AMST498B Special Topics in American Studies
Fashion and Consumer Culture in the U.S.
Fall 2012

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Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 11-noon and 2-2:30 PM, by appointment (use online form)
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Description:
This seminar will introduce major works in the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture, from Veblen's "Theory of the Leisure Class" to emerging fashion theories. Along the way, we will examine a variety of phenomena through these theoretical lenses. Possible topics include religion and consumption, children as consumers, media representations of the fashion industry, dress codes, class and consumption and how individuals use clothing to express identities and group membership. We will devote several weeks to a consideration of current "ethical" consumption trends using the critical tools we have acquired. All students will explore a topic of their own choice, resulting in a final paper, presentation and annotated bibliography; graduate students will also lead one class session on a topic of their choice.

Objectives:
By completing AMST 498B, students will:

- Understand the significance of major works in the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture
- Become familiar with the range of disciplines and approaches involved in the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture
- Understand how scholars approach the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture
- Be able to identify answerable potential research questions
- Improve skills in reading, writing, organizing information, and working collaboratively.

Readings and other "texts"
There are no textbooks or course readings to purchase for this course. Readings or other resources for each section are listed in the course schedule. Most are available online, either from any computer or via Research Port with your UM id.
Assessment and Grading

You are welcome to make an appointment to discuss your standing in the course or the evaluation of your work at any time. Please stop in to see me if you’d like help with any aspect of your course performance.

Engagement (10%) Deep learning happens when people are engaged with the material and with each other. I assess your engagement based on a variety of factors, including attendance, participation (in class and online comments) and initiative. If you are highly engaged and contribute positively to the class on a regular basis, you will earn a 10/10. Being merely present will earn you 5/10. Being disruptive or having a negative impact will earn you 0/10.

Short writing assignments (30%) These assignments consist of 3 brief, informal in-class essays and 7 blog posts, scored as completed (3), partial (2) or not completed (0), with a 1-point penalty for late work. The in-class essays will connect course concepts with your discovery research project. Your blog posts (about 200-250 words) should introduce the class to interesting news items or online sources, or provide insightful analysis of a personal experience. More information is available on the course blog handout.

Midterm (15%) There will be an in-class essay exam on October 16, based on the required readings, class discussions and your research progress up to that point. Notes and laptops are permitted; you may complete and submit the exam electronically, if you prefer.

Term Project (45%) Throughout the semester, you will pursue a “discovery” research project of your own choosing, submitted in three parts:

- **Annotated bibliography (15%)** You will select ten essential, must-read sources on your chosen topic and submit a separate annotated bibliography, consisting of evaluative abstracts of approximately 100 words. *(Email attachment due midnight November 12.)*
- **Presentation (10%)** Ten-minute informational report presented in class. *(November 27-December 11; specific date will be assigned based on your topic)*
- **Prospectus (20%)** A review of the existing literature on your chosen topic, concluding with an assessment of the potential for further research. 8-10 pages, not including bibliography and illustrations. *(Email attachment due Friday, December 14 by 3 pm.)*

For a detailed description of the project, consult the project handout.

**GRADING:**

A: Signifies outstanding work. You completed the assignments on time and exceptionally well. Your writing was clear and concise, and your approach to the intellectual content of the course was creative while showing in-depth knowledge of the ideas covered in class and the readings. You contributed
positively class discussions, demonstrating that you were listening actively and well prepared. An A grade signifies that you went “above and beyond” the requirements and consistently took initiative.

B: Signifies good work. You completed the assignments on time and well. Your writing and argumentation were clear, but could use more attention to detail. You demonstrated an understanding of concepts explored in our readings and ideas discussed in class, but did not consistently take the initiative. You contributed positively to the class.

C: Signifies acceptable work. You completed the assignments adequately, and usually on time. Your writing and argumentation need significant improvement, and you did not always demonstrate mastery of assigned reading material. Some of your work may have been at a higher level, but overall quality was inconsistent.

D and F: You did not complete assignments and did not display serious engagement.

Additional Policies

- Because I will communicate frequently via email sent from ELMS and announcements on ELMS, everyone needs to monitor our class site daily. Students are responsible for checking their UMD email regularly or making arrangements to have your UMD mail forwarded to an email account you actually read. YOU are responsible for resolving technical problems with ELMS or email access.
- Yes, you may bring your laptop or tablet to class, as long as (1) it is not a distraction to you or your classmates and (2) you are willing to do quick searches during the class.
- Late work will receive a lower grade. It is your responsibility to get projects completed and posted in advance of the deadlines. Be sure to give yourself adequate time for solving technical problems and working around the occasional system crash. Save your files frequently and back up your work.
- Studies have repeatedly shown that the better your attendance, the better your grade, so regular attendance is in your best interest. As a rule, my attitude towards absences depends on the activities scheduled for that day.
  - If we are having an in-class assignment, exam or student presentations, I expect this class to be your top priority, and any absences must be accompanied by verification of approved University activity (in advance) or illness.
  - If you miss a regular class due to illness or emergency, no written excuse is required; you will be expected to make up the absence with additional online activity for that week.
  - If you experience an illness or other disruption that results in falling behind in written assignments, contact me as soon as the situation becomes evident, in order to develop a plan for making up the work.
- Code of Academic Integrity: All students enrolled in AMST 498B are expected to abide by the
Student Honor Council's Code of Academic Integrity which can be found here: http://www.shc.umd.edu/whatis.html. Academic dishonesty (cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, and plagiarism) will not be tolerated. The definitions for these offenses are posted on the website; I urge you to familiarize yourselves with them. "Academic dishonesty is a serious offense which may result in suspension or expulsion from the university."

- Students with disabilities: Please identify yourselves early in the semester so that we can make appropriate arrangements through the Office of Disability Support Services.
Course Schedule:

8/30 Course introduction

9/4 Consumer studies – theoretical development

Fashion in Veblen’s time slideshow

Veblen, Thorstein. *The theory of the leisure class*, 1912. 1-34. (Google Books)

9/6 Consumer studies – theoretical development, continued


Optional: A few big names in consumer culture theory:

Grant McCracken http://cultureby.com/
Douglas Holt http://sic.conversationsnetwork.org/shows/detail3673.html
Russell Belk http://research.schulich.yorku.ca/faculty-profile-details.jsp?id=95&tab=0

Sept. 11 & 13 Consumer studies – American Studies research

Research abstracts, *Pink and Blue* Chapter 1

Sept. 18 & 20 In-class 1* 9/18; The role of consumption in cultural constructions of identity and difference (theory)


Sept. 25 & 27 The role of consumption in cultural constructions of identity and difference -- Gender, Race and Controlling Bodies


SPANX website: www.SPANX.com, also SpanxInc’s YouTube Channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/SpanxInc
SPANX on the Red Carpet: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w5Un4HvbXI
Under Armour website: www.underarmour.com

Oct. 2 & 4 In-class 2* 10/2; Cultures of everyday life (Material culture)

Ramlik, Suzanne, “Crafting a New World”,
http://www.utne.com/mind-body/Crafting-a-New-World.aspx?ixzz1VCwe8BZo

Matthews, Christopher Todd. “Form and Deformity: The Trouble with Victorian Pockets.”
Victorian Studies 52, no. 4 (Summer 2010). (UM)

October 9 & 11 Cultures of everyday life: Reality TV and consumer culture
Watch one episode of a reality show in EACH of the following categories:
home and garden (includes house hunting, DIY shows)
wedding
antiques and collectibles (Pawn Stars, American Pickers, Antiques Road Show)
food and cooking
(Many of these shows are available online.)

October 16 Midterm exam 10/16*

October 18 Intro to ethical consumption

October 23 & 25 critics of of consumption
For October 23:


For October 25:

Slade, Giles, Made to Break, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2006. Read introduction and chapter 1 only. (Linked to ELMS, Week by Week)

View first 15 minutes of "Pyramids of Waste"
http://dotsub.com/view/aed3b8b2-1889-4df5-ae63-ad85f572f27
October 30 - November 1 sustainable clothing


"Do The Green Thing"

November 6 - 8 sustainable food choices; In-class 3* on 11/8


In addition, select and read at least one item from this list.


Ikerd, John. "Meeting the Challenge of Peak Oil with Sustainable Agriculture"


→ Annotated Bibliography due November 12 ←

November 13 & 15 No class meeting; Individual consultations about final projects

November 20 - No class meeting; Individual consultations, Thanksgiving

November 27 & 29 Presentations by students*

December 4 & 6 Presentations by students*

December 11 Presentations by students*

*Essential activity; see attendance policies for explanation

*There is no final exam in the course; your final paper is due Friday, Dec 14 by 3 pm.