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

Fall 2011

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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 then devote several weeks to a consideration of current “ethical” consumption trends using the critical tools we have acquired. All students will complete a research project resulting in a final paper; 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 American Studies scholars approach the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture
- Practice selected methods for the study of consumer behavior and consumer culture
- 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 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%) Learning happens when people are engaged with the material and with each other. I assess your engagement based on a variety of factors: attendance, participation (in class and online) and initiative. If you are highly engaged and contribute positively to the class on a regular basis, you will merit a 10/10.

Short writing assignments (30%) These assignments consist of brief, informal in-class essays or blog posts, scored as completed (3), partial (2) or not completed (0), with a 1-point penalty for late work.

Midterm (15%) There will be an in-class essay exam on October 18, 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-style project of your own choosing, culminating in three deliverables:

Presentation (10%) Ten-minute informational report presented in class or delivered online.
Prospectus (20%) An assessment of the potential for further research of your chosen topic. 8-10 pages, not including bibliography and illustrations.
Annotated bibliography (15%) You will select the ten most useful sources referenced in your prospectus and submit a separate annotated bibliography, consisting of evaluative abstracts of approximately 100 words.

For a detailed description of the project, consult the handout distributed in class.

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 master 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 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.

- Code of Academic Integrity: All students enrolled in AMST 340 are expected to abide by the Student Honor Council's Code of Academic Integrity which can be found here: http://www.shc.umd.edu/whatish.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:

9/1 Course introduction

9/6 Consumer studies – theoretical development

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

9/8 Consumer studies – theoretical development, continued


Sept. 13 & 15 Consumer studies – American Studies research
Dissertation abstracts, visiting speakers, inside *Pink and Blue*

Sept. 20 & 22 In-class 1* 9/20; the role of consumption in cultural constructions of identity and difference

Sept. 27 & 29 Cultural constructions of identity and difference
Race, gender

Oct. 4 & 6 In-class 2* 10/4; Cultures of everyday life
Material culture, costume collection

October 11-13 Cultures of everyday life
Reality TV and consumer culture

October 18-20 Midterm exam*; Intro to ethical consumption
Definitions, scope: sustainability, ethical, just

October 25 –27 critics of of consumption


November 1- 3 sustainable clothing

“Do The Green Thing”

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

**Feed Sacks: A Sustainable Fabric History**, Etsy Blog
Kumar, S, and P Malegeant. “Strategic alliance in a closed-loop supply chain, a case of manufacturer and eco-non-profit organization.” *Technovation* 26, no. 10 (October 2006): 1127-1135. (UM)
“The Footprint Chronicles.” Interactive website. *Patagonia*. (spend about one hour on the site and take notes!)

November 8-10 sustainable food choices; In-class 3* on 11/10


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

**Ikerd, John. “Meeting the Challenge of Peak Oil with Sustainable Agriculture”**

November 15-17 Individual consultations about final projects
November 22 - Individual consultations, Thanksgiving
November 29 - December 1 Presentations by students*
December 6 – 8 Presentations by students*
December 13 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 16 by 5 pm.