

## SOC 4220: LIFE IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY

Spring 2014

Dr. Marjukka Ollilainen

### Contact information

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### Course Description

Since the transformation of the U.S. from an industrial to postindustrial society, Americans can be described more accurately as consumers than producers. But what is life like in a consumer society, where our statuses and identities are built on what and how we consume? This course explores the main trends and processes related to life in a consumer society. We begin with a review the history of the U.S. as a consumer society from the emergence of mass markets to the fragmented consumer groups of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We then examine marketing and advertising in promoting and sustaining consumption as an integral economic activity, despite its many critics and counter-movements, and explore how consumerism reflects as well as structures social inequality and pulls people into the "work-spend cycle."

In a consumer society, we are what we consume. Advertisers tell us what to eat and wear and how to live and thereby act as socializing agents from early childhood through old age, influencing our needs, wants, and choices (iPad, anyone?). But consumerism has a price. When everyone is encouraged to consume in order to demonstrate a "standard of living," many do so without adequate means. Therefore, we will also examine how the "work-spend cycle" impacts not only families and personal relationships, but also our culture and the social fabric of communities. We ask questions about the extent to which the increasing rate of personal bankruptcies or the growing household debt in the U.S. are signs of our inability to consume within our means? Furthermore, as the global economy connects consumers around the world, we investigate the potential for consumers to become a political force across national boundaries and read about the growing trend of "downshifting." Finally, as a case study, we focus on the social construction of children as consumers and the growing commercialization of childhood. Throughout the course, we use a variety sociological theories and approaches to examine the effects of consumerism also on our personal lives. We will read both critical writings on consumerism as well as articles that celebrate its existence.

### Required Books and Readings

- 1) *The Consumer Society: Reader*, edited by Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt. New York: The New Press, 2000. ISBN 1-56584-598-6 (pbk)
- 2) Juliet B. Schor. *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. New York: Scribner, 2004. ISBN-13: 978-0-684-87056-4 (pbk)
- 3) Articles on Canvas (<http://canvas.weber.edu>) and handouts given out in class

### Note on Special Needs

A student requiring accommodations or services due to a disability must contact Services for Students with Disabilities, located in the Student Service Center <http://www.weber.edu/ssd/>

### Course Objectives and Student Outcomes

Having taken this course, students will be able to, both orally and in writing:

- Describe how the consumer society emerged and explain its main critiques,
- Analyze the causes and consequences of the work-spend cycle for individuals and families,
- Evaluate the role of symbols and advertising in the construction of statuses and identities, and
- Identify ways in which consumption reflects and reproduces social inequality.

## Course Format

This course is a seminar, which means that it is different from the traditional, lecture-based class. In a seminar, the main focus is on reading and critically considering what you read through discussion and writing. Therefore, most of this course is made up of class discussions on the readings, activities that help you make sense of the readings, and films that highlight key ideas. IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT YOU COMPLETE ALL THE ASSIGNED READINGS BEFORE YOU COME TO CLASS. I assure you that our class time will be more productive and fun when everyone has read. Without your and your classmates' input, the class will be boring and our discussion will fall flat. I will also be monitoring and evaluating your reading very closely through reflection papers, quizzes, and other class assignments. If you already know that you won't be able to commit enough time to preparing for this course, I suggest you consider taking another course. Since the class is largely based on discussion, it is crucial that we take turns, respect everyone's views and recognize they may be different from ours. The key is to allow everyone to express their take on the materials without anyone dominating the discussion.

## Evaluation

### I Exams (2 x 30% = 60%)

There will be two take-home essay exams to test your understanding of the readings and class discussions. The exams will cover the designated articles, notes, films, and handouts given out in class and you will be asked to synthesize what you have read and watched into a coherent and compelling essay.

### II Observation reports (15%)

There will be three observation assignments where students observe and report on consumerism-related phenomena and/or behaviors outside of class. For each assignment, I will provide detailed instructions. Assignment due dates are listed in the class schedule.

### III Born to Buy response papers (10%)

We will discuss the book, *Born to Buy* for several class periods. You will turn in three response papers discussing the assigned chapters. I will provide a prompt for each *Born to Buy* assignment, which is designed to help you write your paper. You may choose which three papers to you turn in. Each paper should be about 2 pages, typed, and double-spaced.

### IV Reading quizzes (10%)

To encourage students to read and prepare for a good class discussion, I will give short, unannounced pop quizzes on the assigned articles. A quiz typically consists of two or three short answer questions per article and will be completed individually during class time. All quizzes will be graded. Because a quiz also serves as an introduction to the class discussion, a missed quiz cannot be made up.

### V Class participation (5%)

Class participation includes participation in class discussions, responses to films, and all in-/out-of-class assignments. Thoughtful comments and questions about class materials and topics are encouraged and rewarded. I also record your attendance. Absences exceeding 20% of class meetings will negatively impact your final grade. Please see the class attendance policy below for details.

Grading scale for course performance (see also the qualitative grading rubric on the Canvas home page):

	A = 100-93%	A- = 92-90%
B+ = 89-87%	B = 86-83%	B- = 82-80%
C+ = 79-77%	C = 76-73%	C- = 72-70%
D+ = 69-67%	D = 66-63%	D- = 62-60%
E ≤ 59%		

<b>Class Policy</b>	
<b>1. Attendance</b>	You must be present at least 80% of the class time. Missing more than 20% of class meetings will result in a 5% reduction of your final grade for each additional absence.
<b>2. Professionalism and soft skills</b>	<p>Taking this course comes with a set of expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Timeliness</b> – Class will start and end on time. You are expected to come to class on time and submit all assignments on time.</li> <li>• <b>Technology</b> – You may use a laptop for note-taking, but should you misuse this privilege (facebook, chats, movies, etc.), you will be asked to <u>put away the computer and continue taking notes by hand</u>. Furthermore, cell phones (incl. texting) and earphones do not belong in class. You will be asked to take ear phones off/put cell phone away <u>or leave the classroom</u>.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Late assignments and exams</b>	<p>* All <u>assignments</u> are to be handed in on the due date. <u>Late assignments are not accepted</u>. You may turn in one assignment late (no questions asked) with the late coupon on page 6.</p> <p>* A late <u>exam</u> will accrue a <u>penalty of -5% for each late day</u>.</p>
<b>3. Extra credit</b>	There is no extra credit in this class.
<b>4. WSU Student Code</b>	Students are expected to be familiar with the WSU Student Code and abide by it. The Code may be reviewed on line at <a href="http://www.weber.edu/ppm/Policies/6-22_StudentCode.html">http://www.weber.edu/ppm/Policies/6-22_StudentCode.html</a> All necessary steps will be taken to enforce the Student Code to guarantee fairness to all students.
<b>5. Plagiarism</b>	<p>As you write your exam essays, make sure you cite other people's work appropriately. Plagiarism (i.e., using someone else's work, ideas, or wording as your own without citing) is considered cheating at Weber State (see student code, section IV.D.2b) and will result, at minimum, in failing your assignment. This also includes getting ideas from your classmates, working on exams together, and copying from the Internet. We will review in class some basic rules of using citations and writing essay exams before the first midterm. <u>All exams will be turned in both as a hard copy and an electronic file to screen for plagiarism.</u></p> <p><i>WSU subscribes to TurnItIn.com, an electronic service that verifies the originality of student work. Enrollment in this course may require you to submit some or all of your assignments to it this semester, and documents submitted to TurnItIn.com are retained, anonymously, in their databases. Continued enrollment in this course constitutes an understanding of and agreement with this policy.</i></p>

### TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE

Articles from *The Consumer Society* are marked as R (as in "reader")

Date	Topic	Reading and assignments
T	Introductions and syllabus	
Th	How/why did we become consumers?	Syllabus; Hine: "Why We Want Objects and How They Change Us" (handout) Stearns: Chs. 4 and 5 (Canvas)
T	Emerging consumerism in Western Europe and America	Matt: Ch. 1 (Canvas)

Th	Do Americans consume too much? Critiques of the consumer society	R Ch. 1 (Adorno & Horkheimer) and Ch. 4 (Ewen)
T	Women as consumers	R Ch. 3 (Friedan) and Parkin: Ch. 1—"Advertisers and their Paradigm: Women as Consumers" (Canvas)
	<b>The social organization of symbols -- marketing</b>	
Th	The creation of needs	R Ch. 5 (Baudrillard)
T	The meaning of things - Advertising	R Ch. 6 (Goldman and Papson)
Th	Advertising cont.	Lindstrom: Ch. 3 – "I Can't Quit You" (Canvas)
T	Capitalism and commodification	R Ch. 19 (Marx); Ritzer: "Cathedrals of Consumption" (Canvas) <i>EXAM 1 GIVEN OUT</i>
Th	Commodification cont.	No reading
T	The commercialization of feeling	Hochschild : "The Commodity Frontier" (Canvas) <i>EXAM 1 DUE IN CLASS</i>
Th	Food and consumerism	Waters: "McDonaldization and the Global Culture of Consumption" (Canvas) <i>FIRST OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT GIVEN OUT</i>
T	Fashion and image	R Ch. 21 (Gladwell); Ch. 22 (Frank)
Th	Consumption as liberation	Ch. 16 (Twitchell) and Ch. 18 (Fiske)
	<b>Consumption and social inequality</b>	
T	Conspicuous consumption and distinction	R Ch. 11 (Veblen) and Ch. 12 (Bourdieu) <i>FIRST OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT DUE IN CLASS</i>
Th	Cultural capital and consumption	R Ch. 13 (Holt)
T	Consumerism across classes	No reading
Th	Ethnicities and consumption	R Ch. 15 (DuCille) <i>SECOND OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT GIVEN OUT</i>
	<b>The work-spend cycle</b>	
T	The Overworked American	Schor: "The Insidious Cycle of Work and Spend" (Canvas)

Th	The Overspent American – Consumer Debt	Manning: “Can’t Leave Home Without It: Consumer Debt and Credit in American Society” (Canvas) <i>SECOND OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT DUE IN CLASS</i>
	SPRING BREAK	
T	New critiques of consumer society	R Ch. 23 (Elgin) and Ch. 24 (Lasn) <i>EXAM 2 GIVEN OUT</i>
Th	Critiques of consumer society cont.	No reading
T	Life in a Consumer society	R Ch. 26 (Schor) <i>EXAM 2 DUE IN CLASS</i>
	<b>Commercialization of Childhood and children as consumers</b>	<b>Schor: <i>Born to Buy</i></b>
Th	The emergence of children’s consumption	Introduction and Chs. 1-2 <i>Reflection paper due</i>
T	Ads in children’s lives	Chs. 3-5 <i>Reflection paper due</i> <i>THIRD OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT GIVEN OUT</i>
Th	The child-consumer	Chs. 6-7 <i>Reflection paper due</i>
T	Effects of the commercialized childhood	Chs. 8-9 <i>Reflection paper due</i>
Th	Is a de-commercialized childhood possible? Semester wrap-up	Ch. 10 <i>THIRD OBSERVATION PAPER DUE</i> <i>Last day to turn in an assignment with the late coupon</i>

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**Late Submission Coupon**

This coupon will allow you to turn in a late assignment once during this semester, no questions asked. Just write in the submission that you would like to use your Late Submission Coupon or attach this coupon (or a copy) onto your submission. This card is valid for a written assignment only, not for exams. The last day to turn in a late assignment is April 12.

## Marjukka OLLILAINEN - Re: Can you OK my course proposal, please?

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**From:** Sheree JOSEPHSON  
**To:** OLLILAINEN, Marjukka  
**Date:** 2/7/2013 4:49 PM  
**Subject:** Re: Can you OK my course proposal, please?

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Marjukka,

Please let me know if you can simply forward this one or whom I need to email it to.

Let me know about lunch.  
sheree

Dear Dr. Olliainen and University Curriculum Committee,

After consulting with faculty members in the Department of Communication, we have concluded that Sociology's course titled Consumer Society does not conflict with our Advertising class (Comm. 3850). We support Sociology's proposal to make this a permanent offering and plan to recommend it to our Communication/Public Relations & Advertising majors. In fact, we will likely contact the Sociology Department for permission to list it as an elective course for students pursuing the interdisciplinary emphasis in lieu of a minor.

While our Advertising course obviously touches on concepts covered in the Consumer Society class, our class focuses on teaching students how to produce effective advertising. Our course requires students to work in student advertising agencies in a competitive situation to produce everything required to make a professional advertising pitch to an actual client. In comparison, the Consumer Society class touches on Advertising but does not teach students how to produce advertising.

We support allowing Sociology to add this class as a permanent curriculum offering. We look forward to recommending it to our students.

Sheree Josephson, Ph.D.  
Chair  
Department of Communication

Sheree Josephson, Ph.D.  
Chair, Communication Department  
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>>> Marjukka OLLILAINEN 2/4/2013 4:37 PM >>>  
Hi Sheree,

## Marjukka OLLILAINEN - Re: I need your help with a curriculum proposal

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**From:** Michael Stevens  
**To:** Marjukka OLLILAINEN  
**Date:** 2/11/2013 12:14 PM  
**Subject:** Re: I need your help with a curriculum proposal

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Hi, Marjukka,

My apologies for not responding last week--I was out of town on university business and have not been in my office to respond to emails until this morning.

Thank you for bringing your new course proposal to our attention in the Department of Business Administration. I agree with your assessment that our courses are somewhat similar, but that our different disciplines examine consumer behavior, consumerism, and commercialization from very different theoretical traditions and for very different purposes. As a result, I see no conflict whatever in your proposed course and MKTG 3100: Consumer Behavior.

I wish you success with your new course and trust your students will benefit from having it in your curriculum.

Best regards.

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 Michael J. Stevens, Ph.D.  
 Professor of Management  
 Dept. Chair, Business Admin.  
[mjstevens@weber.edu](mailto:mjstevens@weber.edu)  
 (801) 626-8099  
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>>> Marjukka OLLILAINEN 2/5/2013 9:37 AM >>>  
 Michael,

I am contacting you directly because I have not been able to reach anyone in your main office by phone. I am the chair of Sociology & Anthropology, currently preparing a curriculum committee proposal to add a "Soc 4220: Consumer Society" course into the sociology program curriculum. The proposal requires me to check with other departments who teach related courses and make sure our course is not impinging on their "territory." Since your marketing program has a course called "MKTG 3100: Consumer Behavior," so I assume I need an OK from you or whoever teaches this course for my proposal.

I am attaching my syllabus as evidence of our course content and to show that it is not threatening to take a way your students (although they would be welcome to take the course). I have taught this course myself twice and all students thus far have been sociology majors. The description of MKTG 3100 includes wording about "sociological findings" but I don't know what that entails. However, I doubt our courses are similar in their scope and approach, as our disciplines tend to examine consumer behavior, consumerism, and commercialization from very different theoretical traditions and for very different purposes.

Would you be so kind as to either forward this e-mail to the professor who teaches the Consumer Behavior course and have them review the attached material or possibly do that yourself. The deadline is Feb 11, so I am