issues and **social structures**. The overall philosophy of the book is explained: to use stuff from everyday consumer culture to explain key sociological concepts and ways of thinking. We also introduce the concepts of **capitalism** and **consumer culture**, which will be key reference points in the pages ahead. You will learn how the discipline of **sociology** grew up alongside capitalism, and how sociology can help us better understand the ups and downs of our lives within consumer culture. Finally, we introduce three thinking frames that will be used throughout the book, and which highlight three key modes of sociological thinking. Specifically, these frames sensitize us to 1) the **material** and **cultural** elements of social life; 2) the tension between social structures and human **agency**; 3) the importance of looking at the social world through small-scale (“**micro**”) perspectives as well as large-scale (“**macro**”) standpoints. Using these thinking frames, you will learn to think like a sociologist, and approach the commonplace “stuff” in your life with fresh eyes.*





1. INTRODUCTION: SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND GLOBAL BLUE JEANS

This may seem like a strange request, but take a moment to look down at your legs. Now look at the legs of the people around you. Chances are that you—or somebody close to you—is wearing a pair of jeans. Around the globe, more than half of the world’s people are wearing denim jeans on any given day (Miller 2010: 34). Marketers estimate that on average, humans wear jeans 3.5 days a week, and 62% of people state that they love or enjoy wearing jeans (Miller and Woodward 2012: 4). The average American woman owns eight pairs of jeans, and young girls own an average of 13 pairs (Snyder 2009: 116). Not only are jeans found on billions of bodies around the globe, but they have taken on a special, iconic place in our hearts. In a stylebook devoted to denim, the authors write: “Loving a pair of jeans is like loving a person. It takes time to find the perfect one and requires care and mending to make it last” (Current et al. 2014: 7).

How did denim come to be such a widely accepted and beloved uniform? Our favorite jeans feel personal and unique, especially as they are washed and faded, molded over time to match our body shape. At the same time, jeans are a mass-market good produced by myriad anonymous laborers and shipped from thousands of miles away. These everyday pants are often taken for granted, but when examined closely, jeans raise some interesting questions. For example, how did a piece of clothing that was historically developed to outfit miners, factory workers, and cowboys evolve into a high-fashion item that can be paired with heels or a suit jacket? Why are jeans a wardrobe classic for many, but also a key piece within changing fashion cycles that float in and out of style (e.g. skinny legs, flares, and overalls)? Why are some people content to buy basic, low-budget jeans, while others shell out hundreds of dollars for a pair of distressed designer jeans with holes in them?

To address these jean-related questions, we need more than a keen fashion sense. We need sociology. Sociology helps us find the meaning in the mundane. Rather than dismissing everyday trends like jean wearing as inconsequential, sociologists explore the meanings and motivations behind our daily decisions. Sociology pushes us, and also *trains* us to explore connections between our individual lives and broader social factors—that is, to develop a **sociological imagination***. This term was coined by C. Wright Mills, a 1950s sociologist who had a reputation for being a bit of a badass. (Mills rode a motorcycle, and he probably taught his classes wearing jeans.) For Mills, developing a

* **Boldface terms in the text are defined in the glossary/index at the back of the book.**

Variety of Jeans



Despite their origin as the preferred apparel of miners and factory workers, jeans have become a versatile item of clothing available in a wide variety of cuts, dyes, styles, and price points.

Source: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/Breathless/view>

sociological imagination allows us to see the connections between “private troubles” and “public issues”. Without a sociological imagination, we tend to reduce our private issues to *personal* failings and foibles: *I shop too much because I just love new stuff. I am unemployed because I am lazy.* When you have a sociological imagination, you are able to connect personal issues to larger social structures and historical context. You then start to ask questions like, *why* do you feel the way you do about your appearance? How are social groups formed and consolidated through clothing choices? How do the relations of capitalism and globalization shape the choices that are available to us as consumers?

Using our sociological imaginations, we can better appreciate the multiple meanings underlying everyday clothing choices, and also identify the social significance of jean wearing. In one jean-focused study, researchers Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward spent time with people in London, England, asking questions about their everyday lives and clothing habits (Miller and Woodward 2012). These researchers discovered that jeans play a paradoxical role in many people's lives. Wearing jeans allow people to feel "ordinary"—like an average person who fits in with the crowd. At the same time, jeans are often used to make a person feel special and unique; they might buy a new pair of jeans for a special occasion, or feel proud of their appearance in a particular pair of jeans. In other words, the meaning behind jeans is incredibly versatile, allowing the wearer to feel both part of the group, but also like a unique individual—a finding that goes a long way to explaining jeans' widespread popularity. This finding was especially poignant for people who had immigrated to the United Kingdom (UK), and wrestled to feel at home in a new land. For example, Miller and Woodward talked to a Sri-Lankan born mother and her teenage daughter about their clothing choices. For the mother, wearing fashionable skinny jeans was a way to feel connected to London fashions as well as her teenage daughter's youthful spirit; jeans allowed her to craft a new identity distinct from her traditional upbringing where she was expected to wear a sari (Miller and Woodward 2012: 34–5). Of course, not every immigrant to London wears skinny jeans, and the exceptions can be as revealing as the jean-wearing norm. Another woman in Miller and Woodward's research study, Fatima, eventually stopped wearing jeans after she was harshly criticized by her family (her mother, her brother, and finally her husband) for being "too big", and told "you look really bad in them". These two examples reveal that jeans are a way for people to feel included *and* excluded in social life. Jeans may seem simple and commonplace, but when approached with a sociological imagination, they reveal a great deal about the meanings and power relations underlying everyday life.

The meaning of jean-wearing is not the only interesting factor here: sociology can also help us think about how we come to *own* jeans in the first place. Today, very few people have experience sewing their own jeans, let alone weaving their own cloth. To get jeans, most people need to go shopping. To understand how jeans end up on store shelves requires a look at their complex global backstory. The design process may take place in Italy, the cotton may come from Turkey, the jeans may be assembled in China, and the "distressed" look may be created by hand in a Mexican factory. Jeans are the consummate globetrotters. Cotton thread is sourced from around the world and mixed

LA Jeans

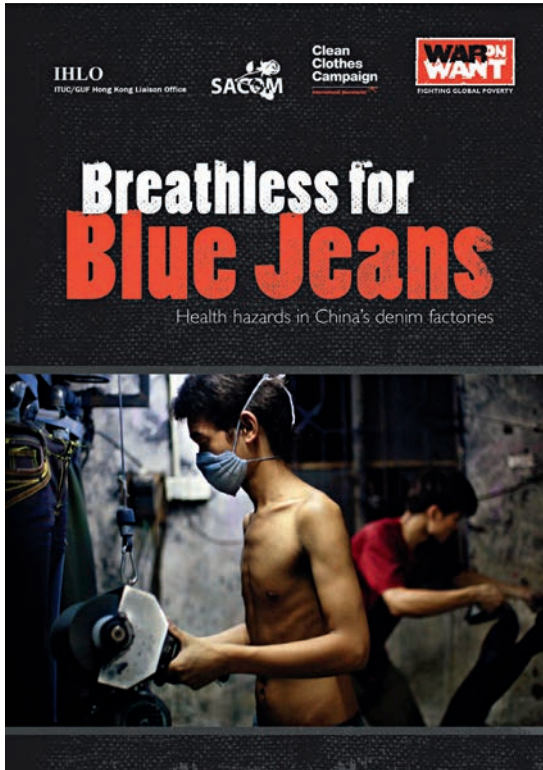


While most jeans are made outside North America in countries like China and Mexico, many brands of more expensive designer jeans are manufactured in the United States. Pictured here are workers inspecting jeans in the quality control room at J Brand jeans factory in downtown Los Angeles.

Source: APimages.com # 653631180108

together to make a consistent product over time; a single foot of thread might contain fiber from the United States, Azerbaijan, India, Turkey, and Pakistan (Snyder 2009: 46). As with other globally produced goods, the trend is for the cheapest jeans to be made in the cheapest labor environment, often in conditions where workers put in long hours and earn very low wages. Premium jeans that cost \$200 are more likely to be manufactured in the United States or Japan; in contrast, a pair of moderately priced jeans is more likely to be made in China. One region of China, Guangdong, makes half of the world's jeans, and labor activists have criticized these factories for alarmingly long hours, low wages, and dangerous working conditions (CCC 2013).

Distressed Jeans by Distressed Workers



A report on denim manufacturing in China suggests that many factories use a technique of “sandblasting” (firing sand onto denim under high pressure) to create a distressed look, even though most Western brands banned sandblasting because it causes a deadly lung disease called silicosis.

Source: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/Breathless/view>

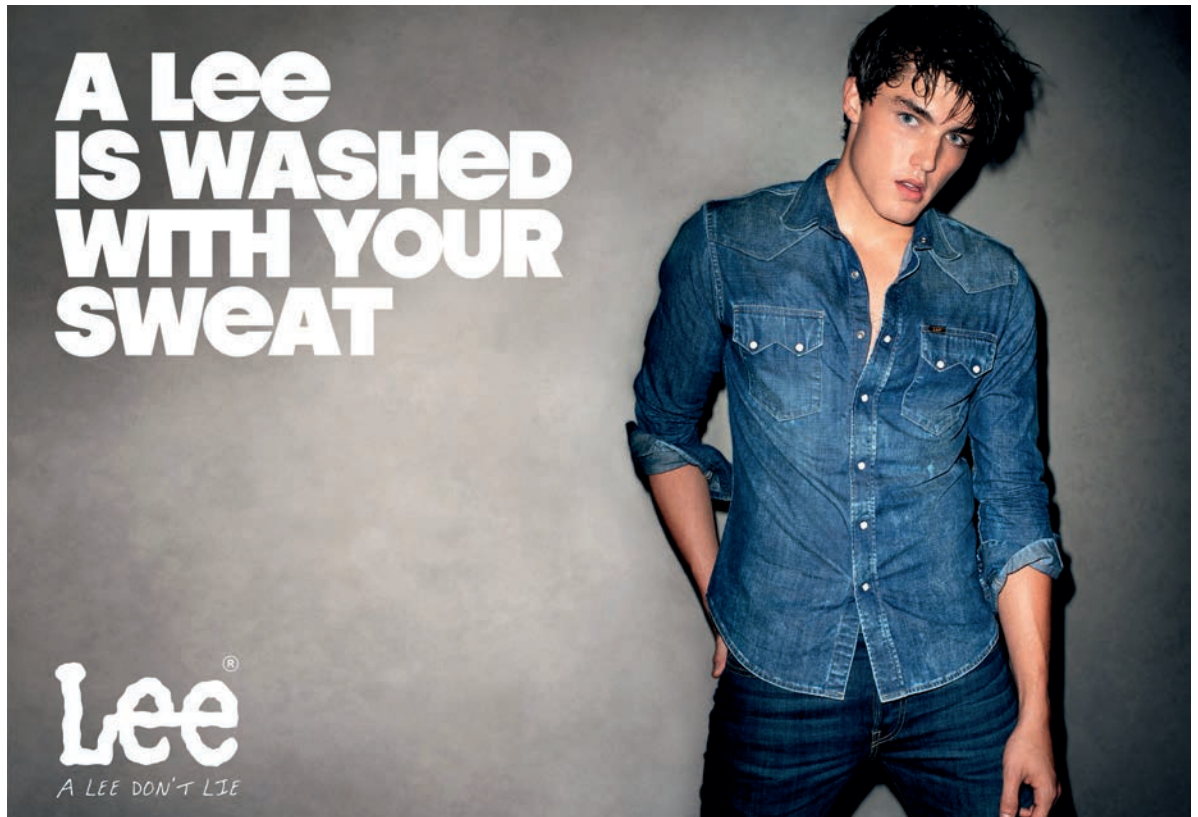
Once you have purchased your jeans, you may feel good in them for a while, but eventually, you may wonder if your jeans are looking a little dated. Living in our contemporary consumer culture, we often feel pressure to buy something new—to upgrade our worn-in jeans with a fresh new pair. If your old jeans feel dull, you have options for new jeans that are colored (or white for summer), ripped, skinny, flared, boyfriend-style, made with raw denim, or emblazoned with a high-status logo like Diesel, Nudie or 7 For All Mankind. When you live in a capitalist economy, you are surrounded by opportunities to buy something new, and it is often difficult to be content with your old, familiar stuff. This can be irritating at times—especially if you feel like you are spending money just to stay on top of trends—and create stress for those on a limited budget. At the same time, shopping can sometimes feel intensely meaningful, even liberating. One Italian sociologist who interviewed teenagers in Milan found that people formed an emotional relationship to their jeans; teens talked about loving their jeans, not wanting to throw them out even when they were no longer wearable, as their jeans helped them to feel physically attractive (Sassatelli 2011). From an early age, many of us feel that our stuff says something about who we are and what matters to us. While we go to stores to purchase life’s necessities—clothing to cover our body, and food to fuel our actions—most of us don’t shop *only* for necessities. We often find ourselves shopping for items that give us pleasure and avenues for self-expression, even though it’s hard to pinpoint exactly when or how certain consumer items came to feel pleasurable and satisfying. The norms and desires of consumer culture often get into our heads in subtle, relatively unconscious ways. We may find ourselves buying things we once thought ridiculous, unnecessary, or unfashionable. One student described it to us this way:

Often I am completely unaware of why I like something or why I have grown to like it after having rejected it. For example, I disliked skinny jeans when they first became an important fashion piece, and now I can't imagine my wardrobe without them.

(Diana, Colombian-Canadian)

How can we mock things like skinny (or high-waisted) jeans one day, and then find ourselves thinking of these items as basic necessities the next? More broadly, how do we make sense of shopping decisions that feel personal, but clearly involve forces larger than ourselves?

A Lee is Washed with Your Sweat



Jeans makers can encourage the idea that a pair of jeans is an intensely personal and meaningful item—and that their purchase is an act of self-expression—through marketing. Consider this advertisement for Lee jeans, suggesting an intimate, even biological connection between jeans and wearer.

Source: <http://modenews.zalando.fr/a-lee-is-washed-with-your-sweat/>

These kinds of questions are the *stuff* that makes up this book. Examining a wide range of “stuff” from consumer culture—from jeans to cars to iPhones to wedding dresses—we use sociological tools to break down and explain key elements of social life. Throughout the book, we show how sociology can help us think critically about the taken-for-granted features of our everyday environment. Instead of assuming that consumer society is a fixed, inevitable, immutable thing, we will visit the “sausage factory” and see how social life is constructed with and *through* our stuff. Sociology seeks to better understand the forces that shape our everyday lives. Sociologists are interested in individuals, but they—*we*—are also interested in how individuals come together: as workers, communities, consumers, and citizens. In the pages that follow, we shed light on how individuals fit into the world of consumer culture and introduce core sociological tools that can help us in this task.

While this book focuses on the everyday stuff of consumer culture (like jeans) to orient our sociological endeavor, we want to be clear that this is not a trivial or superficial pursuit. The relatively “fun”, expressive dimensions of consumer culture are deeply enmeshed in serious social problems. Consider the ecological and social exploitation associated with cotton farming, the fiber used to make denim. In developing countries, women mainly pick cotton by hand for low wages; most poor countries that grow cotton have no hope of alleviating poverty by exporting cotton, since the real money is made producing higher-value products, like finished pairs of jeans (Snyder 2009: 41). One ton of high-quality cotton earns a farmer in Azerbaijan about US \$300, a price so low that most farmers don’t make enough to survive from their land (Snyder 2009: 61, 48). Growing cotton is labor, chemical, and water intensive. For example, even though cotton is grown on a small fraction of the world’s arable land (3%), this crop consumes one quarter of the world’s pesticides (Snyder 2009: 73). Working with cotton is also dangerous, and carries the risk of byssinosis (“brown lung disease”), a condition caused by inhaling cotton dust and all the things it contains (e.g. pesticides, bacteria, fungi) (Snyder 2009: 63). Once cotton is transformed into jeans, the social problems do not dissipate, especially when we consider the extremely low wages experienced by the 30–40 million people employed in the global garment industry (Snyder 2009: 22, 28). Industry analysts suggest that denim products are consistently contaminated with toxic chemicals—chemicals that come from harmful dyes as well as chemically rich treatments that are used to give jeans a “distressed” look (Snyder 2009: 134–5).

When we turn our analytical lens closer to home, private troubles remain connected to public issues. Consider, for example, the punishing emotional

impact for those who struggle to conform to extreme body standards displayed on billboards for designer jeans. Or consider the consequences for people who feel pressured to make consumer purchases they cannot afford. The average indebted person in the US has a \$15,600 balance on their credit card (Johnston 2015). While it is tempting to blame individuals for their problems (like credit card debt), a sociological perspective cues us to examine the social factors underlying these trends. For example, consider the recent real-estate crisis; at the peak of the crisis in 2010, one in forty-five properties received a foreclosure filing (RealtyTrac 2010). When we look at the crisis through a sociological lens, we see that many people lost their homes not because of poor consumer choices, but in response to a host of complex, but critical systemic factors, like a poorly regulated mortgage market and reduced regulations on US financial institutions.

Making connections between the “personal” world of individuals’ lives, and the “public” world of institutional forces like states, markets, and bureaucracy is not always easy—particularly in a culture that places a strong emphasis on the individual. When people can’t pay their mortgage and lose their homes, they typically see their lack of housing as a *personal* failure, and wonder what they could have done differently. Tragically, suicide rates increased along with foreclosure rates during the real-estate crisis (Houle and Light 2014). Indeed, we experience our own lives as deeply personal; we make our own choices, form relationships with others, and negotiate life challenges. When we go shopping, it usually feels like those decisions are ours, and ours alone. As noted sociologist and consumer culture expert Sharon Zukin writes, “there is no central authority compelling us to shop” (2004: 17). Yet shop we do. The sociological imagination doesn’t deny the existence of individual choice, but pushes us to look at how outside forces contribute to our situation and life outcomes. This is precisely why we emphasize the term *imagination*—because it takes some creative effort to connect the dots between our personal experiences and the institutional forces like culture, education, mass media, and economy that envelop our daily lives. Sociology pushes us beyond our own individual perspective toward a *systematic* understanding of society. By seeing the world sociologically, we come to see patterns in the way that society is organized. This helps us to understand how individual lives are powerfully shaped by social factors. It also helps us see how simple decisions—like wearing jeans—can be better understood through sociological thinking.