

SOC493H1S: Sociology of Consumption

Professor Shyon Baumann
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto
Winter 2026

Time: Tuesdays 3:10-5:00pm

Location: See ACORN

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 12-1pm, 700 University Ave, 17th Floor, or by appointment

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Course Description

The sociology of consumption studies how acquiring, using, taking in, and displaying goods and services organize social life and express meaning. It asks how tastes and lifestyles signal identity and belonging while also drawing lines of distinction tied to class, gender, race, and generation. Scholars analyze how markets, media, brands, and digital platforms shape desire and everyday routines—and how consumers, in turn, shape those institutions. They trace the moral and political dimensions of consumption (from “ethical” shopping to stigma and shame), as well as the material infrastructures and global supply chains that make consumption possible and unequally distributed. Overall, it’s about linking what people buy and do with wider patterns of culture, power, and inequality.

Prerequisite

Completion of 1.0 SOC at the 300+level is required to take this course. Students without this prerequisite will be removed from the course without notice.

Course Structure

The course is organized as a seminar where your learning will take place in two ways. First, you will absorb course material through assigned readings and through hearing the instructor’s short interventions (mini-lectures) during class. Second, you will learn via interactions between seminar participants. Talking through perspectives and reflections and ideas is a great way to further your understanding. The course is structured to reflect these modes of learning. During each class, the instructor will provide some thoughts about the readings and the topic of the week. But most of the class time will be spent on discussion, where students will be doing most of the talking. This discussion will focus on the course readings, and for that reason it is essential that students attend class having already done the readings for the week. At the end of each class, we will spend the final ten minutes of class doing a graded writing exercise that will focus on the class discussion (not the readings, but the discussion) that has just taken place.

The class will focus on a different consumption topic each week. We will use the first week to talk about consumption generally, and there will be assigned reading. The final class meeting will be an in-class test.

Learning Outcomes

1. **Comprehensive Understanding of Consumer Culture:** Students will explore the cultural, political, economic, and environmental dimensions of consumer culture by reading about and discussing sociological analysis of consumer attitudes and behaviours.
2. **Understanding of Core Sociological Concepts:** Students will work with a range of core sociological concepts and learn about them in relation to consumer culture.
3. **Application of Sociological Concepts to Real-World Experiences:** Students will be able to apply theories, perspectives and empirical information from the course to their encounters with consumption and consumer society.
4. **Evaluation of Competing Perspectives and Arguments:** Students will be able to identify similarities and differences across different theories as they relate to motivation for and performance of consumption practices, and a range of industries in the creation, production, and distribution of both symbolic and material culture.

Requirements and Evaluation

There are four components to your evaluation in this class.

First, you are required to submit a **reflection paper** (about 300 words) on the readings for each week of class. These reflections are **due by 12pm on the day of class** via Quercus. The reflection must include at least three questions you have based on the readings (the questions can be about the readings themselves or can be sparked by the readings but about consumption more broadly) with an explanation for why you think each question is worth asking. The reflection must also include at least one critique of the readings – something that is wrong, too vague, misunderstood, overly simplistic, missing, or under-theorized. Your **best eight reflection papers** will count toward your final grade. Reflections will be marked out of ten. Reflections will contribute **30% of your final grade**. There is no final paper for this course, so these reflection papers will constitute the bulk of your writing for the course.

Second, you are required to **participate** in class discussions. It is expected that you will speak up in every class. The instructor will keep a list of speakers when there are multiple people interested in contributing at the same time so that no one misses their chance to contribute. Contributions must be substantive, which is to say that they must be relevant to the readings/topic and they must speak to the sociological understanding and concepts of the week. Although a student's personal experience can be described in the service of making a substantive contribution, relaying one's own consumption behaviour ("I scroll Instagram all the time") is not by itself a substantive contribution. Showing up to class is necessary but not sufficient for earning participation points. Participation involves actively engaging in the discussions, which includes both speaking and listening. You need to pose questions to the class and you need to respond to the questions that others have posed. You need to agree or disagree with what others say and explain why. You need to demonstrate an understanding of and an engagement with the readings.

Participation will be marked for the semester as a whole and will account for **30% of your final grade**. I will give you an interim grade half-way through the semester that will give you an idea of how you are doing on participation. The following is a description of how to receive a mark of

30 out of 30 on participation: A student who attends every class, participates multiple times in every discussion, has intelligent, substantive ideas and questions that are clearly and thoughtfully related to the readings, remains engaged with the conversation throughout and does not look at his/her laptop or phone while others are talking but instead makes eye contact with others, consistently offers sociological analyses and observations and questions more than anecdotes and personal experiences. Deviations from this ideal will result in lower grades. The more classes missed, the less on-topic or thoughtful the contributions, the less attentive and responsive to others' contributions, then the lower the grade. Attending all classes without making useful and thoughtful contributions will probably result in a grade of about 14 or 15 out of 30. You have to be present to participate, but presence by itself is not sufficient participation. (I will also moderate conversations in case there are some contributors who need to participate less so that there is space for others to talk.) If you require accommodation, then you will be accommodated so long as you follow the policy for missing term work as described in the [student handbook](#).

Third, each student will complete a **writing exercise** at the end of class that reflects on the discussion (not the readings) that took place in class. We will spend **the last ten minutes of class** to complete this exercise. The writing exercise will ask students to describe what they learned about, found most interesting, found most confusing, found most concerning, or found most productive about the class discussion relative to the readings. Whereas the written reflections that students submit before class will focus only on the readings, the writing exercise at the end of class will focus on the discussion that took place in class. Your **best eight writing exercises** will count toward your final grade, and they will be graded out of ten. The writing exercises will account for **15% of your final grade**. If you require accommodation, then you will be accommodated so long as you follow the policy for missing term work as described in the [student handbook](#).

Fourth, during the final class, there will be an **in-class essay test**. Students will select one of two questions that asks them to think broadly and synthetically about the themes, questions, concepts, and information we studied over the semester. The questions will aim to maximize students' opportunity to demonstrate their learning about the sociological approach to consumption, including both theoretical ideas and arguments and empirical knowledge about consumption patterns. The idea will be to address a broad and general question that will allow you to synthesize what you have learned over as many weeks of the course as possible. You can bring in any notes or readings on paper that you would like to bring to the test. The test will be taken on computers in the computer lab that are not connected to the internet. The test accounts for **25% of your final grade**.

Readings

The readings for this class will come from a textbook as well as articles that are available via the library's website. The main textbook is the following:

Johnston, Josée, Kate Cairns, and Shyon Baumann. 2025. *Introducing Sociology...Using the Stuff of Everyday Life, 2nd edition*. New York: Routledge.

It is available for purchase in hardcopy or as an ebook.

Missed Deadlines and Tests

Students who do not submit a reflection, attend in participate in a class session, submit a writing exercise, or miss the final in-class test will receive a mark of zero for that assignment or test unless the reason is a circumstance beyond their control. Within three days of missing an assignment deadline or test, students must send the instructor a request for consideration. Students must document their request with one of the following:

- Absence declaration via ACORN (can only be used once during the semester)
- U of T Verification of Illness or Injury Form
- College Registrar's letter (e.g., in case of personal/family crisis or emergency)
- Letter of Academic Accommodation from Accessibility Services

Students who miss the test or are late in submitting an assignment for other reasons, such as family or other personal reasons, should request their College Registrar to email the instructor.

Turnitin.com

This is a small class, and I will be reading everyone's written work closely. For that reason, you will not need to submit your work to Turitin.com.

Plagiarism

Be careful to avoid plagiarism. It is a serious academic offense with serious penalties (see the "Code of Behavior on Academic Matters"). If you are using somebody else's ideas, do not present them as your own. Give proper references if you are using somebody else's ideas, and use quotation marks if you are quoting. When in doubt, it is always safer to over-reference -- you are not going to be punished for that. Please also be aware that turning in an old paper, or large parts thereof, for credit in a second (or third etc.) course, is considered an academic offense that results in students being referred off to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Use of Generative AI Tools

You will not be permitted to use generative AI on any of the assignments or in-class tests. While some generative AI tools are currently available for free in Canada, please be warned that these tools have not been vetted by the University of Toronto and might not meet University guidelines or requirements for privacy, intellectual property, security, accessibility, and records retention. Generative AI may produce content, which is incorrect or misleading, or inconsistent with the expectations of this course. These tools may even provide citations to sources that don't exist—and submitting work with false citations is an academic offense. These tools may be subject to service interruptions, software modifications, and pricing changes during the semester.

Generative AI is not required to complete any aspect of this course. Instead, it is recommended that you treat generative AI as a supplementary tool only for exploration or further study. Ultimately, you (and not any AI tool) are responsible for your own learning in this course. It is your responsibility to critically evaluate the content generated, and to regularly assess your own learning independent of generative AI tools. Overreliance on generative AI may give you a false sense of how much you've actually learned, which can lead to poor performance on the assignments, in later courses, or in future work or studies after graduation.

Accessibility Needs

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: disability.services@utoronto.ca or <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility>.

Class Schedule and Required Readings

Jan 6 – Introduction: Why study consumption sociologically?

- Shea, Courtney. 2025. “Live now, pay later.” *Maclean’s Magazine*. November, 2025, Vol. 138 Issue 10, p28-38.
- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 1: Introduction: Sociological Imagination and Global Blue Jeans

Jan 13 – Classic Perspectives on Consumption

- Andrew B. Trigg. 2001. “Veblen, Bourdieu, and Conspicuous Consumption.” *Journal of Economic Issues* 35(1): 99-115.
- Schor, Juliet B. 2007. “In Defense of Consumer Critique: Revisiting the Consumption Debates of the Twentieth Century.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611:16-30.

Jan 20 – Taste and Distinction

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 4: Coffee: Class, Distinction, and “Good” Taste
- Friedman, Sam, and Giseline Kuipers. 2013. “The divisive power of humour: Comedy, taste and symbolic boundaries.” *Cultural Sociology* 7,2: 179-195.

Jan 27 – Social and Symbolic Boundaries and Identity

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 5: Shopping Lessons: Consuming Social Order
- Kuipers, Giseline. 2022. “The Expanding Beauty Regime: Or, Why It Has Become so Important to Look Good.” *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty* 13 (2): 207–28.
https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00046_1.

Feb 3 – Race and Group Boundaries through Consumption and Cultural Industries

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 6: Get in the Game: Race, Merit and Group Boundaries
- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 12: What’s on your Playlist?: Subcultures, Racism, and Cultural Appropriation

Feb 10 – Gender, Family and Group Boundaries through Consumption and Production

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 7: Barbies and Monster Trucks: Socialization and “Doing Gender.”
- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 8: Dreaming of a White Wedding: Marriage, Family, and Heteronormativity
- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 13: Our Love-Hate Relationship with the Car: Masculinity, Industry, and Environmental Sustainability

Feb 16-20 Reading week

Feb 24 – Media and Technology: Social Networks and Wellbeing

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 9: I <3 My Phone: Technology and Social Networks
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2024. "The Surge of Suffering." In *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin.

Mar 3 – The Self: Are we what we buy?

- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 2: You Are What You Eat: Culture, Norms, and Values.
- *Introducing Sociology*: Chapter 10: Branding Your Unique Identity: Consumer Culture and the Social Self

Mar 10 – Consumption and Meaning

- Shively, JoEllen. 1991. "Cowboys and Indians." *American Sociological Review* 57, 6: 725-734.
- Rawlings, Craig M., and Clayton Childress. 2019. "Emergent meanings: Reconciling dispositional and situational accounts of meaning-making from cultural objects." *American Journal of Sociology* 124.6: 1763-1809..

Mar 17 – Consumption as a Moral Project

- Brans, Luuc, and Giseline Kuipers. 2025. "Fashion as 'Force for Change'? How Ideologization Reshapes the Work of Intermediaries in the Legitimation of Culture." *Cultural Sociology* 19,1: 43-66.
- Huddart Kennedy, Emily, and Carly Hamdon. 2023. "Do People Who Drive Trucks Care About the Environment?" *Contexts* 22,3: 18-23.
- Bryant, Christopher J., and Cor van der Weele. 2021. "The farmers' dilemma: Meat, means, and morality." *Appetite* 167, 105605.

Mar 24 – Consumer Culture At Large

- Boréus, Kristina, Karin Bradley, and Sofie Tornhill. 2024. "Breaking through banal consumerism? Representations of postconsumerist perspectives in mainstream press media." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 24,1: 155-174.
- Schor, Juliet. 1998. "Introduction," pp. 1-22 in *The Overspent American: Upscaling, downshifting and the new consumer*. New York: Harper Perennial..

Mar 31 – In-class essay test in Computer Lab, Room 17198