

Introduction and Course Description

ANTH 3811 WDE Consumer Culture and Identity

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Consumer Culture and Identity is a class that I created 10 years ago to help students examine and reflect on the intersections of identities, consumerism, and forms of capitalism (industrial capitalism to neoliberalism). Each time I teach the class, the focus shifts. In previous classes we have looked at tourist industry, car culture, sexual commodification in music videos, and children. In this class, we draw attention to department stores, celebrity culture, the pork industry, and fast fashion. We will look at the effects of consumerism in relation to constructions and performances of identities as they intersect with history, capitalism, advertising, branding, corporations, and power relations of the Global North and Global South.

Undoubtedly, you will have some familiarity with the areas that we will be examining as they are the stuff of our everyday lives. However, in this class you will be challenged to take a *critical look* at the norms, practices, constructions, and intersections of consumer culture and identity formation, including your own. Identity, economics, the media, and history intersect in consumerism; we will be examining their complex relations.

We explore questions such as: How has consumerism come to define 21st identities and bodies? What role does media play in how we imagine –and perform – our identities? What are some of the contradictory messages in visual texts such as advertisements and commercials? What are the psychological effects of taking up (internalizing) these meanings? What kinds of bodies are constructed in consumer culture and what are the effects of branded performances of identities? What role do transnational corporations and global neoliberal capitalism play in creating hegemonic meanings and the choices of everyday life? Why are critical literacies of normative meanings important for Canadians? Can subjects disentangle themselves from consumerism? Does culture exist outside of capitalism?

Most importantly, how does critical reflexivity of consumer culture, consumer practices, and identity formation enable subjects to understand an increasingly commodified globalizing world where consumerism is linking economies, creating imbalances and injustices, accelerating voraciously despite that many of us are aware of its effects, [destroying the natural world](#), exploiting less privileged peoples in the Global South, and creating new consumer cultures in the Global South at a speed beyond the rise of consumerism in the Global North?

Together, we will think through concepts such as consumerism, identity formation, commodity fetishism, media culture, gender, the body, neoliberal capitalism, and hierarchies of power. Because the individual is a central signifier of consumer culture, we will be examining identity formation and our own identities in the context of consumerism and the hierarchies ubiquitous to capitalism, specifically its contemporary form, neoliberalism.

We will learn to take a critical gaze to contemporary culture, neoliberal politics, and the everyday practices of our identities. In our discussions, we will seek ways to move beyond contemporary corporate-driven practices of consumerism that are creating larger gaps between the haves and the have nots, disregarding and [disappearing species](#), and ignoring and denying the unequal effects of neoliberal capitalism's practices and successes. In our writings we will seek to deconstruct – to unpack – the stuff of our everyday lives and our sense of self. What will we find in our belongings and in our psyches? In what ways are we complicit, complacent, acquiescent, struggling, disturbed, defiant, and resistant?

Consumerism affects each of us. Our identities have been consumed by consumerism. Let's unpack our lifestyles. (page continues after the suitcase image)



[source](#) Our stuff overwhelms us. Packing to go on a consumer travel adventure creates anxiety over what to bring and how to fit all of it into our bags, and when traveling via air, meeting baggage and weight allowances. Buying, cleaning, organizing, storing, handling our clothing and apparel, buying bins, shelves, and modular units to store all our stuff, and disposing of "unneeded" clothing and apparel consume endless hours of our lives. Indeed, a consumer industry has grown around our compulsive shopping; we are told through life coaches, websites, books, TV shows, social media, conferences, etc. how to "make our lives simpler," how to control the out-of-control consumerism that consumes us.

Course Materials:

1. Andrew Brooks. (2015). *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-hand Clothes*.
2. Online readings and visual texts to watch. Find the links to them on the Modules.

Methods & Format

There are 9 modules. There are 7 assignments for evaluation.

- 1 Me & My Stuff post. 5 paragraphs. Due: Jan. 16. **5%**
- 3 posts and 3 comments. Each Post and Comment (P&C) unit (for a Module) is marked out of 10%. Post, minimum 600 words; Comment, minimum 250 words. These are minimums. Your effort determines how much you wish to write; a Post includes a minimum of 1 image and 1 hyperlink. Due: 1 P&C in January (for Module 2), 2 P&Cs in March (for Module 6 and Module 7). 3 P&Cs @ 10 marks each unit = **30%**
- 1 My Choice post (MC); for Module 8. MC Post minimum 750 words + 1 image + 1 hyperlink. **10%**
- 1 mid-term test. Covers 3 modules: Module 3, Module 4 and Module 5. Accessed online. **25%**
- 1 book review on *Clothing Poverty*. Upload on Assignments tool. **30%**

Students are divided into groups. Find the group you belong to by searching for your name on the [Groups](#) page.

Each group has a Discussion forum for Modules 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. Your posts and comments are written on your group's Discussion forum on the specific Module. The Book Review is uploaded via the Assignments tool. The test is written online, accessed on the class D2L and is timed.

The Posts for the Modules can be posted at any time over the term as long as it's before the due date. I recommend writing the My Choice post early! For this post, you can take any topic on consumer culture that is not developed in our class (e.g. e-tail, children, pet industry, car culture, fashion bloggers, cosplay, franchise films, video games, music industry, Canadiana, branding the nation, education, selling war and militarism, and so on).

This course depends on keeping up with the reading, submitting your writing by due dates, and completing the test. You are expected to engage closely with course readings and material and to think through concepts by writing them down and sharing and discussing concepts with your colleagues (45% of your grade). You can find posts written by me on the Announcement feed on the main page as well as I add content to specific Modules to help you think through material. I will let you know that I have written something by posting a notice on Announcements. Regularly visit the D2L over the term.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Acquaint students with contemporary debates on various sites and intersections of consumer culture, identity formation, media culture, and neoliberal capitalism. Students will learn a cultural history of consumerism and to decode cultural meanings within various 20th and 21st c sites of consumer culture, from advertisements to branding and celebrity culture, among others.

- Learn interdisciplinary cultural studies methods to develop theoretical and analytical tools to deconstruct and evaluate consumer culture and identity formation in the context of the unequal power relations of changing forms of capitalism.
- Promote students' abilities to develop critical literacies which will allow them to move beyond commonsense discourses of identity, culture and capitalism.
- Students will learn theoretical language to articulate analyses of power relations of identity, consumer culture and everyday life, and understand cultural processes as complex, historical, political, negotiated, and relational.
- Students will learn to analyze cultural processes as multifaceted and to discuss the concept of identity as a shifting process that is dynamic, multiple, and embedded in power relations of culture, history, economics, and politics.
- Students will investigate critical reflexivity and interrogate their own everyday consumer identities. Students will increase their critical awareness of their negotiations, struggles, complications, and entanglements in consumer culture.
- Students will improve their rhetorical abilities and online (digital) writing, and in so doing develop the opportunity to discuss, question, and address with others social, cultural and political relations and identity formation, contemporary consumer culture, consumerism, and capitalism.