How and why does consumerism exercise so great an influence on global culture today? How are our institutions and relationships shaped and transformed by the forces of commodification and consumerism? Are there any realms of life that ought to be free from the market-driven forces of commodification? Can consumerism offer a positive means of cultural critique to processes we wish to resist? In this seminar, we explore the history of consumer culture in the U.S. and globally, with special attention to understanding the effects of com-modification upon the self, human relationships, and social institutions. We will consider both classical and contemporary critiques of commodification and consumerism, as well as arguments for the liberatory dimensions of consumer society.

Prerequisite: 100-level sociology course or permission of instructor.

Distribution: Social and Behavioral Analysis

**Learning Objectives**

Students in this course will:

- Become familiar with theoretical approaches to understanding consumer culture
- Use a sociological approach to think critically about the effects (either positive or negative) of consumerism and commodification on social identity, relationships, and institutions
- Apply categories of gender, social class, race, and age to offer sociological analysis of consumer experiences
- Think critically about the intersections of production and consumption in global culture
- Evaluate attempts to influence social change through either consumer activism or resistance to consumerism
- Analyze the complex social meaning of particular commodities

**Required Books**


Additional required readings will be available through either e-reserve or library databases.
Course Requirements

As a seminar, this class will be discussion-based. Regular attendance and active, prepared participation is expected of all students. In order to prepare for class meetings, you should thoughtfully complete all required readings, making note of main points and arguments, intersections and overlaps between readings, questions or points that you wish to discuss for either further elaboration or clarification, and your own ideas and reactions sparked by readings. You may keep your notes in whatever way works best for your learning style, but you should be prepared to summarize and respond to readings when called upon in class discussions. Of course, participation in discussions includes thoughtful listening and responding to ideas developed during class, too! **Class participation is worth 15% of the course grade.**

In addition to preparing for discussion of required readings, students will prepare for several class meetings by completing weekly writing or empirical assignments. Some of these will be individual assignments, and others will entail working with a group. You should be prepared to share these assignments in class, as they will also help form the basis for class discussion on those days. **Each weekly assignment will be worth 10% of the course grade (Total 50%).**

Each student will complete a semester project, selecting a particular commodity that she will study in detail and analyze sociologically. Semester projects will culminate in an informational poster and presentation at an end-of-semester symposium. **The semester project is worth 35% of the course grade.**

These course requirements are designed not only to enhance your critical engagement with and understanding of consumer culture, but also to give you opportunities to practice and develop important practical and academic skills, including:

- Critical thinking
- Summarizing, responding to, and building upon scholarly work
- Locating and evaluating bibliographic sources
- Working in collaborative teams
- Collecting and analyzing empirical data
- Communicating ideas effectively by speaking, writing, and using visual media
Course Outline

Week 1—Sept. 7  **Introductions, Overview**
   View in class *Mardi Gras Made in China*

Week 2—Sept. 14  **Commodities, value, & meaning**
   **Assignment #1 due**
   Marx: Excerpts from *Capital, Volume 1*: “The Two Factors of a Commodity” and “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”
   McCracken: Meaning manufacture and movement in the world of goods
   Belk: Possessions and the Extended Self *Journal of Consumer Research* (J-Stor)
   Carrier: The Rituals of Christmas Giving

Week 3—Sept. 21  **From producers to consumers**
   Bauman: From the work ethic to the aesthetic of consumption
   Horkheimer & Adorno: The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as mass deception
   Galbraith: Excerpt from *The Affluent Society*: “The Dependence Effect”
   Cohen: From Town Center to Shopping Center *American Historical Review* 1997 (J-Stor)
   Campbell: Consuming goods and the good of consuming

Week 4—Sept. 28  **Consumer spaces / Field Trip to Jordan’s Furniture**
   Ritzer: *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*
   In preparation for the field trip, spend a little time familiarizing yourself with the company by looking around on their website.

Week 5—Oct. 5  **Advertising**
   **Assignment #2 due**
   Baudrillard: The ideological genesis of needs
   Goldman and Papson  Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning
   Gladwell: “The cool hunt”
   Watch: *The Merchants of Cool* (video e-reserve)

Week 6—Oct. 19  **Gender in Consumer Culture**
   **Deadline for semester project proposal**
   Friedan: The Sexual Sell
   May: The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home
   Wilson: Feminism and Fashion
   Fiske: Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance
   Cole & Crossley: On Feminism in the Age of Consumption
   [http://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/11-1/cole_crossley.htm](http://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/11-1/cole_crossley.htm)
   *Slim Hopes* (video e-reserve)
Week 7—Oct. 26  **Consumer culture and social class / Library instruction, Laura Reiner**
  
  **Assignment #3 due**
  Veblen: Conspicuous consumption
  Bourdieu: The aesthetic sense as the sense of distinction
  Holt: Does cultural capital structure American consumption?
  Zelizer: With strings attached: The earmarking of charitable cash

Week 8—Nov. 2  **Children in consumer society**
  
  Cook: Consumer Culture
  Pugh: *Longing and Belonging*
  Watch *Consuming Kids* (video e-reserve)

Week 9—Nov. 9  **Race/ethnicity in consumer society / Design instruction, Rebecca Darling**
  
  **Assignment #4 due**
  Halter: The new ethnic marketing experts
  Zukin: Artemio goes to Tiffany’s
  Lamont & Molnar: How Blacks use Consumption
  Weems: Consumerism and the construction of Black Female identity
  Taylor & Stern: Asian Americans: Television advertising and the model minority stereotype

Week 10—Nov. 16  **Meet in library PC classroom for Photoshop instruction**
  **Group work session for assignment #5**
  *Annotated bibliography and storyboard due*

Week 11—Nov. 23  **Consumer agency and resisting consumerism**
  
  **Assignment #5 due**
  Twitchell: “Two Cheers for Materialism”
  Friedman: “On promoting a sustainable future through consumer activism” *Journal of Social Issues* (available online through Wellesley College library)
  Kimeldorf et. al.: “Consumers with a Conscience: Will they pay more?” *Contexts* (available online through Wellesley College library)
  Kozinets & Handelman: “Adversaries of Consumption” *Journal of Consumer Research* (J-Stor)
  Elgin: “Voluntary Simplicity and the New Global Challenge”
  Schor: “Towards a New Politics of Consumption”

Week 12—Nov. 30  **Consumer culture symposium**
  **Final presentations**

Week 13—Dec. 7  **Consumer culture symposium**
  **Final presentations**
Weekly Assignments

Over the course of the semester, you will complete a total of 5 weekly assignments. Assignments 1 and 2 are to be completed individually. Assignments 3, 4, and 5 are collaborative and will be undertaken as groups. In all cases, your weekly assignments should reflect critical engagement with the week’s assigned readings.

Assignment #1: Written reflection on commodities, value, and meaning
Due September 14

Describe an object that has special meaning to you because of the way that it expresses either an important aspect of your identity or a relationship between you and some significant other. Discuss the item’s value both in economic and social terms, incorporating insights from the week’s readings as appropriate. Decide whether you regard the item as a commodity, and explain why or why not. Be prepared to discuss your object in class (show and tell is allowed, if you wish). (suggested length: 3-5 pages)

Assignment #2 Write an essay reflecting upon Enchanting a Disenchanted World and the field trip to Jordan’s Furniture.
Due October 5

Thoughtfully reflect on Enchanting a Disenchanted World in light of what you observed at Jordan’s furniture. You might describe whether and how Jordan’s exemplifies Ritzer’s cathedrals of consumption; reflect upon whether you think the company’s philosophy and/or charitable and community involvements relate to themes raised by Ritzer; compare Jordan’s with some other retail or entertainment venue in light of Ritzer’s conceptualizations; make some analysis of Jordan’s advertising in light of the readings for week 5; or write on some other topic that interests you and ties together your field observations with relevant course reading(s). (suggested length: 4-7 pages)

Assignment #3: Visualizing goods as status symbols at Wellesley
Due October 26

Working in groups of 3, discuss the role of consumer goods at Wellesley and develop a question of particular interest to you about the class-based nature of some set of consumer goods and their display as status symbols at Wellesley. As a group, develop a questionnaire or interview guide that you will each use to gather data to answer your question. Each group should collect data from at least 12 Wellesley students (i.e., each group member will interview 4 other students). Work together as a group to summarize your findings as a visual aid (table, graph, chart, diagram, picture, or other graphic) that depicts the class connotations of the consumer goods your group is interested in. Be prepared to present your visual summary to the class.
Assignment #4: Content analysis of children’s television advertising
Due November 9

Working in groups of 3, watch at least 3 hours of children’s commercial television programming (not PBS) and analyze the advertising. Groups will be given time in class on Nov. 2 to identify issues of common interest, set sampling parameters, and develop a code sheet for analyzing commercials. For example, you may want to pay attention to things like age, gender, ethnicity, activities represented, adult roles, specific behaviors, violence, etc. There may be other issues that interest you—just be thoughtful and systematic in your coding. All code sheets should also include a method for keeping track of what channel and programs you watch, what audience you think they are designed for, how many commercials are aired and what products they advertise, and the content of commercials. (Don’t forget to keep an eye out for product placement in programs, too!) Using the common code sheet developed by the group, each student will participate in data analysis (that is viewing & coding), which may be conducted either together or separately. Along with your code sheets, each group will turn in a short written memo about at least one cultural message contained in the advertising you coded. (Suggested memo length: 3-5 pages)

Assignment #5: Activist Group Profile
Due November 23

Working in groups of 3, investigate either a consumer activist group or an anti-consumerism group (examples abound and include groups like Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Commercial Alert, Adbusters, Slow Food, Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood, Earth Healing, etc.). Try to understand the group’s history, membership, issues of concern, objectives, and strategies or tactics. Discuss whether you think the group is effective in its critical engagement with consumer culture (why/why not?). Prepare a summary profile of the group, consisting of an informational handout and a brief presentation (5-10 minutes), and present it in class.

Policy for late assignments
Weekly assignments for this course are designed to contribute to the class sessions for which they are assigned. Assignments not completed on time will be accepted at any point prior to the last day of classes for half credit.
Semester Project: Commodity Analysis
Poster and Presentation

This semester-long assignment challenges you to rethink something that you consume. Choose a particular commodity or category of consumer goods that is relevant to you and conduct a thorough sociological analysis of it. There are a variety of questions you might consider pursuing in your analysis, such as:

- What is the history of this commodity? How long have people been consuming it and why? Where and when did its consumption originate? What or who encouraged it?
- Where does it come from? Who makes it and under what conditions? What paths does it travel between production and consumption?
- How is this commodity consumed? By whom and under what circumstances? What is the process of consumption? What remains after consumption and how is it handled (disposal, storage, etc.)?
- What messages communicate that item ought to be consumed? In other words, how is it marketed or advertised?
- What are the social meanings or messages tied to this thing? What social pressures lead to its consumption?
- What roles does this commodity play in the construction and display of individual identity and/or membership in social groups? How does it shape or reflect categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and/or sexual orientation?
- What role does the commodity play in marking social class boundaries and/or reproducing economic or status inequalities?
- How does it shape or reflect social relationships, either those that are personal and visible or those that are remote and largely invisible?
- What is the environmental impact of this commodity? You might consider the raw materials from which it is made, the environmental effects of production, the effects of transportation, or its disposal or afterlife.
- What are the positive effects that are associated with consumption of this item? Does its consumption contribute to any public or social goods?
- What are the negative effects associated with consumption of this item? Does its consumption contribute to any issues identified as social problems or ills?
- What does it mean to not consume this particular commodity? What statement or message is sent by people who reject its consumption?

Your analysis will be unique, depending upon the commodity you choose and your particular interests. You will probably find that you are more drawn to some of these lines of questioning than others, based on either what is relevant to the item you choose or your own background interests and agendas. That is fine: you cannot address all of these questions, and there is ample room for individualizing this project to suit your interests. What I ask is that you rethink the item you choose in ways that you have not previously considered and strive to undertake as thorough an analysis as possible.
In order to conduct an academically rigorous analysis, you should rely upon a variety of source materials. You should use at least 10-15 sources in developing your analysis. Informational sources may include such things as websites, encyclopedias, industry documents, news items, or empirical data sets. You must include at least 3 scholarly works as sources for your analysis. Items of opinion or propaganda such as advertising or public critiques may also be used as sources. Although you will need to independently locate sources appropriate to your particular topic, you are also encouraged to include relevant course readings in thinking sociologically about the commodity you analyze.

Ultimately, you will present your work (a) visually—as an informational poster and (b) orally—as a 10-15 minute public presentation. The last two class days will be set aside as symposia to which we will invite others and at which your final projects will be presented. I encourage you to think both analytically and creatively in completing this project and to strive for an innovative, polished, and professional presentation of your work. Because of the format, part of the challenge will be to work toward a concise presentation of your extensive and thorough research. On the day of your presentation, you will also submit to me (1) an electronic file of your poster, (2) a final version of your bibliography, and (3) any additional supporting documents you wish to submit (additional documents are optional).

I encourage you to start early and work on this project throughout the semester. Some key dates to keep in mind are:

Oct. 19 Deadline to submit a 1-page proposal stating what commodity you will investigate, why you are interested in it, and 3-4 questions you hope to answer.

Oct. 26 Meet in class with Laura Reiner, sociology research librarian, for library resource instruction.

Nov. 9 Meet in class with Rebecca Darling, IS, for poster design instruction. Rebecca will describe how to create a storyboard for your project.

Nov. 16 Deadline to submit an annotated bibliography and a storyboard for your poster. An annotated bibliography includes not only full bibliographic information but also an abstract of each source item, summarizing its main points and explaining its contribution to your project.

Nov. 16 Meet with Rebecca Darling in library PC classroom for Photoshop instruction.

Nov. 30 Symposium for presentation of final projects

Dec. 7 Symposium for presentation of final projects
Course Policies

This course will abide by the following grading system outlined by the Wellesley College Articles of Government (Book II, Article VII, Section 1):

Grade A is given to students who meet with conspicuous excellence every demand which can fairly be made by the course.
Grade B is given to those students who add to the minimum of satisfactory attainment excellence in not all, but some of the following: organization, accuracy, originality, understanding, insight.
Grade C is given to those students who have attained a satisfactory familiarity with the content of a course and who have demonstrated ability to use this knowledge in a satisfactory manner.
Grade D is a passing grade. There is no grade of D+ or D-.
Grade F denotes failure and a loss of credit for the course.

Academic honesty is expected of all students in accordance with the Wellesley Honor Code. Suspected honor violations relating to course work in this class will be reported to the General Judiciary.

Attendance: Except for special cases, I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. Please come to class on time. Absences and habitual tardiness will negatively affect your grade for class participation. Excessive absences will result in loss of credit for class participation.

Policy on late work: Weekly assignments for this course are designed to contribute to the class sessions at which they are due. Weekly assignments not completed on time will be accepted at any point prior to the last day of classes for half credit. Semester projects will not be accepted late, except in cases of extreme emergency, and then only by prior arrangement.

Need help?: If for any reason during the semester, you find you are struggling to keep up, please schedule an appointment and let me know what is going on so that I can offer appropriate help or accommodations.

I will gladly make necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. Those needing accommodations are encouraged to work with either Jim Wice or Barb Burck in the Pforzheimer Learning and Teaching Center in Clapp Library to make appropriate arrangements.

***Disclaimer: The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus and course schedule. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on the course conference.