COURSE SYLLABUS

SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMERISM
IFSA Rome

US semester credit hours: 3
Contact Hours: 45
Course Code: SO386-09 / MK386-09
Course Length: Semester
Delivery Method: Face to face
Language of Instruction: English
Suggested Cross-listings: Sociology, Marketing

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the ways in which modern societies place significance on money and material possessions and the undeniable reality of the “consumer society.” Through a sociological and interdisciplinary approach, consumerism will be studied, drawing upon academic research from various theoretical and applied perspectives. The ubiquitous presence of consumerism and its influences on individual behaviors, social welfare, culture, environmental quality, economic performance, and public policy, will be examined. We will learn to critically engage with the consumer culture that we are steeped in. The Made in Italy governmental and social movement, which labels goods manufactured in-country as such and promotes their high quality, is a vibrant case study for the investigative topics of this course.

COURSE DELIVERY

Students are expected to read or view assigned resources in advance and be prepared to actively discuss them in class. In most meetings, the instructor will overview the topic and then facilitate a group discussion, drawing out relevant themes, following up on specific lines of inquiry, and prompting students’ thoughtful engagement with the topic.

Students are encouraged to bring their prior learning experiences into class discussions (based on experiential learning theory) and to make cognitive connections between this course and others in IFSA Rome whenever possible (based on the philosophy of integrative learning).

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Understand many of the effects of consumerism on our well-being, culture, the environment, and economies from the local to global level
- Explore the impact of advertising and marketing on personal behavior and culture
- Gain facility with ethnographic interviewing and critically engaging with tourist sites
- Be conversant in the language of semiotics
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- Strengthen written communication skills
- Identify resources available for sociology of consumerism research
- Make cognitive connections between learning in this course and other learning experiences in IFSA Rome

COURSE OUTLINE

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<th>Week</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Readings / Viewings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>Expectations for the class, including syllabus, grading, etc.</td>
<td>Review syllabus, expectations, projects</td>
<td>Video Clip: History of Consumerism <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Unq3R--M0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Unq3R--M0</a></td>
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<td><strong>Class Discussion:</strong> What is consumerism? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks?</td>
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<td>2A</td>
<td>The Birth of Consumerism</td>
<td>Reading: Ewen – <em>Captains of Consciousness</em>, pp. 1-48</td>
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<td>2B</td>
<td>Becoming Consumers, Internalizing the Logic of the Market</td>
<td>Reading: Ewen – <em>Captains of Consciousness</em>, pp. 51-102&lt;br&gt;Video Clip: A Very Short Introduction to Semiotics <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO9xl5n9aYI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO9xl5n9aYI</a> (this is a boringly presented video, but the information it contains is invaluable and will help make your semiotic paper clearer.)</td>
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## COURSE SYLLABUS

| 3A | Semiotics: The Study of Signs and Symbols | **In class Activity:** In instructor will bring in Italian ads for the class to conduct semiotic analyses. | **Reading** - Hall - *Representation and Signifying Practices* - Chapter 1  
| 3B | Semiotics: The Study of Signs and Symbols | **Reading:** Hall – *Representation and Signifying Practices* - Chapter 2 |
| 4A | Audience Reception | **Class Discussion:** As audiences are we dupes to the messages we are given? Are we free to interpret images and messages as we wish?  
**Activity:** Look at Italian ads try to find ways in which they could be differently interpreted. | **Reading:** Hall – “Encoding/Decoding” in Ryan, Ed. *Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, Blackwell Press. 2008  
**Semiotic Analysis due.** |
| 4B | Creating Racial Identity Through the Market | **Class Discussion:** Based on the readings, how are race and power connected. | **Reading:**  
<p>| 5A | LatinX Identity | <strong>Class Discussion:</strong> How was the Latinx community “created” by Latinx television programs? Who was included and who left out? | <strong>Reading:</strong> Davila – “Images, Producing Culture” in <em>Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People</em>, University of California Press. 2001 |</p>
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| 8A | Creating History and Heritage | **Reading:** Gundle - “Visions of Prosperity: Consumerism and Popular Culture in Italy from the 1920s to the 1950s,” *Three Postwar Eras in Comparison*, 151-172 (selected excerpts)  
Zhang – “From a Symbol of Imperialistic Penetration to a Site of Cultural Heritage The ‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ in Tianjin” in Maags, Ed. *Chinese Cultural Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*. Amsterdam University Press. 2018 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 8B | Politics At The Checkout Line | **Reading:** MacCannell – “Staged Authenticity Today” in *The Ethics of Sightseeing*. University of California Press. 2011  
**Video:** Alain de Botton – Status Anxiety  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1MqJPHxy6g |
| 9B | Shopping Tourism | **Reading:** Chiara Rabbiosi “The Invention of Shopping Tourism: The Discursive Repositioning of Landscape in an Italian Retail-led Case” in *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 9:2, pp. 70-86 (2011) |
| 10A | Ethnographic Interviewing | **Class Discussion:** Answering questions about doing an ethnography  
**Video:** Gabe and Kristy: Getting People to Talk: An Ethnography & Interviewing Primer  https://vimeo.com/1269848  
This was made for designers but has a lot of useful information for sociologists as well. |
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| **10B** | Fashion | **Reading:** Ewen – “Fashion and Democracy” in *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, University of Minnesota Press. (1992)  
**Video:** Killing Us Softly 4, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnAY6S4_m5I |
| **11B** | Sweatshops Abroad and at “Home” | **Reading:** Kinetz – “Deadly inferno exposes true cost of illicit economy in Italy’s illegal Chinese sweatshops” in *The Japan Times*, Oct. 19, 2014  
Reuters – “Big Trouble In Italy’s ‘Little China’ As Authorities Crack Down On Sweatshop Factories And Vigilantes” in *South China Morning Post*. Sunday, 03 July, 2016  
Max – “The Chinese Workers Who Assemble Designer Bags in Tuscany” in *The New Yorker*, April 16, 2018  
**Video:** BBC Series “Blood, Sweat and T Shirts” any episode. *Instructor will provide a Youtube link.* |
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Fashion and Consumerism Ethnography Due |
| **13A** | “High Culture” – Museums and Art Galleries  
Video: Wasteland  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L35RGQL9E |
| **13B** | **14A** | Art in the Global South  
Class Discussion: Wasteland. Can art be used as an engine for social change? Why or Why not? How so?  
| **14B** | Class Discussion: How does the selling of art change according to location? Does art mean different things in the global south vs. in the north and one of the worlds’ “greatest art centers” such as Italy? What can we learn from this literature that is applicable to your upcoming papers?  
Reading: Schneebaum – “Tourism and Art” in *Pacific Arts*, No. 3 (January 1991), pp. 27-28 |
| **15A** | **Class Discussion:** What have you learned during this course? How did course  
Art and Culture Paper Due |
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<td>15B</td>
<td>Class Wrap-Up Review. Discussion of consumerism in study abroad.</td>
<td>Reflection Journal Due</td>
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RESOURCES

The following are required texts. All other readings are available in pdf format.


EVALUATION METHODS

The course instructor will provide specific requirements and grading rubrics for individual assignments for the course. Your final grade in the course will be comprised of the following course requirements:

**Reflection Journal:** 15%
This should be comprised of at least 12 entries (of at least 250 words each) over the course of the semester. These entries should show how you to think critically about your experience as an exchange student in Italy and reflect upon and integrate course materials into your experiences.

**Short Semiotic Analysis:** 15%
For this paper, you will choose one ad campaign (of at least 3 ads) and do a semiotic analysis of it. You are expected to use the tools of semiotics (signifier/signified, connotation/denotation, icons, etc.) to explore who these ads are marketed to (rich/poor, men/women, gay/straight, black/white/Asian, etc.)? How do they appeal to that group of people or segment of society? But most importantly, what are they saying about them? What values, mores or characteristics do the ads ascribe to them? 4-6 pages

**Historical Tourism Paper:** 20%
Drawing on the course materials as a foundation, visit a historical tourist site and do a critical analysis of the experience and how it was framed for you. Guiding questions to consider include – what are you shown (and what remains unseen)? Are you allowed access to back regions? If so, what are these and what work does it do to see them? How does the site create authenticity?
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Does the site tell a story of Italian nationalism? If so, what story does it tell and how does it do so?  7-10 pages

Fashion and Consumerism Ethnography: 20%
For this paper, you will be asked to do some ethnographic interviewing. I would like you to interview Italians (at least 5 people from the same demographic group – middle aged women, teenaged boys, etc). You will be asking them about their relationship to things, shopping, status, etc. Be creative. The questions should come from you and reflect your interests and concerns. You are seeking to understand if Italians experience consumer society in the same way that you do. Do things (perhaps a specific thing – Air Jordans’, for instance) have the same meanings in Italy. What things are most valued? Do they have concerns about consumerism?

Then you will write a paper of 7-10 pages in length that illustrates the commonalities and disagreements that you find between your respondents. Use quotes from your interviews to illustrate your argument. Your thesis should say something clear about Italian cultural perspectives and how it may coincide or diverge from American consumerism.

Art and Culture Paper 20%
For this paper, you are asked to attend an art exhibit of a contemporary artist (either a painter, installation artist, ceramicist or sculptor). Choose one coherent exhibit or the works of one artist for specificity. Look for an art exhibit that you think is speaking to contemporary power and culture. You are looking for artists that are not simply trying to make something pretty, but are undergirded by a concept. Nearly all artists are grappling with wider issues.

Take photos of the exhibit (if permitted) and use the gallery prompt (available via pdf) to take notes on the exhibit or pieces you will focus on. Then go home and research the artist to find out what they think their art pieces mean. Do NOT do research ahead of time or you will undermine your own ability to learn more about the work. What issues are they exploring through their art?

Then write a 7-10 page paper describing the artist and their work. You should make a clear argument about how the artist either reflects or contests elements of contemporary culture. Be sure to take account of any differences or commonalities between how you interpreted the artwork versus how the artist themselves think about their work.

Attendance and Participation 10%
This is a participatory class and therefore your attendance and engagement is integral to its working smoothly. In order to receive full grades on this you must be in class having read the readings in preparation for a vibrant discussion. You are also expected to participate in the class discussions by making comments that are directly relevant to the course materials. While your thoughts and feelings are indeed very relevant to the class and your integration of the readings, they should be clearly related. In other words, it is not enough to share what you feel about –for instance- shopping, you must also be able to engage critically with it and tie your feelings to the academic arguments made in the literature. You must be present and participatory for full grades.

Note: All written assignments should be completed in Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced.

Timely Submissions
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Assignments submitted after the deadline will be accepted at the discretion of the course instructor and generally only in the event of a documented illness or emergency.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any academic endeavor must be based upon a foundation of honesty and integrity. Students are expected to abide by principles of academic integrity and must be willing to bear individual responsibility for their work while studying abroad. Any academic work (written or otherwise) submitted to fulfill an academic requirement must represent a student’s original work. Any act of academic misconduct, such as cheating, fabrication, forgery, plagiarism, or facilitating academic dishonesty, will subject a student to disciplinary action.

IFSA takes academic integrity very seriously. Students must not accept outside assistance without permission from the instructor. Additionally, students must document all sources according to the instructions of the professor. Should your instructor suspect you of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic dishonesty, you may receive a failing grade for the course and disciplinary action may result. The incident will be reported to the IFSA resident director as well as your home institution.