

# *Course Syllabus: The Consumer Society*

“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.” – Henry Thoreau

“And I encourage you all to go shopping more.” – George W. Bush

## *Course Objectives*

We commonly hear that modern societies place disproportionate significance on money and material possessions - that we live in a “consumer society”. In this course we take an interdisciplinary approach to studying consumerism, drawing upon academic research from various theoretical and applied perspectives. We will examine how the ubiquitous presence of consumerism influences individual behaviors, social welfare, culture, environmental quality, economic performance, and public policy. We will study both the positive and negative impacts of consumerism on individuals and societies, with a focus on the United States. We will also explore our personal choices as members of a consumer society, considering how we can lead balanced and fulfilling lives.

The specific objectives of the course are:

1. Survey the history of consumerism and materialism from ancient to modern times.
2. Explore various sociological, psychological, and economic theories related to consumerism.
3. Understand the effects of consumerism on our well-being, our culture, the environment, and economies from the local to global level.
4. Study social and economic trends related to consumerism in the United States and compare these trends to data from other countries
5. Explore the impact of advertising and marketing on personal behavior and culture
6. Consider the potential for alternatives to consumerism both at the personal level and in terms of public policy

## *Class Meetings*

Wednesdays, 6:00 – 8:30 PM  
Anderson 210

## **Instructor**

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Office Hours: Feel free to make an appointment for a time that is convenient for you. I'm generally on campus Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

## **Readings**

There are no required texts for you to purchase for the course. All readings are posted electronically, in .pdf format, for free download at:

<http://ase.tufts.edu/gdae/CS/CS.html>

## **Grading**

Your grade in the class will be determined by six factors:

1. a spending diary
2. pre-class writing assignments
3. a presentation and short paper on a topic of your choosing
4. two homeworks
5. a final exam
6. class participation

The spending diary will account for 10% of your course grade. The details of the spending diary will be discussed at the start of the course.

The course is intended to foster an environment of dynamic discussion, focused on the readings for each class meeting. Thus it is important that you are familiar with the assigned material in preparation for each class so that you can be an active participant in the discussion. As an incentive for adequate preparation, there will be short writing assignments based on the readings for each class meeting, starting with the second meeting. These assignments will be available at least one week in advance and will be due at the start of each class. Pre-class writing assignments will be graded on a scale from 0-10. Late assignments are acceptable only with permission obtained prior to the start of a class meeting. There will be a total of 12 pre-class assignments. You will get

to drop your lowest two grades. The remaining grades will count for 10% of your course grade.

The presentation and paper will give you an opportunity to further explore any topic related to the course material that particularly interests you. The paper and presentation are to be on the same topic. You can do this project either on your own, or as part of a group of up to three people. More information about the paper and presentation is provided on the course home page.

Two homeworks will be given during the semester. You will have at least two weeks to complete each homework. Homeworks will include summarizing material from the course, performing minor research (mostly using the Internet), and presenting informed opinions on topics related to the course. Late homeworks will be penalized 20 points for every calendar day it is late. This penalty will be waived only if you check with me, before the homework is due, to receive an extension. Homework submissions can be electronic (send me a file via e-mail) or in hard copy.

A cumulative final exam will be given. The exam will include multiple-choice questions and short essays. Your class participation grade will not merely reflect the frequency of participation but also the insightfulness and relevance of your questions and comments. Notifying me of interesting articles related to the course material also counts towards class participation. Class participation will be encouraged with frequent break-up sessions into small groups to briefly discuss a topic, followed by an open class discussion.

I recognize that different students perform better with different tasks. Thus I leave it up to each of you to determine how the last four factors (paper/presentation, homeworks, final exam, and class participation) will be allocated in calculating your course grade. I do, however, set a restriction of 15-30% for each of these four factors. Of course the total for these four factors must be 80%, so that the total grade allocation adds up to 100% including the spending diary and in-class writing assignments. I ask that you submit your grade allocation by the third class meeting, and no changes are allowed after that.

## **Class Philosophy**

This course takes an interdisciplinary approach to studying consumerism as an important and pervasive characteristic of modern societies. We will try to understand individual consumer behaviors as well as social impacts and public policy. Throughout much of the course we will approach the material as academics seeking greater understanding through objective analysis. However, as we are all active participants in a consumer society, it is my hope that the material will cause you to reflect on your own role in a consumer society. We will also consider whether policy reforms are necessary in light of modern consumerism, and if so, what types of reforms. Thus, this course is a combination of scientific analysis, personal opinion, and thoughtful speculation. A diversity of opinions is to be expected – just be careful to support your opinions with readings from the class or related material from your own experience. I promise to respect all opinions, and that grading will not be based on whether your opinions correspond with my own views.

There is a significant amount of reading for the course. As mentioned above, I expect you to be familiar with the assigned readings for each class meeting. This does not necessarily mean reading every word of every reading. I also ask that you come to each class meeting with questions, topics for discussion, and personal reflections from the day's readings. You are strongly encouraged to ask questions, initiate further discussion on topics, or propose discussion on a related topic. I don't mind going off on tangents, as long as those tangents are somewhat relevant and interesting. Finally, I ask each student to come to class with an open but active mind and a willingness to explore different ideas. I hope you find the course informative, somewhat entertaining, and thought provoking. If you ever have any suggestions to improve the course, please don't hesitate to let me know.

## **Other Class Information**

All students are expected to maintain a high standard of academic honesty according to the pamphlet "Academic Integrity at Tufts." While you are welcome and encouraged to work in groups on homework assignments, all interpretations and opinions should be your own.

If you need accommodations due to a disability, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss appropriate arrangements.

## **Tentative Course Schedule**

This schedule is based on 13 two-and-a-half hour class meetings. Each week's meeting is divided into two sessions – thus there are 26 sessions in the course. This schedule is subject to revision during the semester. Any updates to the syllabus will be posted on the course website, <http://ase.tufts.edu/gdae/CS/CS.html>. Realize that different priorities will be placed on different readings. While you should read some in detail, others can be merely browsed. Specific reading guidelines will be given on the web page for each session.

### **January 27, Session 1**– Course Introduction

No Readings

### **January 27, Session 2**– Documentary Film: *Affluenza*

No Readings

### **February 3, Session 3** – Introduction to the Consumer Society

1. “Introduction,” Chapter 1 of The Overspent American by Juliet Schor
2. “The Consumer Society” Chapter 2 of How Much Is Enough? by Alan Durning
3. “Money Well Spent?” Chapter 1 of Luxury Fever by Robert H. Frank

### **February 3, Session 4** – History of Consumerism (Part I)

1. “Before Consumerism,” Chapter 1 of Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire, Peter N. Stearns.
2. “The First Causes of Consumerism, Chapter 3 of Consumerism in World History
3. “The Puritan Way,” Chapter 1 of The Simple Life by David Shi

### **February 10, Session 5** – History of Consumerism (Part II)

1. “The Explosion of Consumerism in Western Europe and the United States,” Chapter 5 of Consumerism in World History
2. “Transcendental Simplicity,” Chapter 6 of The Simple Life
3. “Affluence and Anxiety,” Chapter 10 of The Simple Life
4. “Who Wins – Consumerism or Consumers?” Chapter 13 of Consumerism in World History

### **February 10, Session 6** – Cultural Perspectives on Consumerism (Part I)

1. “The Contradictions of Consumer Culture,” Chapter 2 of Consumer Culture by Douglas J. Goodman and Mirelle Cohen.
2. “Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture,” Chapter 14 of The Ethics of Consumption by Michael Schudson
3. “Introduction,” Chapter 1 of In Praise of Commercial Culture by Tyler Cowen

**February 17, Session 7** – Cultural Perspectives on Consumerism (Part II)

1. “The Consumption of Anticonsumption,” Chapter 3 of Consumer Culture
2. “Communicating with Commodities,” Chapter 2 of The Overspent American

**February 17, Session 8** – Psychological Perspectives on Consumerism (Part I)

1. “Personal Well-Being,” Chapter 2 of The High Price of Materialism by Tim Kasser
2. “Lethal Consumption: Death-Denying Materialism,” Chapter 8 of Psychology and Consumer Culture by Sheldon Solomon, et al.
3. “The Manic Society,” Introduction to American Mania by Peter C. Whybrow

**February 24, Session 9** – Psychological Perspectives on Consumption (Part II)

1. “Deciding and Choosing,” Chapter 3 of The Paradox of Choice by Barry Schwartz
2. “Why Decisions Disappoint: The Problem of Adaptation,” Chapter 8 of The Paradox of Choice
3. “Try It, You’ll Like It: The Influence of Expectation, Consumption, and Revelation on Preferences for Beer,” *Psychological Science* 17(12):1054-1058 (December 2006) by Leonard Lee, Shane Frederick, and Dan Ariely.

**February 24, Session 10** – Economic Perspectives on Consumerism: Microeconomics

1. “How Markets Work,” Chapter 12 of Economics Explained by Robert L. Heilbroner and Lester Thurow
2. “A Psychological Perspective on Economics,” *The American Economic Review* 93(2):162-168 (May 2003) by Daniel Kahneman

**March 3, Session 11** – Economic Perspectives on Consumerism: Macroeconomics

1. “The GDP,” Chapter 5 of Economics Explained
2. “Genuine Progress Indicator,” by Redefining Progress (online)
3. “Limits to Consumption and Economic Growth: The Middle Ground,” Chapter 4 of The Ethics of Consumption by Allen L. Hammond
4. “Three Possible Futures” and “To Live Wisely and Agreeably and Well” from The End of Economic Growth by Charles Siegel

**March 3, Session 12** – Advertising

1. “Advertising in American Society,” Chapter 1 of Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture by Arthur Asa Berger
2. “Introduction,” Chapter 1 of Why We Shop by Jim Pooler
3. “Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising,” Chapter 4 of Marketing Madness by Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur
4. “Subliminal Sexuality,” Chapter 11 of Sex in Advertising by Wilson Bryan Key

**March 10, Session 13** – Documentary Film: *The Persuaders* (PBS Frontline)

No Readings

**March 10, Session 14** – Consumerism and the Environment

1. “An Environmentalist’s Perspective on Consumer Society,” Chapter 5 of Consumer Society in American History: A Reader by Alan Durning
2. “The Real Impacts of Household Consumption,” Chapter 3 of The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices by Michael Brower and Warren Leon
3. “Where the Green Is: Examining the Paradox of Environmentally Conscious Consumption,” *Electronic Green Journal*, Issue 23 (April 2006) by Annie Muldoon

**March 17, Session 15** – Personal Finances, Credit Cards, and Compulsive Shopping

1. “Recent Changes in U.S. Family Finances: Evidence from the 2001 and 2004 Survey of Consumer Finances,” Brian K. Bucks, Arthur B. Kennickell, and Kevin B. Moore
2. “Credit Card Debt,” Chapter 3 of Expressing America by George Ritzer
3. “Estimated Prevalence of Compulsive Buying Behavior in the United States,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 163:1806-1812 (October 2006) by Koran, et al.

**March 17, Session 16** – Budgeting, Saving, and Investment (Part I)

1. “Prologue” of *Your Money or Your Life* by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin
2. “What Is Foolishness?” and “Start with an Index Fund” by The Motley Fool (online)

**March 31, Session 17** - Budgeting, Saving, and Investment (Part II)

1. “Obstacles for Young Investors,” Karen Blumenthal, *New York Times*, February 9, 2009.
2. “Open Your First IRA,” Cameron Huddleston, *Kiplinger*, 2008.

**March 31, Session 18** - Consumerism and Work/Time Balance

1. “The (Even More) Overworked American,” Chapter 1 of Take Back Your Time, edited by John de Graaf
2. “The Bigger Picture of Health,” Chapter 12 of Take Back Your Time
3. “Europe’s Work-Time Alternative,” Chapter 28 of Take Back Your Time

**April 7, Session 19** – Student Presentations

**April 7, Session 20** - Consumerism and Inequality / Globalization

1. “Stigmatizing Inequality in Consumer Culture,” Chapter 4 of Consumer Culture
2. “Global Income Inequality: What It Is and Why It Matters,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3865, March 2006, by Branko Milanovic.
3. “Anonymous Inequality in the Global Consumer Culture,” Chapter 5 of Consumer Culture
4. “The Discarded Factory: Degraded Production in the Age of the Superbrand,” Chapter 9 of No Logo by Naomi Klein

**April 14, Session 21** – Student Presentations

No Readings

**April 14, Session 22** – Money and Happiness

1. “Does Money Buy Happiness?” Chapter 5 of Luxury Fever
2. “Who Is Happy?” *Psychological Science* 6(1):10-19 (January 1995) by David G. Myers and Ed Diener
3. “The Art of Buying: Coming to Terms with Money and Materialism,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4(4):405-435 (December 2003) by Miriam Tatzel
4. "A Design for Living," Chapter 7 of Happiness: The Science behind your Smile by Daniel Nettle.

**April 21, Session 23** – Student Presentations

No Readings

**April 21, Session 24** – Summary of Advantages and Disadvantages of the Consumer Society

1. “When Spending Becomes You,” Chapter 4 of The Overspent American
2. “A (Mild) Defense of Luxury,” Chapter 9 of Living It Up by James Twitchell

**April 28, Session 25** – Consumerism and Public Policy

1. “Learning Diderot’s Lesson: Stopping the Upward Creep of Desire,” Chapter 6 of The Overspent American
2. “Luxury Without Apology,” Chapter 14 of Luxury Fever

**April 28, Session 26** – Lifestyle Choices and Personal Goals

1. “The Downshifter Next Door,” Chapter 5 of The Overspent American
2. “Voluntary Simplicity and the New Global Challenge,” Chapter 23 of The Consumer Society Reader by Duane Elgin.