
History and Sociology of Modern Consumerism

COURSE DESIGNATOR FLOR 3005

Language of Instruction English

NUMBER OF CREDITS 3

Contact Hours 45

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We commonly hear that we live in a “consumer society”. The aim of the course is to understand the importance of consumption and consumerism in our contemporary society and in the past. Given that consumerism is a complex and multilayered concept, the course will offer a variety of theoretical approaches and methods of analysis in order to better comprehend the deep and relevant relations among consumerism, society and individuals. The course will start with a historical overview on the development of the Consuming Society in order to understand the origins of our contemporary consumer society. Then, the study of early and contemporary sociological theories on consumption will provide a critical and comprehensive understanding on many features characterizing the so-called “consumer culture” in our globalized world, and it will be useful to analyze the topics that will be dealt with during the course. The use of several educational tools, such as readings, field experiences, lectures, and group works, will allow students to understand how different sociological perspectives approach problems related to consumer culture and patterns of consumerism.

A variety of materials will be used to focus on specific case studies both from US and Italy in a comparative way, and to stimulate an active and critical in-class students’ participation. Students will be encouraged to apply theoretical skills to reality and to their own experience as consumers, and to experience and observe Florence as a study subject as well.

Based on opportunities available in Florence, the course will try to fully integrate the students’ abroad experience in their learning process. During the course, students will be encouraged to express their positions and ideas through writings, presentations, and in-class discussion.

The course will cover the following themes:

- Overview of the advents of the Consuming Society
- Early and contemporary sociological theories on consumption
- Marketing, advertising, branding and their relations with consumers as individuals and as members of specific groups
- Fashion as a strategic tool in consumerist cultures
- Globalization and “glocalization”: patterns of consumption in Modern Consumer Culture
- Tourism as a contemporary form of consumption
- Hip consumerism, material culture, “cool” goods and strategies of distinction
- Music consumption in the digital era
- Consumerism and Environment: critical consumption and sustainable lifestyles
- New Media, New consuming patterns: the active role of consumers and the relations between production, distribution and consumption

INSTRUCTOR

Marco Bracci, Ph.D.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To provide a core historical base in the subject
- To introduce students to key debates in the sociology of consumerism and in the different theories of consumer culture
- To understand contemporary materialism and consumerism and the problems of globalization, environment, and culture
- To reflect upon ways in which personal and social identities are increasingly linked to consumerism
- To encourage students to engage critically with questions around consumer society, through research and writing

- To acquire a deeper understanding of students' own habits of consumption, establishing a connection between personal dimension and the societal dimension, especially by the use of *The Journal of Consumer Habits* (guidelines will be given in class)
- To take full advantage of students' experience in Florence using the city as a learning tool in order to live a deep intercultural experience

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course the students will be familiar with:

- The main historical processes which characterized the shift from pre-modern to contemporary consuming society
- A range of sociological perspectives on consumerism as an ideology and consumption as a practical aspect of everyday lives.
- The relationship between consumerism and identity formation.
- A range of substantive areas of consumerism, such as fashion, food, tourism, music etc.

Students will be able:

- To critically apply concepts and theoretical perspectives to real-life situations
- To understand the connections between marketing strategies and consumption
- To develop cases studies of specific goods or commodities
- To understand consumerism as a form of culture operating in different cultural contexts and in specific consumer groups
- To develop a critical thinking upon the main changes of their own habits of consumption (being immersed in a different consumer culture will be a great opportunity to question one's patterns of consumption)
- To understand their role as "social actors" in relation to the main problems connected to the presence of consumerism in our societies

METHODOLOGY

The course includes readings and discussion of a selection of primary sources (historical and sociological documents, among others) and other materials such as movies and documentaries.

The learning process will happen in a variety of formats in this course, mainly through lectures, guest lectures on specific topics, home assignments, videos, discussions, out-of-class and in-class activities.

Class discussions and active participation are extremely vital, as they are essential to develop critical skills. For this reason, the readings assigned weekly are accompanied by an **active discussion work on a case study or on a topic to be dealt with in class**. This is the basis for the work that will be led in class. Students should be aware that, **although the workload is not heavy, it requires a constant and active participation**. We will remain flexible enough to take advantage of other potential opportunities for learning as they develop over the course of the semester.

COURSE PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites for this course, but a basic background in sociology could be helpful. At the start of the course, students will be asked to fill out a questionnaire to provide some background information, their study plan and their expectations about the course.

BIBLIOGRAPHY/MATERIALS

The following readings will be assigned during the course of the semester

From P. Corrigan, *The Sociology of Consumption: an Introduction* (Sage, 1998)

- *Advents of the consuming society*, pp. 1-16

From D.B. Clarke, M.A. Doel and K.M.L. Housiaux (edited by), *The Consumption Reader* (Routledge, 2003)

- C. Campbell, *Traditional and modern hedonism*, pp. 48-53

- J. Urry, *The consumption of tourism*, pp. 117-121

- P. Falk, *The genealogy of advertising*, pp. 185-190

- G. Simmel, *The philosophy of fashion*, pp. 238-245

- T. Veblen, *Pecuniary emulation*, pp. 233-237

From T. Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption. Concepts, practices and politics in consumer society* (Open UP, 2009)

- Introduction: contradictions of consumption, pp. 1-8
- Chapter 1: *Conceptions of consumption*, pp. 9-31
- Chapter 2: *From here to modernity. Contemporary theories of consumer society*, pp. 32-51
- Chapter 3: *Marketing, advertising and the construction of the contemporary consumer*, pp. 52-77
- Chapter 7: *Consuming passions. Fashion and consumer society*, pp. 149-164

From O. von Feigenblatt, B. Pena Acuna (edited by), *Popular Culture: A Reader* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013)

- M. Bracci, *Online Music Listening and Consumption, and the Re-definition of Personal Identities in our Radical Modernity*, pp. 1-12

From *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Sage

- D. Holt, *Toward a sociology of branding*, 2006, Vol. 6(3), pp. 299-302

From *Journal Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2001, Sage, Vol. 27, n. 6)

- J. Heath, *The structure of hip consumerism*, pp. 1-17

From *Electronic Green Journal*

- A. Muldoon, *Where the Green Is: Examining the Paradox of Environmentally Conscious Consumption*, April 2006, Issue 23, pp.1-15

Further readings and materials (such as videos, documentaries, newspaper and magazine articles) may be used on the basis of students' specific interests.

Readings will be available at Lory's copy store (for information ask the front desk) or will be e-mailed to students by Professor. Readings will be assigned week by week and **must be taken to class** as they will be the core of the lesson and the starting point for class discussion on specific topics and case studies. Professor could give **home assignments** (tasks to perform, documentaries to watch) when needed to facilitate in-class discussion and to integrate topics dealt with in class.

VISITS

During the course two visits to **places of sociological relevance** (see CLASS SCHEDULE) will enrich the students' knowledge of the topics dealt with in class and deepen their understanding of the Florentine/Italian culture they are living in.

GRADING

Exams:

There are two scheduled exams for this course.

- Students will take a **Mid-Term Written Exam** with short answer questions based mainly on the general subject that will be dealt with in the first part of the course
- The written final exam will consist of a **Take-Home Final project** (see description below)

Take-Home Final:

- For the final exam students will choose a specific commodity chain, company or products through which they will deal with certain aspects of the course program using specific tools and strategies developed in class.
- Students will hand in a written essay of around 2400 words.
- This project represents the occasion to originally elaborate on the readings and discussion conducted in class. It has to be an exercise in creativity and originality at the same time maintaining an analytic and critical perspective on the whole material studied during the semester.
- Guidelines will be given in class.

Final Presentation

- Students will conclude the course with a presentation of the topic chosen for the Take-Home Final.
- Students will have to use **all the tools available** (such as: PowerPoint, handouts, surveys, extra information or evidence etc.) to reach the point. The aim of this assignment is to demonstrate their skills in presenting their ideas and perspective to the rest of the class, activating a **discussion** and being able to respond to the instructor's and other students' feedback.
- Guidelines will be given in class.

Students-Led Discussion:

- During the class after the midterm, there will be a students-led discussion: students will present a specific topic dealt with in class till then, trying to argue in favor of it. A feedback from the class is required in order to start a discussion.

Summary of how grades are weighted:

Participation, In-class activities	10%
Homework, Tasks, Out-of-class activities	15%
Students-Led Discussion	10%
Mid-term Exam	25%
Take-Home Final Exam	25%
Final Presentation	15%
Overall grade	100%

CRITERIA FOR GRADING AND GRADING STANDARDS

Grading Rubric		
A	93+	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
A-	90-92	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B+	87-89	
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C+	77-79	
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.
D+	67-69	
D	60-66	
F	<60	Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an I.

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

An overview in the History and Sociology of Consumption **(part 1)**

- Course presentation and distribution of the syllabus; course requirements and course expectations; methodology.
- The importance of the Sociological Perspective.
- Advents of the Consuming Society and the making of the modern world; the modern features and processes that make the consumer culture distinctive and different from the pre-modern period.

WEEK 2

An overview in the History and Sociology of Consumption **(part 2)**

- An interdisciplinary approach to consumption; western patterns of consumption and theories of consumption; early theories and contemporary theories.

WEEK 3

Marketing, Advertising, Branding and their relations with the contemporary consumer's identity

WEEK 4

Fashion as a self-representation tool and its connections with marketing and advertising
Visit: *Gucci Museum*, Florence

WEEK 5

From Globalization to *Glocalization*. Focus on the Italian landscape

WEEK 6

Review
MIDTERM EXAM (two hours)

MIDSEMESTER BREAK

WEEK 7

Tourism as a form of city consumption/consumerism
Visit: *DotFlorence.com s.r.l.*, Florence

WEEK 8

Hip Consumerism: consuming choices and the “cool” goods

WEEK 9

Students-led discussions

Illustration of Taormina assignment

TAORMINA STUDY TOUR

Students complete Taormina assignments

WEEK 10

Online and Digital Music Consumption, and the latest changes in the *popular music* market

WEEK 11

Consumerism and Environment: Lifestyles and the Ecological Footprint

WEEK 12

Take Home Final DUE

GUEST LECTURER – Prof. Francesca Passeri, Ph.D.

Assessing Consumer Power after the advent of new technologies: active consumers and the Web

WEEK 13

PRESENTATIONS of Take Home Finals

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Regular attendance and punctuality are mandatory in order to earn full marks. The final grade will take into consideration preparation required for class (i.e. readings) and participation in class discussions. If you miss **more than two class meetings** without evidence of medical need, **your final grade for the class will be dropped** accordingly (check the *Academic Handbook* for the attendance policy in place at the Florence Program). When missing class, it is the student's responsibility to find out what information was given in class including any announcements made.

Missed assignments: a valid doctor's certificate dated on the day of the absence is required to make up for any missed assignment (paper due, presentation due, project due, test, quiz, midterm, final, and all other graded activities). Failure to provide such evidence will automatically result in an "F"/"0" grade for the assignment. No exceptions allowed.

See the *Academic Handbook* for guidelines on providing a valid medical certificate.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own, can result in disciplinary action. The University Student Conduct Code defines scholastic dishonesty as follows:

SCHOLASTIC DISHONESTY:

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing a University academic

record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis.

Within this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an “F” or “N” for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask.

STUDENT CONDUCT

The University of Minnesota has specific policies concerning student conduct and student needs. This information can be found on the Learning Abroad Center website.