
Master of Science
in Marketing and
Transformative Economy

Second year
Fall semester 2025

Core course

6 ECTS

Consumer Culture

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Objectives

To speak of ‘consumer culture’ – or of ‘consumer society’ – is to admit that the relationship between people and objects is central to our lives (subjective scale), to the relationships we have (social scale), and to qualifying the contexts in which our existence and relationships unfold (institutional scale).

Several authors, as Roberta Sassatelli (2007) points out, trace the emergence of consumer culture to the period following the Second World War. From this moment onwards, in the West – and subsequently in the East – the subjective, social, and institutional importance of consumer goods is no longer limited to a few objects but becomes the centre of our mundane experience. In other words, the frontier between the market and our life becomes thinner, with the market eroding life domains that were not centred on consumer goods just a few decades ago (education, ethics, family moments, love, politics, religion, etc.). This is why dealing with consumer culture is an economic endeavour as much as it is an anthropological, ideological, sociological, and critical effort.

To speak of ‘consumer culture’ also implies acknowledging that the meanings and valences of consumer goods are multiple and often competing. In our markets, companies can win consumer preference by adopting opposite strategies, also regarding the meanings they inscribe in their products and marketing actions. Each market trend often confronts its opposite. Consumer behaviours are more often characterised by paradoxes than rationality. In sum, our societies and markets seem to find equilibria more through balanced oppositions rather than convergence at the centre.

Therefore, a communicator, marketing expert, or manager cannot make decisions without understanding the far-reaching and profound implications of consumer products and the practices by which they are brought to their audiences (communicative, distributive, creative, experiential, and more).

Historically informed, this Course aims to:

1. Briefly review the key theoretical streams needed to understand the complexity of consumer culture.
 2. Analyse contrasting consumer phenomenological paradigms, as they reflect opposing market expectations, ideologies, and practices.
 3. In line with the professional focus of elective courses, contextualise the discussion within different economic sectors.
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PART I. THEORETICAL REFERENCES (HIGHLIGHTS)

- Identity: From consumer identity projects to nationalism
- The social patterning of consumption: Class, family, lifestyle, and consumer movements
- Power: Market creation, structures of domination, and consumer representation
- Socio-materiality: The power of material consumer culture

PART II. OPPOSING MARKET PARADIGMS

- National culture: Nationalism versus localism
- Power: Market vulnerability versus market resistance
- Taste: Consumption beautification versus uglification
- Success measure: Growth versus postgrowth

PART III. OPPOSING CONSUMER PARADIGMS

- Technology: Consumer rationality and datafication versus consumer magical thinking
- Body: The perishable body versus the posthuman body
- Temporal pace: Consumer acceleration versus consumer deceleration
- Expectations: Consumer sovereignty versus consumer responsabilisation

Assessment

Components

Assessment is based on both an individual written exam (50% of the final grade, reviewing the key notions of the Course and based on multiple-choice questions) and group assignments (50%). Concerning group assignments, teams will work mostly in class, elaborating on ad hoc requests and presenting their conclusions.

Written exam

During the exam, the use of notes, books, the Internet, generative AI, and any other type of document is not permitted. Students are expected to know what we covered in class. As such, they must attend at least 60% of the classes. The exam will be held on your laptop (in Safe Exam Browser mode) or on a university PC at the student's request.

Group assignment for Part I

During the first part of the course, groups will work on a single consumer phenomenon or market. For each theory, they will be asked to reflect on how it could be applied to the assigned phenomenon/market. Different groups will work on different phenomena/sectors. They will then be asked to read articles and conduct online (or offline) research to present their conclusions. Proposed phenomena/markets include: (1) eco-electronics (e.g., smart home devices, air purifiers, smart thermostats, and domestic solar panels); (2) recommerce and second-hand goods (e.g., dedicated apps and platforms, second-hand markets and shops); (3) food-wellness and functional foods (e.g., vegan products, gluten/lactose-free products, low-fat/ low-calorie products, and functional drinks).

Group assignment for Part II and III

During the applicative parts of the course (Part II and III), groups will all work on one specific market and provide examples of successful companies using alternative strategies (e.g., in the catering/restaurant sector, companies using fast, slow, or mixed philosophies). Again, they will be asked to read articles and conduct online (or offline) research to present their conclusions.

Final rules

Concerning the group assignments, (generative) artificial intelligence tools may be used provided that: (1) the authors indicate its use (which parts, with which prompts, etc.); (2) the authors use the content critically, verifying its reliability; (3) the authors take responsibility for the product as stated in the report; (4) the use of AI is limited to parts of the work (therefore, reports entirely delegated to AI are prohibited). Failure to declare the use of AI and how it is used is considered plagiarism and is subject to measures and sanctions, as per USI regulations and code of ethics.

To validate the course and average the project grade, each student must achieve a grade of 5 out of 10 or higher on the written individual examination.

References

Articles

- The complete list of articles associated with each session will be stated on the Course's iCorsi platform.

Books

- Sassatelli, Roberta (2007). *Consumer Culture. History, Theory and Politics*. London: Sage. Selected chapters.
- Arnould, Eric J., Craig J. Thompson, Michelle Weinberger, and David Crockett (Eds.) (2023), *Consumer Culture Theory*, London: Sage. Selected chapters.

Suggested readings

- For an updated and thematised list of consumer culture articles published in the Journal of Consumer Research, please refer to the following link: <https://consumerresearcher.com/cct-in-jcr>