

### Course Description

It's practically a cliché to say that we live in a “consumer culture,” an observation that is often shorthand for saying that our society has become increasingly superficial and homogenized, or that we have wasted the leisure time and wealth that our modern economy provides for some members of our society. In this course we will look deeper at critiques of consumer culture, as well as at those who praise and defend it, and discover what assumptions about society and ideals of the “good life” underlie different ideological approaches to making sense of our culture of consumption. We will consider how consumer goods are used as a form of communication, and further, how our systems of media and communication are impacted by the dominance of commercial interests in our culture.

The goals of this course are:

- To contextualize and make contemporary news and debates about consumer culture more meaningful. Critiques of consumer culture often put into question whether our society, as it's currently configured, is healthy or organized to help us achieve the “good life.” Such fundamental questions about our culture are inherently worth considering.
- To help us reflect on and understand our own experience with consumption and “consumer culture,” and give us additional preparation for the lifetime of consumption ahead of us.
- To give some preparation and useful knowledge for different careers in which understanding aspects of consumer culture, such as consumer behavior and preferences, the relationship between consumer culture and the media, and cycles of fashion will be an asset.
- To have opportunities to practice and improve upon transferable skills including reading critically, writing, delivering a presentation, and teamwork.

The course consists of four thematic units:

UNIT 1: THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF CONSUMER CULTURE

UNIT 2: FASHION AND COMMUNICATING IDENTITY: ENGINES OF CONSUMER CULTURE

UNIT 3: COMMODIFICATION OF DAILY LIFE

UNIT 4: CONSUMER CULTURE AND GLOBALIZATION

### **Course Requirements**

#### ***Class Participation*** (10%)

Participation will be evaluated on an ongoing basis, and includes quality and quantity (and enthusiasm!) of contributions to class discussions, and participation in classroom activities, which may include in-class writing or group tasks that are then handed in. For students who are less comfortable contributing to in-class discussion, there will be opportunities to contribute online on the class website. Students will receive feedback on their participation at the midterm point.

#### ***Quizzes*** (10%)

There will be 13 unannounced, in-class quizzes throughout the semester, usually administered at the beginning of class. Quizzes will be made up of two or three true or false, multiple choice, or short open-ended questions. The questions will not be difficult, but will be designed to reward those who have done the reading and made a good-faith attempt to understand it. Each quiz will count for 1% of your final grade. Quizzes count for 10% of the final grade, so students can drop their bottom three quiz grades or miss up to three quizzes without losing marks. There will be no make-up quizzes, but any student who misses more than three quizzes for a verifiable reason such as an extended illness can make an alternative arrangement with the instructor.

#### ***Group Project & Presentation*** (20%)

There are many interesting topics that could not fit into the reading assignments in a single semester. To broaden the topics and viewpoints that we are exposed to in class, small groups will report on a recent book relevant to the topic of consumer culture. This project includes the presentation itself and a written report (3-4 pages, double-spaced) answering questions provided by the instructor. The books chosen for review are either academic books that are quite accessible, or books written for a general readership that are provocative and thoroughly researched. The breakdown for this assignment is as follows:

- 15 minute presentation (timed) with 5 minutes for questions. (10%)
- Written assignment, due the day of the group's presentation. (10%)

**Assignments** (35%)

Each unit will have a take-home assignment, based on the readings, lectures, and materials introduced in class-time (such as films). The assignments should be completed independently, unless otherwise instructed. They will ask you to synthesize material, compare and contrast readings, and/or apply class material to new examples, either in short or long answer format.

**Final (Take-home)** (25%)

The final take-home exam will draw mainly from the last two units of the class. It will consist of short answer and essay questions.

**Readings**

There is one required text, The Consumer Society Reader edited by Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt. It is available at the Jeffrey Amherst Bookstore in downtown Amherst.

The rest of the readings are on electronic reserve through the W.E.B. DuBois Library. These readings have been placed on electronic reserve, rather than collated into a coursepack, with your pocketbooks in mind. However, they are meant to be read just as closely as if they were printed on paper. If necessary, you may want to print the readings off in order to mark them up or bring them to class.

Occasionally websites or articles of interest may be posted on the class website on WebCT. Documents relevant to the class, such as the syllabus and instructions for assignments, will also be posted there.

The course reading *averages* about 35 pages per week, but the *range* is from 10 pages to 57 pages per week. This is a more than reasonable amount for a 300 level class, but may require you to plan ahead and budget your time to make sure you complete the reading in weeks with more pages than average assigned.

**Grading**

Class Participation <i>(Contribution to discussions in class and online, Participation in class activities)</i>	10%
Quizzes	10%
Group Presentation and Report on Book	20%
Take-home Assignments	35%
Take-home Final	25%
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TOTAL	100%

Students will have the opportunity to evaluate the course and the instructor at midterm and the end of the class.

## Policies

**Plagiarism:** If you fail to cite or identify the origin of a direct quote or of an idea that you have paraphrased, then you are plagiarizing. Plagiarism can result in consequences varying from a warning to a more formal punishment through the university, including failing the class.

**Style for Assignments** Students will be asked to cite and reference their assignments in the APA (American Psychological Association) style, which will be reviewed in class. Standard instructions for class assignments include: identifying assignments with student numbers rather than names, stapling, double-spacing, and using 12 point font.

**Late Assignments:** For each day that a paper is late, the student will receive a 5% reduction in the total score. Papers will not be accepted more than 7 days after the assignment was originally due, unless there are extenuating circumstances (such as an illness that can be documented), in which case the student and instructor will come to an agreement together.

**Students with Disabilities:** Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with documented disabilities, with the advice and assistance of the appropriate services on campus.

**Syllabus Changes:** This syllabus is a contract between the professor and the students. However, it is subject to change with sufficient notice to students.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

Thursday, January 27th

- Introduction

### UNIT 1: THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF CONSUMER CULTURE

Tuesday, February 1st

- Douglas B. Holt and Juliet B. Schor. "Do Americans Consume Too Much?" Reader pp.vii-x.
- Goodman & Cohen, pp.5-24

Thursday, February 3rd

- John Kenneth Galbraith. "The Dependence Effect." Reader, pp.20-25.
- Juliet Schor. "Towards a New Politics of Consumption." Reader, pp.446-462.

Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup> (Last day of Drop & Add)

- Kalle Lasn. "Culture Jamming." Reader, pp.414-432.
- James Twitchell. "Two Cheers for Materialism." Reader, pp.281-290.
- Assignment #1 assigned

### UNIT 2: FASHION AND COMMUNICATING IDENTITY: ENGINES OF CONSUMER CULTURE

Thursday, February 10th

- Thorstein Veblen. "Conspicuous Consumption." Reader, pp.187-204

Tuesday, February 15th

- Malcolm Gladwell. "The Coolhunt." Reader, pp.360-374.
- Alex Kotlowitz. "False Connections." Reader, pp.253-258.

Thursday, February 17th

- Thomas Frank. "Advertising as Cultural Criticism: Bill Bernbach versus the Mass Society." Reader, pp.375-391.
- Assignment #1 Due

Tuesday, February 22nd

- BOOK REPORT: Bobos in Paradise (David Brooks)
- FILM CLIPS: High Fidelity, Ghost World

Thursday, February 24th

- BOOK REPORT: Why We Buy (Paco Underhill)
- Malcolm Gladwell, The Science of Shopping, The New Yorker, Nov.4, 1996, pp.66-75.

Tuesday, March 1st

*Consumption and Social Class*

- Elizabeth Chin, Purchasing Power, pp.1-6, 103-111
- Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed, pp.11-16, 25-34

Thursday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>

- BOOK REPORT: Substance of Style (Virginia Postrel)
- Douglas B. Holt. “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” Reader, pp.212-222.

Tuesday, March 8th

- Douglas B. Holt. “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” Reader, pp.222-248.

Thursday, March 10th

- BOOK REPORT: Why People Buy Things They Don’t Need (Pamela Danziger)
- Robert D. Manning, Credit Card Nation, pp.1-30 (Selections to be announced)

SPRING BREAK!!!

Tuesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> (the 23<sup>rd</sup> is the last day to drop with a W)

- TBA

Thursday, March 24th

*Gender, Sexuality, and Consumption*

- BOOK REPORT: Hope in a Jar (Kathy Peiss)
- Betty Friedan. “The Sexual Sell.” From Reader, pp.26-46.

Tuesday, March 29th

- Mark Simpson. MetroDaddy Speaks!?” Salon.com. 5 January, 2004.  
<http://marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/metrodaddyspeaks.html>
- Assignment #2 assigned

### UNIT 3: COMMODIFICATION OF DAILY LIFE

Thursday, March 31st

*The Politics of Consumer Choice*

- BOOK REPORT: The Paradox of Choice
- Elizabeth Cohen, "Citizens and Consumers in the United States in the Century of Mass Consumption." From The Politics of Consumption, (Eds. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton), pp.203-221).

Tuesday, April 5th

*The Commodity Frontier*

- BOOK REPORT: Consuming Kids (Susan Linn)
- Arlie Russell Hochschild, "The Commodity Frontier." From The Commercialization of Intimate Life, pp.30-44.

Thursday, April 7th

- BOOK REPORT: Medicine Moves to the Mall (Sloane & Sloane)
- Nancy Tomes, "An Undesired Necessity: The Commodification of Medical Service in the Interwar United States," in Commodifying Everything (Ed. Susan Strasser) pp.97-114.
- Assignment #2 Due

Tuesday, April 12th

- BOOK REPORT: Fast Food Nation (Eric Schlosser)
- Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." Reader, Selections from pp.331-340.

Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup>

*Corporate Sponsorship and Branding*

- Naomi Klein. The Branding of Learning, from No Logo, pp.86-105

Tuesday, April 19<sup>th</sup>

- BOOK REPORT: Branded Nation (James Twitchell)
- Matthew P. McAllister, "College Bowl Sponsorship and the Increased Commercialization of Amateur Sports." Critical Studies in Media Communication, Vol.15 (1998): 357-381.

Thursday, April 21<sup>st</sup> NO CLASS – MONDAY SCHEDULE IS FOLLOWED

Tuesday, April 26th

- Matthew P. McAllister, “From Flick to Flack: The Increased Emphasis on Marketing by Media Entertainment Corporations,” in Critical Studies in Media Commercialism, Andersen, Robin and Strate, Lance (Eds.), pp.101-122.
- Ted Turner, “My Beef with Big Media,” Alternet.org.
- Assignment #3 assigned

#### UNIT 4: CONSUMER CULTURE AND GLOBALIZATION

Thursday, April 28<sup>th</sup>

- BOOK REPORT: Michael Jordan and Global Capitalism (Walter LaFeber)
- Constance Classen and David Howes, “Epilogue,” from Cross-Cultural Consumption, pp.178-193.

Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>

- TBA

Thursday, May 5<sup>th</sup>

- BOOK REPORT: In Sam We Trust (Bob Ortega)
- Katherine Fry. “Starbucks Coffee: Cultivating and Selling the Postmodern Brew,” in Critical Studies in Media Commercialism, Andersen, Robin and Strate, Lance (Eds.), pp.173-185.
- Assignment #3 Due

Tuesday, May 10<sup>th</sup>

- Kim Fellner, “The Starbucks Paradox,” Alternet.org
- Final assignment distributed (due Wednesday, May 18<sup>th</sup>)

Thursday, May 12<sup>th</sup>

- Final wrap-up

## Book Report Options

Medicine Moves to the Mall by David C. Sloane & Beverlie C. Sloane (2003)

Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture by Kathy Peiss (1998)

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal by Eric Schlosser (2001)

Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There by David Brooks (2001)

In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and Wal-mart, the world's most powerful retailer, by Bob Ortega (2000)

Why People Buy Things They Don't Need by Pamela N. Danziger (2004)

Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism by Walter LaFeber (1999)

The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less by Barry Schwartz (2004)

Consuming Kids : The Hostile Takeover of Childhood by Susan Linn (2004).

Branded Nation : The Marketing of Megachurch, College, Inc., and Museumworld by James Twitchell (2004).

The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness by Virginia Postrel (2003)

Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping by Paco Underhill (1999)

Important Dates for Comm 397L Spring 2005– Consumer Culture

Thursday, January 27th  
Tuesday, February 1st  
Thursday, February 3rd  
Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup> (Last day of Drop & Add) - Assignment #1 assigned  
Thursday, February 10th  
Tuesday, February 15th  
Thursday, February 17<sup>th</sup> - Assignment #1 Due  
Tuesday, February 22nd  
Thursday, February 24th  
Tuesday, March 1st  
Thursday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Tuesday, March 8th  
Thursday, March 10<sup>th</sup>  
SPRING BREAK!!!  
Tuesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> (the 23<sup>rd</sup> is the last day to drop with a W)  
Thursday, March 24th  
Tuesday, March 29<sup>th</sup> - Assignment #2 assigned  
Thursday, March 31st  
Tuesday, April 5th  
Thursday, April 7<sup>th</sup> - Assignment #2 Due  
Tuesday, April 12th  
Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup>  
Tuesday, April 19<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, April 21<sup>st</sup> NO CLASS – MONDAY SCHEDULE IS FOLLOWED  
Tuesday, April 26<sup>th</sup> - Assignment #3 assigned  
Thursday, April 28<sup>th</sup>  
Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Thursday, May 5<sup>th</sup> - Assignment #3 Due  
Tuesday, May 10<sup>th</sup> – Final assignment distributed  
Thursday, May 12th

FINAL DUE WEDNESDAY, MAY 18TH