

**Sociology 495**  
**Culture & Consumption**  
Spring 2008

Professor: Lyn Macgregor  
Office: SS 303  
Phone: 243-5863

Office Hours: M & W, 10:00-12:00  
Email: [lyn.macgregor@umontana.edu](mailto:lyn.macgregor@umontana.edu)

Why do we buy the things we buy? What is “consumer culture”? Is consumer culture destructive? Productive? Can individuals withdraw from it if they so choose?

Contemporary society is frequently characterized as a consumer society, in which significant portions of individuals’ lives are organized around the processes of accumulating goods, purchasing services, and earning money to make these purchases. This course examines the significance of consumer culture and the practices it entails. This is a subject with which we all have significant experience. We will be using course material largely to analyze our own experiences in consumer culture—to consider critically how we create consumer society through our practices, and how consumer society shapes us.

**Readings**

This course will depend heavily on student discussion, so everyone must complete the assigned readings before coming to class. There are two required texts for the course, both of which are available (for purchase!) at the University Bookstore. A handful of readings will be posted on the course Blackboard (BB).

Schor, Juliet and Douglas Holt, eds. (2000) *The Consumer Society Reader*. New York: The New Press. (S&H)

Zukin, Sharon. (2005) *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*. New York: Routledge. (Z)

Students may choose the credit/no credit grading option for this course, though Sociology majors who want the course to count toward their major credits must take it for a grade. I will include -/+ grades in the course, per the grading policy in the University course catalog.

**Assignments (Total possible points = 170)**

*Class Discussions*—30 points

Each class discussion will be led by students working either alone or in small groups. Students will take complete responsibility for the class—including making sure that important points of the readings are highlighted. These class discussions should be creative! Students may design activities or games, make movies, put together power point presentations, or anything else. Presenting students are highly encouraged not only to do the assigned readings for the day, but to do additional research as well, both in scholarly sources and/or in news archives. Presentations will be evaluated on how well the discussion engaged the class, how creative it was, and how

well it engaged the relevant material. Students working in groups will also evaluate each others' contributions to the presentations.

*Journal Entries*—seven entries, 10 points each

Each student will complete at least seven of ten journal entry assignments (assignments are listed on the last page of the syllabus). Each entry should be 4-5 typed, double-spaced pages. You are more than welcome to add images or other artifacts (for that scrapbooky feel!) if you'd like. Journals will be collected twice during the semester. You should have completed at least three entries by the first due date. I recommend you use a loose-leaf or some other kind of binder to collect your entries and accompanying materials in one place.

*Research Analysis Paper*—50 points

Each student will complete a research project which analyzes an aspect of consumer culture. These papers should draw explicitly on the ideas of the sociologists and theorists we cover this semester. Papers should be roughly 12-15 pages in length, double-spaced. Below are some possible ideas—you need not choose one of these. Feel free to design a topic of your own.

\*The Commodification of Public Space: Corporate Advertising in Museums (or schools, or sports arenas, public transportation...)

\*Global Consumerism: The Effect of Starbucks (or any other global chain) on Local Culture in (Some Country)

\*Selling Gender Ideologies: An Analysis of Toys (or video games, or board games, or teen magazines, or baby clothing...)

\*Buy a Yellow Ribbon: Commodifying Patriotism

\*Consumer Culture & the Environment: the Paradox of Eco-Tourism

\*How Fair is Fair Trade?: A Case Study of (Insert Fair Trade Product Here)

\*Commodifying Ethnicity: Selling Irishness in Butte (or another ethnicity in some other context)

\*Selling Bodies: An Analysis of Ads Aimed at Men & Women

\*"It's Fun to Shop!" Deconstructing Materialism in Children's Magazines (or toys, or games...)

\*Recall Nation: Consumer Advocates and the Government Regulation of (Some kind of product)

\* The Voluntary Simplicity Movement (or other "anti-materialist" efforts or movements)

\* Bottled Water: The Creation of a New Consumer "Need"

\*Marketing & Racial Identity: The Case of (Insert Product or Brand)

\*Your Special Day: Consuming the Wedding

\*Body as Product: The Rise of Performance Enhancing Drugs in Professional Baseball

To ensure that students are choosing feasible topics and making reasonable progress on these papers, two intermediate assignments will be collected and graded early in the semester:

*Library Assignment* (5 points): students will conduct library research using any relevant library resources to determine the feasibility of particular research topics. Students must turn in a typed summary of the kinds of resources available on their topics, including a brief discussion of how available resources are shaping your choice of topic (3-4 pages).

*Prospectus* (5 points): This typed, 2-3 page statement articulates your research question, what you have accomplished so far, and the next steps you will take as you work toward

completing your research paper. The topic area statement should demonstrate that you have settled on a feasible topic. This is not the time to say, “Well, I had a great idea but it didn’t work out because I can’t find any information.” By the time the topic area statement is due, you should be far enough along to be able to formulate a research question, and probably have a general idea of the answer to it.

I will not require you to turn in a preliminary draft of the research paper. It is your responsibility to seek help well in advance of the due date should you need it, and to turn in a paper that is polished and well-written (you can view a general evaluation rubric on the course Blackboard). I encourage students to get feedback on their papers from fellow students, from the Writing Center, or from me.

#### *Attendance & Class Participation—10 points*

All students are expected to come to class and participate actively in it. Participation will be particularly important in this course, as the discussions will be student-led. Help your fellow students by coming to class ready to join the discussion or activity. They’ll do it for you when you are leading the discussion! Since there are no exams in this course, class participation is one of the key ways students will demonstrate their familiarity with the course material, so it is absolutely vital. It is the student’s responsibility to acquire missed information, notes, etc.

A few words about standards:

*In class*—one gets out of a college course what one invests. Please come to class on time and stay in class the entire period unless you make arrangements with the instructor to leave early. Extra comings, goings, sleeping, newspaper reading, cell phone or other sounds, distract both fellow students and the instructor, and decrease the overall quality of the course for everyone. Please set aside all non-course materials before the course begins.

The success of any academic community depends on the open exchange of ideas. Contributions to class discussions should be civil, and participants must be willing to thoughtfully consider a wide range of views. In the event that a student’s behavior or inappropriate comments disrupt the class, the instructor will discuss the problem with the student. If the problem continues, the case will be referred to the Dean of Students.

*Written work*—this is an upper-division university course. As such, I expect all work you turn in to be complete, and carefully proofed. If you need assistance with written work, it is your responsibility to get it well in advance of the paper’s due date.

#### *Academic Misconduct*

Here is what I’m required to tell you:

*All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University.*

*All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321>.*

Here is what I really want you to know about my policy:

*Academic misconduct of any kind will not be tolerated.* If you are unsure about what might constitute academic misconduct (including plagiarism), it is *your responsibility* to consult the student conduct code or the instructor before proceeding. **Any instance of academic misconduct will result in a failing grade for the course**, and the case will be referred to the Office of the Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs.

## Course Schedule

### Introductions

Tuesday January 22  
Intro to Course

Thursday January 24  
Read Introduction in S&H, Prologue in Z  
BB: Ritzer, “Revolution in consumption & the larger society”

### Classic Critiques

Tuesday January 29  
S&H: Readings 1, 2, 19

Thursday January 31  
Film: *Affluenza*

### Consumption, Class & Social Inequality

Tuesday February 5  
S&H: 11, 12, 13

Thursday February 7  
BB: Simmel, “On Fashion”

Tuesday February 12  
Film: *People Like Us*

### Digression: Can't Buy Me Love??

Thursday February 14  
\*Library Assignment Due\*  
S&H: Reading 10  
BB: Otnes & Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, Chs 1 & 2  
(5 optional)

### Consumption & Identity: Gender

Tuesday February 19  
S&H: Reading 3

Thursday February 21  
Film: *Killing Us Softly 3*

### Consumption & Identity: Race

Tuesday February 26  
Z: Ch 6  
BB: Patillo-McCoy, “Nike’s Reign”

Thursday February 28  
\*Prospectus Due\*  
S&H: Readings 14, 20

## **Consumption & Lived Experience**

Tuesday March 4  
S&H: Readings 8, 9  
\*\*Journals A-M Due

Thursday March 6  
Guest Lecture: Becoming Modern through  
Consumption in Thailand  
BB: Reading TBA

### *Shopping*

Tuesday March 11  
Z: Chs 1, 4  
\*\*Journals N-Z Due

### *Places to Shop*

Thursday March 13  
Z: Chs 3, 5

Tuesday March 18  
BB: Ritzer, "A Tour of the new means of  
consumption" and "Landscapes of  
consumption"

Thursday March 20  
Film: *How They Sell*

### *Brands, Labels, Logos & Trends*

Tuesday March 25  
S&H: 21  
BB: Holt, "Why Do Brands Matter?"

Thursday March 27  
Film: *Merchants of Cool*

Tuesday April 1  
Z: Chs 2, 8

Thursday April 3  
Film: *No Logo: Brands, Globalization & Resistance*

## **Consequences of Consumption: Work, Consumer Debt & the Environment**

Tuesday April 8  
S&H: Reading 28

Thursday April 10  
Film: *The Secret History of the Credit Card*

Tuesday April 15  
Guest speaker from Missoula  
Federal Credit Union on Consumer Debt

Thursday April 17  
Film: *Advertising & the End of the World*  
\*\*Research Paper Due\*\*

## **Resisting Consumer Society**

Tuesday April 22  
S&H: Reading 23, 24

Thursday April 24  
Guest Speaker: Emily Darrell on Freeganism

Tuesday April 29  
Z: Ch 10, Epilogue  
S&H: 26

Thursday May 1  
Film: *Escape from Affluenza*  
Journals Due

## Journal Entry Assignments

Entry #1: \*\*Everyone MUST complete this entry.

Write down every good or service you buy beginning from the moment you wake up on Wednesday, January 23, to the time you go to sleep on Wednesday, February 6 (two weeks). Record every single service (e.g. a haircut, take-out food) and item (even small purchases like cups of coffee, newspapers, music downloads, etc.), where you purchased it, and, most importantly, why you purchased it. (Feel free to record “personal item” for goods you don’t feel comfortable sharing—I don’t need to know how many tubes of Preparation H you bought.)

Add up the amount of money you spent in total, and then the amounts you spent on recurring purchases (e.g. how much you spent on coffee, or health and beauty products). Are there any surprises to you in this information?

Do some serious reflecting on your general views of consumption—both your own, and your perceptions of consumption practices in our culture more generally. How do you think your habits compare to those of other Americans?

Entry #2—Consumption and Class Background

In this entry, consider the ways that your own class background has influenced your feelings about consumption. Think back on your childhood and the messages you received from the adults in your life about the kinds of goods that were appropriate for “people like us.” Did anyone ever tell you that there were items people like you must (or should absolutely not) have? How do you think your family background influences your ideas about consumption today? Have you largely adopted the consumption standards associated with your class background, or rejected them in whole or in part? How has your class background influenced your expectations about your future consumption habits (and by extension, the kind of income you will need to support those habits)?

Entry # 3—Love, Consumer Style

You have several options to begin this entry. First, you might talk to someone about his or her buying habits around the Valentine’s Day holiday. Did your respondent experience some pressure to express his or her affection for someone by giving a material gift? How did he or she go about selecting an appropriate gift? Alternatively, examine some Valentine’s Day advertising. What kinds of messages do advertisers use at this time of year? Another alternative for this entry is to examine and analyze a wedding guidebook or magazine. Relate what you find to some of the readings from the course so far.

Once you have done this, reflect on your own experience with these issues. How did you signify your affection for significant others this week? Have you attended or planned a wedding lately? How do consumption practices shape our expressions of love in your experience?

Entry # 4—Shoppers, All

Follow someone you know as he or she goes shopping. As this person shops, ask him or her to reflect on the process of selecting places to shop as well as which items to reject or to purchase

and take notes (or better yet, record) what they tell you. Use Sharon Zukin's work to analyze your respondents' shopping practices. Once you have done this, reflect on your own experiences and habits as a shopper, also in light of what Zukin describes in her book.

#### Entry # 1—Li'l Consumers

Spend some time examining the messages that children get about consumer practices. You might do this in any number of ways: for example, by visiting a toy store or the toy section of a department store, by watching the commercials during several hours of Saturday morning cartoons, or looking at other kinds of products or cathedrals of consumption aimed at children (e.g. "kids" cereals, teen or pre-teen magazines). Use course material to discuss some of the ways that consumer culture influences childhood or young adulthood.

#### Entry # 6—You Are What You Own?

Have someone you know give you a "tour" of a room or collection of goods that matters to them. For example, if you know someone to whom food is very important, you might ask that person to give you a tour of his or her kitchen, including the cooking gear, and the foods in the refrigerator and pantry. Ask that person to talk about why he or she owns these things—what do these things mean to their owner? Are these things an integral part of their owners' identity? Do these things help integrate their owner in to some social group? If so, how? Once you have written about your respondent, you may reflect on how consumer culture structures your identity as well if you choose.

#### Entry # 7—Cathedrals of Consumption

Using Ritzer's chapters as a touchstone, visit a mall, casino, restaurant, or another consumption venue and analyze what you see (it might be particularly interesting to do this in a venue that ostensibly rejects the aesthetics or ethics of contemporary consumer culture). Does what you see largely confirm or subvert Ritzer's argument? How so (be specific)? How does the venue shape our culture of consumption? How do these cathedrals shape you and your shopping habits?

#### Entry # 8—What Comes in Must Go Out

Just as you recorded everything you purchased for one week, record everything (EVERYTHING) you discard for one week. For each item, record how (e.g. put in trash, recycled, gave away, donated to Goodwill, etc.) and why you disposed of it. If you can, keep a running tab of how much the things you toss weigh so you can total it up at the end of the week. Alternatively, examine what other people discard. If you are really brave, you can check out the kinds of things that end up in dumpsters (please don't get caught by authorities), or examine other places people discard things (a recycling center, or a second-hand store, the "Free" link on Craigslist, etc.). In any case, reflect your own and our cultural ideas about what's disposable.

#### Entry #9—Vive la Resistance?

Examine some attempt to create an alternative to contemporary consumer culture. You might investigate resale shops, stores that somehow try to sell products or operate in ways that resist

“mainstream” consumer culture, forums or organizations that facilitate the trading of items, or that focus on salvaging things that would otherwise be thrown away. Is the entity or practice you examine truly a way to resist consumer culture? In what ways? In what ways might it be complicit in consumer culture despite its aims?

Once you have done this, reflect on whether or not you are personally interested in trying to resist some aspect(s) of mainstream consumer culture. If so, in what ways do you, or would you like to do this? What consumer issues do you care about most (e.g. toy safety, buying locally, resisting consumer debt, reducing energy use, etc.). Can you think of new ways to do this that aren't in place in our community now? Or, are you comfortable with our consumer society the way that it is? If so, what's wrong with critics' arguments against it?

Entry #10—\*\*Everyone MUST complete this entry.

Reflect on what you have learned about consumer society this semester. What has been most interesting or surprising to you? What do you think you will remember most? In what ways, if any, has studying consumption affected your thinking on these issues? Will any of this information affect your behavior in the future? Be very specific. Don't forget to reference course readings.