The Culture of Consumption

Contemporary society is frequently characterized as a consumer society, a place where material goods and the process of accumulating those goods have become extremely important for individuals and the larger culture. This course will examine the development and significance of a culture of consumption. It will pay particular attention to the ongoing debate over whether consumption is a diversion from pressing social problems or a legitimate expression of popular pleasure. We will also consider how the current economic crisis may be affecting consumer culture. In the first few weeks of the course, we will examine the evolution of consumer society and different theoretical perspectives that have been developed to explain consumer culture. Following that, we look at the rise of commercialized leisure and the ways in which consumption patterns became marked by class and gender. The course will then lead into the contemporary era by exploring the significance of advertising and marketing for consumer culture. Finally, we will study how consumer culture gets expressed in various realms of everyday life.

The TAs for this course are Sara Chaganti (schagant@brandeis.edu) and Roberto (Tito) Soto-Carrión (rsc@brandeis.edu). Their office hours will be announced in class.

Learning Goals

Students who complete this course will:

1. Gain an understanding of the historical development of consumer culture.
2. Become familiar with different theoretical perspectives on consumption and consumer society.
3. Critically evaluate the social meanings attached to consumption.
4. Explore how a culture of consumption affects various dimensions of everyday life.

Requirements

Students are expected to keep up with the readings and attend class regularly. You are also strongly encouraged to participate in class discussions, though I recognize it can be difficult in a class of this size. Your written work will consist of two short papers covering readings and other course material, and a take-home final exam consisting of essay questions.

I expect courtesy in the classroom. That means arriving to class on time, turning cell phones off before class begins, no texting, and no side conversations. Please recognize how distracting these latter behaviors are for your classmates and your instructor. If you bring food or drink to class, remember to clean up after yourself.

My policy on laptops is that they should be used only for class-related purposes. Other uses are highly distracting for you, for me, and for those sitting around you. If we notice you reading...
email, checking Facebook, watching a broadcast or anything else not related to class, we will call you on it. If these behaviors become a persistent problem, then laptops will be prohibited in class.

**Evaluation**

First short paper (4-5 pages) 25%
Second short paper (5-6 pages) 35%
Take-home final 40%

Students are expected to uphold standards of academic integrity. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person without proper acknowledgement of that source. This means that you must use references and, where appropriate, quotation marks to indicate the source of any phrases, sentences, or ideas not your own -- whether they are found in written materials or on the Internet, and whether they are created by a published author, another student, or your parent. Violations of University policies on academic integrity may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, and could end in suspension from the University. Students with questions about standards of academic integrity are advised to consult Section 4 of Rights and Responsibilities from the Brandeis Student Handbook and/or speak to me. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, you must ask for clarification.

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, you should contact me, and present your letter of accommodation, as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services at 736-3470 (brodgers@brandeis.edu). Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

The following books are available for purchase from the university bookstore:


These books are also on reserve at the main library.

The readings for weeks 1-4 are on the Latte site for this class. Look at the section titled "Readings."

All other readings are contained in a custom course packet. Information on how to purchase this will be announced in class.

There is also an area on Latte with links to organizations and other resources related to issues we will be discussing in class. This may be useful for those who would like to pursue these issues further, either during the course or sometime in the future. I may be adding to this site as the course progresses, so you may want to check it periodically.
Course Schedule

week 1-2
Aug 30-Sep 5

Introduction


week 2-3
Sep 6-13

Origins of Consumer Society


week 4-5
Sep 19-24

Theoretical Perspectives on Consumption


week 5-6
Sep 27-Oct 4

What Does the Consumer Want? Motives and Goals


---

**week 7  
Oct 9-11**

**Department Stores: Palaces of Consumption**


first short paper due Thursday, October 11th

---

**week 8  
Oct 15-18**

**The Growth of Commercialized Leisure**


---

**week 9  
Oct 22-25**

**Cold War Consumerism**


---

**week 10  
Oct 29-Nov 1**

**Advertising: Creating New Art or Creating New Needs?**


week 11
Nov 5-8

Love and Romance for Sale


---

week 12
Nov 12-15

Children: Learning Consumer Culture


toy show & tell

---

week 13-14
Nov 19-26

Fashion: Class, Style, and Identity


second short paper due Monday, November 19th
Theme Parks and Themed Environments


From Shopping Malls to E-Commerce


Education: Consumers in the Classroom


Take-home final due Tuesday, December 18th