

Contemporary Consumer Culture

Instructor: Prof. CHEUNG Shoan Yin (she/her/hers)

Email: sy.cheung@cuhk.edu.hk

Course Hours:

Tuesday	Lecture	2:30 p.m. – 4:15 p.m.	LDS 214
	Tutorial	4:30 p.m. – 5:15 p.m.	LDS 214 / UCC201

What are the origins of our global consumer society and its current inequalities? What does it mean to consume things and ideas? What are the affective dimensions of consumer culture? This course will discuss key issues of contemporary consumer society, including shopping, branding, lifestyle, and how material culture shapes social relations of status and power. We will investigate practices of consumption at both a theoretical level and in relation to our own practices, identities, and ethics. As consumerism is also politics, we will also discuss issues of race, gender, class, and contemporary geopolitics, as well as critical responses to consumer culture, including resisting consumerism and mobilizing consumerism for social change. We will use cultural theories to understand consumer aspirations, and how ideologies and systems of production work together to shape the ways we make meaning in our lives.

Course Objectives

By taking this course, you will be able to:

- Explain key cultural theories on consumerism
- Apply these theories to investigate your own consumer society
- Analyze how visual representations, icons, and signs communicate ideologies
- Identify how consumerism mediates and produces global relations of inequality
- Gain in-depth insight into these topics by analyzing a consumer object

Course Assessment

Participation	20%
Short Paper (2)	20%
Presentation	20%
Final Project	40%

Tutorials

Tutorials for this course will begin after the ADD/DROP period on the third week of class, on 19 September 2023. Your tutorial session will be assigned then.

1. 5 Sep. Introduction: Contemporary Consumer Culture

2. 12 Sep. Brand Society

- Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, “The Uses of Goods,” *The Consumer Society Reader* (2000)
- Richard Wilk, “Bottled Water: The Pure Commodity in the Age of Branding,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2006)
- Raymond Williams, “Advertising: The Magic System,” *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1961)

Recommended:

- Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process,” *The Social Life of Things* (1986)

3. 19 Sep. Status and Culture

- Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction.” *The Consumer Society Reader* (2000)
- George Simmel, “Fashion,” *The American Journal of Sociology* (1957)
- Jennifer Smith Maguire, “Media Representations of the Nouveaux Riches and the Cultural Constitution of the Global Middle Class,” *Cultural Politics* (2019)

Recommended:

- Thorstein Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1934)
- Rachel Sherman, “The Production of Distinctions: Class, Gender, and Taste in the Lifestyle Management Industry,” *Qualitative Sociology* (2011)

4. 26 Sep. Middle-Class

- Michel Aglietta, “The Characteristic Mode of Consumption of Fordism,” *The Consumer Society Reader* (2000)

- David Gartman, “Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logics of the Car” in *Theory, Culture and Society* (2004)
- Jun Zhang, “(Extended) Family Car, Filial Consumer-Citizens: Becoming Properly Middle Class in Post-Socialist South China,” *Modern China* (2017)

Recommended:

- Mike Featherstone, “Mass Culture,” *Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology* (2014)
- Rachel Heinman, Carla Freeman, and Mark Liechty, “Introduction: Charting an Anthropology of the Middle-Classes,” *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography* (2012)

5. 3 Oct. Modern Living

- Per Lenin and David Manchin, “Forty Years of IKEA Kitchens and the Rise of a Neoliberal Control of Domestic Space,” *Visual Communication* (2018)
- Christopher Holmes Smith, “Freeze Frames: Frozen Foods and Memories of the Postwar American Family,” *Kitchen Culture in America* (2000)
- Ying-Kit Chan, “Creating Modern Women: The Kitchen in Postcolonial Singapore, 1960-90,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2020)

Recommended:

- Amy Sue Bix, “Equipped for Life: Gendered Technical Training and Consumerism in Home Economics, 1920-1980,” *Technology and Culture* (2002)
- Yunah Lee, “The Modern Kitchen in Korea: Design, Modernity, and Transnationalism,” *Design and Modernity in Asia* (2002)

6. 10 Oct. Consumer Identity

- Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Branding Consumer Citizens: Gender and the Emergence of Brand Culture,” *Authentic(tm): The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012)

- Serra Tinic, “United Colors and United Meanings: Benneton and the Commodification of Social Issues,” *Journal of Communication* (1997)
- Rudy Lierman, “Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of Modern Consumer Culture (1860-1914)” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10(4):79-102

Recommended:

- Frank Trentmann, “Crossing divides: consumption and globalization in history,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2009)

7. 17 Oct. Intersectionality

- Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” *Gender, Race, Class, and Media* (1981)
- Amy Hansen, “Yellow Peril Consumerism: China, North America, and An Era of Global Trade,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2012)
- Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping the Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising,” *Imperial Leather* (1995)

Recommended:

- Susan Bordo, “Introduction,” *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993)

8. 24 Oct. Gender, Sexuality, and Markets

- Joan Acker, “Class, Gender, and the Relations of Distribution,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1988)
- Amy Hansen, “The Gendered Rice Bowl: The Sexual Politics of Service Work in Urban China,” *Gender and Society* (2005)
- Ashley Mears, “Girls as Elite Distinction: The Appropriation of Bodily Capital,” *Poetics* (2015)

Recommended:

- Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges, “The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Consumption,” *Monthly Review* (1976)

9. 31 Oct. Fashion

- In-class screening: *Thread*

10. 7 Nov. The Body Beautiful

- Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, “The Skin of New Vietnam,” *Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia* (2019)
- Miliann King, “Manicures as Transnational Body Labor,” *Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia* (2019)

11. 14 Nov. Super Rich

- Mike Featherstone, “Genealogies of the Global,” *Theory, Culture and Society* (2006)
- Joanne Roberts, “Is Contemporary Luxury Morally Acceptable? A Question for the Super-Rich,” *Cultural Politics* (2019)
- Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski, “Elite Mobilities: The Semiotic Landscapes of Luxury and Privilege” *Social Semiotics* (2012)

Recommended:

- Aeron Davis, “Top CEO’s, Financialization, and the Creation of the Super-Rich Economy,” *Cultural Politics* (2019)

12. 21 Nov. Consumer Politics

- Tim Bartley et al, “Electronics: The Hidden Costs of Computing,” *Looking Behind the Label: Global Industries and the Conscientious Consumer* (2015)
- Margaret Willis and Juliet B. Schor, “Does Changing a Light Bulb Lead to Changing the World? Political Action and the Conscientious Consumer,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2012)
- Kate Cairns and Josee Johnston, “Feeding the ‘Organic Child’: Mothering through Ethical Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2013)

Recommended:

- Michael Maniates, "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" *Global Environmental Politics* (2001)

13. 28 Nov. Final Presentations