Why should we study consumer culture? For starters, we live in the age of the consumer. Consumers and consumption keep the wheels of our world turning. Consumption of marketer-made things and services is everywhere around us. We can’t escape it. Consider how you will most probably read this document on a particular software (PDF Reader) on a particular machine (my educated guess – a steel-grey Macbook Pro) while consuming marketer-produced content in the next chrome tab. For another, to paraphrase a famous sociologist, it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of the consumer.

But why study ‘consumer culture’ and not consumer behavior or consumer satisfaction or any number of such concepts. Why culture? The short answer is that we can’t consume a product or service without a sophisticated but mostly taken for granted cultural understanding of how/what/when/where to consume.

During the course, we’ll learn that there isn’t a singular consumer culture, although the people at McDonalds, Coca Cola and Marvel have attempted to universalize consumer culture with some success. To the extent that all of us can recognize a bottle of coke, Iron Man and a Big Mac. We’ll also learn that there are many kinds of consumers, because the transformation of everyday people into consumers did not follow the same process everywhere or had the same source material to work with.

We will begin with a trek back in time, to understand the formation of the consumer subject. We will then compare and contrast how consumers in different cultures evolved and struggled with their consumer identities (or did not). We will then ask a few tough questions of these evolved consumers, about their impact on the social and cultural landscapes that they inhabited. We will then go on a journey with the newest iterations - responsible and ethical consumption (done by people like you) and its struggles to break free of all that came before it found a conscience.

Upon completion of the course, all of us should be able to

* Map the evolution and diffusion of consumer-cultures as they move across geographies and eras
* Understand different theoretical approaches to investigate what goes on with consumers and consumption contexts
* Exhibit fluency with the theoretical and practical building blocks of consumer cultures
* Critically evaluate conceptual explanations of the formation and revision of consumer culture across different societies and social groups

**ASSESSMENT AND GRADING**

I will assess student performance on the following measures:

1. Attendance & Class Participation (Individual) (15%)
2. Discussion of Assigned Class Readings (Group) (20%)
3. Weekly Cultural Insight Task (Individual) (40%)
4. Concluding Assignment (Individual) (25%)

**STUDENT WORKLOAD**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ACTIVITY | Breakdown (Hours) | Total (Hours) |
| Contact Sessions + Reflection | 18 + 36 | 54 |
| Discussion of Assigned Class Readings |  | 40 |
| 1. Personal Reading & Reflection | 30 |  |
| 2. Pre-Class Discussion | 10 |  |
| Weekly Cultural Insight Task |  | 35 |
| 1. Personal Reading and Reflection | 30 |  |
| 2. Writing | 5 |  |
| Concluding Essay | 35 | 35 |
| TOTAL |  | 164 |

**PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE (Subject to change based on company schedules)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Session** | **Date** | **Topic** | **Assigned Readings** | **Visitors** |
| 1 | Tuesday, October 27 | Course Guidelines & Introduction to Consumer Culture |  |  |
| 2 | Thursday, October 29  | Lecture: The Formation of the Consumer Subject | The Premodern Consumer, The Responsible Consumer, The Citizen Consumer, The Less Industrialized Consumer |  |
| 3 | Tuesday, November 3 |  TBD | TBD |  |
| 4 | Thursday, November 5 | Guest Lecture: How do brands stay relevant in the 21st century |  | Simone Bocedi, Brand Solutions Partner, Smartly.io |
| 5 | Tuesday, November 10 | Lecture: Identity, branding and cultural consumption | Selling Pain, Brand Public, Protecting Consumer Identity, Resurgent Identities |  |
| 6 | Thursday, November 12 | Lecture: Group Belonging/Exclusion and consumer cultures | Liquid Consumption, Veiling in Style, Fatshionistas, Shattered Identity |  |
| 7 | Tuesday, November 17 | Lecture: The explicit politics of consumer cultures | Swadeshi, Zhao, Stigma (Crockett), Inverted Status (Varman), Context of Context |  |
| 8 | Thursday, November 19 | Lecture: Enchantment and Commodification | Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism, Paradise, The Post-Marketized Consumer, The Pure Commodity |  |
| 9 | Tuesday, November 24 | Lecture: Consumption and Emancipation | Burning man, Consumer Deceleration, Escaping the gift economy, Status Games, |  |
| 10 | Thursday, November 26 | Lecture: Technologized Consumer Cultures | Consuming Technocultures, Extended Self in a Digital World, Networks of Desire, Paradoxes of Technology |  |
| 11 | Tuesday, December 1 | Guest Lecture: Culture in Consumption |  | VISITOR: TBD |
| 12 | Thursday, December 3 | Concluding Lecture: Leveraging Cultural Insight |  |  |

**COURSE MATERIALS**

I will post PDF files of assigned readings on mycourses at least a week in advance so students will have ample time to familiarize themselves with the literature.

**GUIDELINES FOR WEEKLY DISCUSSION OF CLASS READINGS**

Each group will be assigned TWO articles during the course where they will be the main discussants for the article’s discussion in class (with me leading the discussion). The group will be responsible for about 5-10 minutes of Q&A related to the article (NOTE: NO SLIDES NEEDED. But reading the article before class – MUCH NEEDED). We will finalize the discussion schedule during THURSDAY’S (29.10.2020) class. To keep it fair for all the groups, we will use a lottery system to schedule the presentations. The one pre-condition will be that no group has to present twice in the same week.