

“This is a sample syllabus only. Instructor may make changes to the syllabus in future courses.”

CONSUMER CULTURE (SOC 729-QL)

Instructor: Cullen Clark, PhD

Office Hours: TBA

Phone: TBA

Contact Info: My e-mail address is culclark@uab.edu. I check e-mail Monday through Friday during normal business hours. I will try to respond to your e-mail no later than the end of the next workday.

TEXTS:

Baudrillard, Jean. 2004. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications.

Sassatelli, Roberta. 2007. *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Cahill, Dennis J. *Lifestyle Market Segmentation*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Note: All texts are available in paperback editions, a less costly alternative to hard-bound copies.

ABOUT THIS COURSE: We live in a consumer age when shoppers have access to goods of a variety and on a scale unimaginable to people in earlier historical epochs. Indeed, some have claimed that in our era we even purchase our individual identity through the goods we buy. This course explores consumer culture from an applied sociological perspective, examining its history and some theories put forth to explain the phenomenon of consumer culture. It concludes with a look at the ways in which marketers – informed by the theoretical perspective discussed in the class – can engage in data mining and market segmentation.

COURSE OBJECTIVES: The objectives of this course are:

- To give students a clear understanding of recent ideas about consumer culture as a precursor to capitalist development
- To familiarize students with relevant theoretical concepts from the work of Thorstein Veblen, Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu
- To help students understand how marketers can use quantitative research techniques (such as cluster analysis, factor analysis and others) informed by the theoretical concepts covered in this class to conduct data mining and customer segmentation
- To help students build an online community in which they can support and encourage one another as they complete this graduate program

MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY: Learning should be fun and exciting. My job as a teacher is to be a catalyst for this process by presenting information to you in a way that is accessible and engaging.

As a student, your job is to maintain a positive attitude toward learning and work hard. This is especially important in an online course. In this digital environment we create a virtual classroom, a cyber place where learning occurs. Whether this place will be an effective and pleasant learning environment depends upon our work and the nature of our interactions. If our work displays curiosity, a respect for one another, a commitment to learning and to building a sense of community, this digital class can be truly electric. Remember, ultimately this is your class. Its success depends upon you.

GRADING: Your grade will be determined on a 100 point scale as follows:

Posts/Comments	20 pts
Field Work Assignments (two at 10 pts. each).....	20 pts
Exam (30 pts.)	30 pts
Final Project... ..	30 pts
Total	100 pts

Grades will be awarded as follows:

90 points and above	A
80 to 89 points	B
70 to 79 points	C
60 to 69 points	D
59 points and below	F

COURSE PROJECTS:

Posts/Comments – At a bare minimum you should post something on the discussion board for each section and comment upon posts by two of your classmates. These posts and comments are a chance to engage in a discussion while building a respectful learning community. They should go well beyond “Well done” or “Good idea.” However, moderation is a virtue; overly long posts are both ineffective and disrespectful of other’s time. As an applied sociologist you must learn to make substantive comments in a succinct and engaging fashion.

These posts and comments serve as an online equivalent to the discussion that would take place in a traditional classroom. It is up to you how you present your posts and comments. They may be written – or you may record your thoughts. If you choose the latter, record them, attach the file to your post/comment and upload to the discussion board.

You will receive a cumulative grade for your posts and comments for each unit. Your grade will depend upon how well you demonstrate your mastery of the information in the readings; how well you connect this information to your own experience and to additional research and reading that you undertake on your own; and your efforts to foster online community.

Exams – There will be one take-home exam in this class. This exam is worth 30 points. The first exam will be accessible on **DATE** and will be due by 8 a.m., **DATE**. Your answers should draw upon assigned readings as well as additional research. Exam papers will be typed, follow ASA formatting and reference requirements, and be submitted via BlackBoard.

Field Work – Students will complete two field observations for this class. Each observation will require that you spend an hour observing people and happenings in a public retail setting. You will type up your field notes and submit them via the assignment function for the class website. You will then synthesize your thoughts about these observations and post them in the discussion forum. Each individual field work assignment is worth 10 points. The first field work will be conducted **DATE**; the second will be conducted **DATE**.

Final Project – Imagine you are an applied sociologist whose firm conducts detailed business analyses for retail clients. Select a retail client and prepare an in-depth report on the company using your skills as an applied sociologist.

Your report should include:

- a brief history of the company
- an analysis of the social, technological and economic forces shaping both the individual company and its industry at large; this analysis should place these forces in the context of one of the social theories studied in class
- an analysis of its customer base including who they seem to be and the role the company and its products seem to play in their life.

This report should draw upon published material (both peer reviewed and general press) about the company and its industry, any publicly available data you can find, and your personal observations.

And because your firm is a commercial concern, your analysis should also include one additional item, a proposal for an additional project to conduct a data mining/customer segmentation study for the company. This proposal should sell the “next phase” of research to build upon the information in your report and explain the theoretical basis upon which the study will be based. It should also explain what research technique your firm will use and why.

The final project will be due **DATE**.

Tentative Course Outline^{* +}

Dates

Topic

Introduction

Introduction to Course

Zukin, Sharon and Jennifer Smith Maguire. “Consumers and Consumption.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 30: 173 – 197.

Consumer autobiographies should be posted by **DATE.**

Dates

Topic

Unit 1. History

Section 1: Putting the Horse Back in Front of the Cart: Consumer Culture as Precursor to Capitalism.

Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, pgs 1 – 52.

Karababa, Eminegul and Guliz Ger. 2010. "Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 37: 737 – 760.

Section 2: American Retail

Zukin, *Point of Purchase*, pgs. 11 – 34 & 113 - 144. (on electronic reserve)

Field work: Spend one hour observing the people and happenings in a public retail setting. Document your observations in field notes, synthesize your thoughts in a few paragraphs and post online.

Section 3: Consumer Culture in an Age of Financialization

[Palley, Thomas I. 2007. "Financialization: What it is and Why it Matters." Political Economy Research Institute. University of Massachusetts Amherst.](#)

Holt, Douglas B. 2002. "Why do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29 (1): 70 – 90.

Pedroni, Marco. "Sellers of Experience. The New Face of Fashion Retail." Published on Inter-Disciplinary Net. Accessed Aug. 15, 2012.

<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/pedronifpaper.pdf>

Unit 2. Theory

Section 1a: Consumption as Desire

[Sex and Advertising: Retail Therapy \(*The Economist*, Dec. 17, 2011\)](#)

[Calvin Klein Jeans ; Calvin Klein Inc.](#)

[Manifesto for a Study of Denim](#)

Section 1b: Consumption as Desire

Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, on electronic reserve, Introduction, Chapter 1- Pecuniary Emulation, and Chapter 4 – Conspicuous Consumption.

Scott, David. 2010. "What Would Veblen Say?" *Leisure Sciences* 32: 288 – 294.

Section 2a: Consumption as Language

Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, Introduction and Part 1

Dates

Topic

Section 2b: Consumption as Language

Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, Part 2

Field work: Spend one hour observing the people and happenings in a public retail setting. Document your observations in field notes, synthesize your thoughts in a few paragraphs and post online.

Section 3a: Consumption as Expression (Construction) of Identity

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. Chapter 3, "The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles" in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Tastes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Available on electronic reserve.

Holt, Douglas B. 1998. "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 25 (1): 1 – 25.

Section 3b: Consumption as Expression (Construction) of Identity / Consumption as Community

Zukin, Sharon and Ervin Kosta. 2004. "Bourdieu Off-Broadway: Managing Distinction on a Shopping Block in the East Village." *City & Community* 3(2): 101 – 114.

Thompson, Craig J. and Siok Kuan Tambyah. 1999. "Trying to be Cosmopolitan." *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 26 (3): 214 – 241.

TBD

Exam

Unit 3. Practice

Section 1: Mapping Consumer Culture

Cahill, Dennis J. *Lifestyle Market Segmentation*, pgs 1 - 12.

Converse, P.D. 1936. "Analysis of Retail Trading Areas: Some Suggested Methods with an Example." *National Marketing Review* Vol. 1 (4): 316 – 325.

Mittal, Vikas, Wagner A. Kamakura and Rahul Govind. 2004. "Geographic Patterns in Customer Service and Satisfaction: An Empirical Investigation." *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 68 (3): 48 – 62.

Section 3: Putting it All Together: The Power of Research

This section utilizes a collection of readings, videos and a radio interview. Links to all of which can be found on BlackBoard.

Final Project

* Assigned readings/activities are listed under each section on the Blackboard site.

+ Details subject to change at discretion of instructor. Any changes will be promptly noted and disseminated to the class.