

**Culture and Consumption:  
Why Do People Buy Things They “Don’t Need”?**

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*Course Overview:*

This course will explore a question that has inspired social criticism and challenged marketers since at least the 18th century: Why do people buy things they “don’t need”? Economists take consumer preferences as given, while moralists condemn unnecessary purchases as self-indulgent or worse. Between these extremes is the territory we will explore, drawing on classic and contemporary social science along with personal and journalistic accounts of consumer experiences. What are the subjective sources of economic value? Beyond function, what purposes does consumption serve? How does the nature of consumption change with social conditions? What are the personal and social consequences? This course blends theory and application. It should appeal to students who want to delve into the meaning of life in a consumer society as well as those interested in practical marketing applications.

*Required texts:*

These books are available from Amazon. Other readings are available for free online as noted on the syllabus.

Elizabeth Currid Halkett, [\*The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class\*](#)

Grant McCracken, [\*Culture and Consumption\*](#) (Make sure you get the original volume, which is green. There is a second volume, which is yellow.)

Virginia Postrel, [\*The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion\*](#) (a paperback version should be available shortly)

*Expectations:*

This class is a collegial enterprise, in which everyone is expected to participate. That means attending all classes, thoughtfully preparing the assignments in advance, and contributing to class discussions. The reading load is heavy—this is supposed to be an elite-level course—and Greece is inviting, so I encourage you to read as much as possible before arrival. That will also give you a chance to review and better digest the material once class starts.

I will set up a private, unindexed WordPress blog for the class. Before each session, post brief answers to the following questions and be prepared to discuss them at the beginning of our discussion: 1) What in the readings grabbed your attention and why? 2) What did you have difficulty understanding and why? 3) Were there words, phrases, or references that interested or

puzzled you? What did you find when you looked them up? There are no stupid questions! If you're confused, chances are other people are too.

There is a "short assignment" listed for each class. The assignment for Session 5 is mandatory and due the night before, because we will use it in our group work during that session. Choose three of the other short assignments to complete (four in total). Please print out your work, with ample margins so I can write comments, and give it to me at the beginning of class. (Again, the Session 5 assignment is an exception. It should be posted on the blog the night before.)

The final project may be an essay 1500–2000 words long or, with advance permission, some other type of project (e.g., a video, a branding pitch). It is due via email by midnight Pacific Time on August 31. For written work, please use a PDF. No later than the night before session 10, please email me a description of what you would like to work on. I will meet with each student to discuss your final project idea.

Students who aren't taking the course for credit aren't expected to do a final project but should complete the short assignments.

Plagiarism is a big no-no. In my line of work, people lose their jobs for it and I will not hesitate to flunk or downgrade offenders. Use your own words to express your own thoughts and cite your sources. If you have any doubts, ask me.

### *Grading:*

Class participation, including opening question preparation: 20%

Short assignments: 10% each (40% total)

In-class group project and presentation: 10%

Final project, due August 31: 30%

### *Course Schedule and Assignments:*

#### **Session 1: Why Do People Buy Things They "Don't Need"?**

Abraham Maslow, "[A Theory of Human Motivation](#)," *Psychological Review*, 1943

Lois Ardery, "[Inarticulate Longings](#)" (1924)

Case studies:

"[The Significance of Owning a Pair of Air Jordans](#)," *Newsweek*, October 18, 2015

Yiyin Li, "[Eat, Memory, Orange Crush](#)," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2006

Sarah Skwire, "[Bronze Boots: My Descent Into Sin](#)" and Louisa May Alcott, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, chapter 3, "Polly's Troubles" ([Google Books](#), [Amazon](#))

Linda Scott, "[Dignity and Small Luxuries](#)"

Kerry Burke, Mark Morales, Barbara Ross, and Ginger Adams Otis, "[Barneys accused teen of using fake debit card for \\$349 belt because he's a 'young black American male': lawsuit](#)," New York Daily News, October 24, 2013

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 1:* Maslow writes, "A desire for an ice cream cone might actually be an indirect expression of a desire for love." Pick one of the case studies above and write a short analysis (250–350 words) of what desire(s) might have motivated the purchase or desired purchase. What does this purchase tell us about consumer motivations more generally?

### **Session 2: Theories of Consumption**

Grant McCracken, "Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods" and "Consumption, Change, and Continuity," *Culture & Consumption*, pp. 71–89, 130–137

Jens Beckert, "[The Transcending Power of Goods: Imaginative Value in the Economy](#)," MPIfG Discussion Paper, April 2010

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 2:* Pick one of the case studies from Session 1 and write a short analysis (250–350 words) applying McCracken's idea of meaning manufacture or Beckert's idea of imaginative value to it.

### **Session 3: Birth of the Consumer Society**

Grant McCracken, *Culture & Consumption*, "Three Moments in the History of Consumption" and "Ever Dearer in Our Thoughts: Patina and the Representation of Status before and after the Eighteenth Century," pp. 10–43

David Hume (1752) "Of Refinement in the Arts," from *Essays, Moral, Political, Literary*, available free [here](#)

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Parts IV and V, "Of the Effect of Utility upon the Sentiment of Approbation" and "Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Sentiments of Moral Approbation and Disapprobation," available free [here](#).

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 3:* McCracken points to the importance of patina in signaling family status, while Smith depicts the enthusiasm of consumers for "trinkets of frivolous utility" distinguished by their ingenuity and, by implication, their novelty. Write 250–350 words applying one or both of these ideas to an example contemporary consumption. Can the two types of motivations co-exist? What does the contrast between the two tell us about individual personality and social context?

### **Session 4: Conspicuous Consumption**

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, chapters 4 "Conspicuous Consumption" and 7 "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture," free from [Google Books](#) or as 99-cent Kindle edition from [Amazon](#)

Elizabeth Currid Halkett, [\*The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class\*](#), “Ballet Slippers and Yale Tuition,” page numbers to come when book is published in April

Virginia Postrel, “[Inconspicuous Consumption](#),” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008

“[Hey, Big Spender](#),” *Toronto Life*, June 2016

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 4:* Social media makes it easier than ever to make your consumption conspicuous. Write 250–350 words speculating on how Veblen would analyze today’s consumption and media patterns. What would he make of Instagram? Of YouTube haul videos?

### **Session 5: Group Work and Presentations**

This work will be done in small groups during class time: Applying the theories discussed so far, develop three branding ideas aimed at one or more of your personas: one emphasizing practical features, one positional, and one imaginative. Each group will draw three possible “client” products or services at random and choose one to work on and which personas to target. Each group will have 10-15 minutes at the end of class to present their ideas. (The size of the class will determine the exact logistics of this assignment.)

*Mandatory short assignment due at 9 p.m. the night before Session 5:* Create two characters (“personas”), one man and one woman. Give them names and backgrounds (ages, professions, where they live, personalities, interests, desires, taste, motivations, etc.). Find a photo to represent each. Post the photos and descriptions on the blog.

### **Session 6: Identity Signals, Social Influences, and the Diderot Effect**

Georg Simmel, “[Fashion](#),” *International Quarterly*, 1904 (reprinted in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 1957)

Grant McCracken, “The Diderot Effect,” [\*Culture and Consumption\*](#)

*Father Knows Best*, “[The Mink Coat](#),” 1955 (Link is to YouTube. Also available on [Amazon](#) for \$1.99.)

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 6:* What we buy says something to ourselves and to the world about who we are, both as individuals and as members of social groups. (In [\*The Substance of Style\*](#), I call this phenomenon “standing out and fitting in.”) So incongruity creates puzzling messages. Write 250–350 words on an example of incongruity that you’ve observed or experienced. Were the mixed messages the inaccurate of choices made for other reasons? Or did they reveal something true?

### **Session 7: Crafting Consumption**

Colin Campbell, “[The Craft Consumer](#),” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2003

Elizabeth Currid Halkett, [\*The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class\*](#), “Conspicuous Production,” page numbers to come when book is published in April

Craig J. Thompson and Zeynep Arsel, "[The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers' \(Anticorporate\) Experiences of Glocalization](#)," *Journal of Consumer Research*, December 2004

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 7:* Thompson and Arsel divide anti-Starbucks patrons into *café flâneurs* and *oppositional localists*. Write 250–350 words applying Campbell or Halkett's ideas about craft to these two groups.

### **Session 8: Experiences vs. Goods**

Leaf van Boven and Thomas Gilovich, "[To Have or To Do. That Is the Question](#)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2003

Aaron C. Weidman and Elizabeth W. Dunn, "[The Unsung Benefits of Material Things](#)," *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2016

James Hamblin, "[Buy Experiences, Not Things](#)," *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2014

Elissa Strauss, "[Experiences Over Stuff Is a Tired—and Sexist—Idea](#)," *Slate*, June 28, 2016

*Short Assignment due by midnight before Session 8:* Most theories of consumption implicitly or explicitly assume consumers are buying physical objects. Pick a specific experience and write 250–300 words on how one of the theories we've discussed in previous sessions might apply to it. How does the intangible and ephemeral nature of an experience change how the theory works?

### **Session 8: Glamour and Displaced Meaning**

Grant McCracken, "The Evocative Power of Things," *Culture & Consumption*, pp. 104–117

Virginia Postrel, *Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion*, pp. 3–23, 31–48, 150–160, 171–199

*Short Assignment, due at beginning of Session 8:* Write 250–350 words describing an example of a purchase you've made, or wish you could make, that serves as a "bridge to hopes and ideals." Questions to consider: What are the hopes and ideals? How does the good/brand represent them? Where does the meaning come from? Has it been consciously constructed by the company or did it emerge independently?

### **Session 10: House and Home**

Katy McLaughlin, "[Hard-Core House Collectors](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2016

Meghan Daum, Life Would Be Perfect If I Lived in that House, [excerpt](#)

Grant McCracken, "Lois Roget: Curatorial Consumer in a Modern World," *Culture & Consumption*, pp. 44–53

Jura Koncius, "[Stuff it: Millennials nix their parents' treasures](#)," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2015

Jennifer Levitz, "[Lock the Door! Your Boomer Parents Have Decided to Downsize](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2016

Dahleen Glanton, "[Kids see no wealth in boomers' hand-me-downs](#)," *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 2012

*Short Assignment due by midnight before Session 10:* Using one or more of the theories discussed in sessions 6, 7, 8, or 9, pick a *specific* artifact found in the home and write 250–300 words on why it might be valued by one generation but discarded by the next. The artifact could be something mentioned in one of the articles, something from your own life, something you've seen elsewhere, or something out of your imagination. You can even write fiction if you choose.