Syllabus for
‘Products and Preferences: The evolutionary psychology of consumer behavior’

Graduate Seminar, Psychology Department, University of New Mexico
Course number 650, section 9, Autumn 2001
Taught by Geoffrey Miller

This syllabus includes the following information:

1. Instructor details and contact information
2. Meeting time and place
3. Overview of course content
4. Course mechanics (including grading)
5. Registration details
6. Student list
7. List of class topics and readings week by week
8. Additional readings (may be relevant to term papers)

1. Instructor Details:
Dr. Geoffrey Miller
Assistant Professor
Psychology, Logan Hall 160
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131-1161, USA
(505) 277-1967 (office voice/fax)
(505) 277-1394 (dept fax)
gfmiller@unm.edu
http://www.unm.edu/~psych/faculty/gmiller.html
Office hours: Wednesdays, 10:30 a.m. to noon, Logan Hall 160

2. Meeting time and place:
Fridays, 9:30 am to noon
Logan Hall Room

3. Overview of course content:
The science of human nature can illuminate the world of consumerism, and vice-versa. In this seminar students will read and discuss some of the new research that connects the evolutionary psychology of human preferences and motivations to the contemporary world of consumer behavior, marketing, advertising, and media. The emphasis will be theoretical and methodological, but enlivened by many case studies and examples from contemporary culture, fashion, e-commerce, and entertainment. We will consider topics such as:

    the evolutionary origins of human preferences, tastes, and motivations
romantic gift-giving, biological signalling theory, and conspicuous consumption
theories of fads, fashions, information cascades, and social networks
the psychology of product recognition, branding, and advertising
the design of news, entertainment, and education as products
spatial cognition, landscape preferences, and the design of houses, shops, resort hotels,
and theme parks
the social psychology of service industries and corporate public relations
intuitive cost/benefit/risk perception and the design of financial products (equities,
bonds, insurance, loans, derivatives, portfolios)
Darwinian aesthetics of product design
ways that the features of products and markets can be scientifically informative about
human nature; ways to apply the new psychology in market research and product
development

4. Course mechanics

We will meet once a week for 2.5 hours. There will be 3 to 7 readings per week.

Readings for each week’s class will be passed out as in the previous week’s class. I
expect all readings to be completed before each class, and for students to be prepared to
discuss key points. Often, particular students will be assigned to give a brief overview,
analysis, and critical commentary on a particular reading. Sometimes, students will be
asked to apply the ideas from readings to particular classes of goods or services.

Some topic areas will entail special kinds of preparation; for example, in the session on
the psychology of computer games, students will be asked to play three particular genres
of computer games before class; the game software will be distributed in class the
previous session.

In the initial weeks, one student will be assigned to summarize and discuss each reading.
Please prepare answers to the following questions when doing such presentations:

1. What is the author’s central point?
2. How does/would the author characterize consumerism?
3. Does the author view consumerism as a ‘natural’ outcome of human
   preferences and desires, or as a cultural invention serving economic interests?
4. How does the author view the connection between individual preferences and
   the social organization of economic forces?
5. What are three strengths and three weaknesses of the author’s arguments?
6. Which other readings would support the author’s argument; which would
   challenge it?

For all readings in the first few weeks, think about the following questions, for class
discussion:

1. Does consumption fulfill individual preferences per se, or does it fulfill social
   functions in relation to (or in competition with) other individuals?
2. Is modern consumerism an inevitable outcome of human nature combined with
our current technological capabilities?

(3) Is there a genuine parallel between the biological theory of wasteful signaling and the economic phenomenon of conspicuous consumption?

(4) If human nature is stable, how can it account for ‘psychological obsolescence’ – the rapid turnover of product fashions?

Grading

40% class attendance, participation, and presentation.
I expect regular attendance, knowledge of assigned readings, active participation and intellectual engagement, and well-prepared presentations.

60% one research paper: due Friday, November 30, at the beginning of class. Aim for 3,000 to 6,000 words. Print out double-space, single-sided in 12 point Arial or Times Roman font. Follow standard APA (American Psychological Association) research paper format. Check with me about your proposed paper topic by October 26; I will be happy to read draft versions of the paper if you want early feedback.

No Exams.

5. Registration details

Enrolment is limited to 15 students, and admission is at the discretion of the instructor. The course is open to graduate students in psychology, anthropology, biology, economics, marketing, and other related departments. Exceptional upper-level undergraduates (e.g. Psychology Honors students) will also be considered. Preference will be given to those who have some background in basic psychology, basic microeconomics, evolutionary psychology, animal behavior, consumer behavior, and/or marketing. Some familiarity with shopping malls would be useful as well.

Please contact the instructor Geoffrey Miller as soon as possible by email (matingmind@hotmail.com) to register your interest (he will not arrive at UNM until August 2001, so do not try to find him in person until then). In your email, please include your: name, email address, department, degree program (e.g. Ph.D.), background in the relevant areas mentioned above, recent course grades or SAT/GRE scores, and reasons for interest in the class.

6. Student list

The following students are taking the autumn 2001 version of this course:

Kevin Bennett, Psychology, kbenn@unm.edu
Christine Garver, Psychology, garver@unm.edu
Gil Greengross, Anthropology, gili@unm.edu
Yann Klimentidis, Anthropology, yann@unm.edu
Amanda Price, Psychology, alprice@unm.edu
Chris Radi, Psychology, cradi@unm.edu
7. Topics and readings week by week

Brief overview:
Week 1 (August 24): Introduction and overview
Week 2 (August 31): Basic psychology of marketing and costly signaling theory
Week 3 (September 7): Conspicuous consumption, costly signaling, courtship
Week 4 (September 14): Sexual products; male and female sexual preferences
Week 5 (September 14): Happiness, utility, and fitness
Week 6 (September 28): Landscape aesthetics, landscape products
Week 7 (October 4): Branding as a signal of product quality
Week 8 (October 19): The evolutionary psychology of computer games
Week 9 (October 26): Fads, fashions, information cascades, and memes
Week 10 (November 9): Discussion of student term paper topics
Week 11 (November 16): Language products
Week 12 (November 30): Financial products
Week 13 (December 7): Last class: summary and review

Week 1 (August 24, 2001): Introduction and overview
No assigned readings

Week 2 (August 31): Basic psychology of marketing and costly signaling theory
Assigned readings:

Week 3 (September 7): Conspicuous consumption, costly signaling, courtship
Assigned readings:
1. Barkow, Jerome (1989). Chapter 8 ‘Relative standing, prestige, and self-
esteem’ (pp. 179-212) from *Darwin, sex, and status*. U. Toronto Press.


Assigned video:

*What women want* (2001, Mel Gibson, Helen Hunt)

http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00005A7UA/qid%3D1003967914/026-5332744-7884429

**Week 4 (September 14): Sexual products; male and female sexual preferences**

Assigned readings:


Suggested videos:

*Breast men* (1997, David Schwimmer)

*The Pornographer* (1999, Doug Atchison)

*The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996, Woody Harrelson, Courtney Love)

**Week 5 (September 21): Happiness, utility, and fitness**

Assigned readings:


From edge.org online discussion forum.


**Week 6 (September 28): Landscape aesthetics, landscape products**

Assigned readings:
Stroud, Dorothy (). Reproduction of Repton’s ‘Redbook’ illustrations (before and after views of landscape design plans) from *Humphry Repton*. London: Country Life.

Assigned mini-research projects: comment on the readings in relation to the design and history of:
- Central park, New York
- Golf courses
- Amusement parks
- Zoos
- Luxury resort hotels

**Week 7 (October 4): Branding as a signal of product quality**

Assigned readings:
Klein, Naomi (2000). Chapter 1 ‘New branded world (pp. 3-26) and chapter 2 ‘The brand expands’ (pp. 27-61) from *No logo*. London: Flamingo.

Assigned mini-research projects: comment on the readings in relation to branding in the following product categories:
- Clothing
- Restaurants
- Universities
- Car racing and sponsorship
- Movie stars

(no class October 12 due to fall break)

**Week 8 (October 19): The evolutionary psychology of computer games**

Assigned readings:

**Computer game exercise:**

Computer game software will be distributed in class two weeks ahead of this class session. Pass it around between students and play on your computers. Please play at least one game from each of the genres below, for at least one hour each, within the next two weeks.

Genres:
- 1\textsuperscript{st} person shooter: Max Payne, Deus Ex, Half-Life
- Real-time strategy: Age of Kings, Starcraft, Homeworld
- Simulation: Rollercoaster Tycoon, Crimson Skies

(For example, play Half-Life for an hour, play Starcraft for an hour, and play Crimson Skies for an hour, by October 12)

**For each game you play, please take notes on the following:**
- What emotions do you feel when playing each game?
- What kinds of memory, planning, and decision-making processes do you use when playing?
- What are the most aesthetically appealing aspects of the game?
- What aspects of the game are the most addictive and immersive?
What demographic (age, sex) do the games best appeal to? Why? How might the games be changed to better appeal to different demographics?

What human psychological adaptations do the games appeal to most powerfully? (what makes them fun?)

How might advances in computer gaming technology allow future versions of this game to appeal to a broader set of psychological adaptations?

In addition, everyone should play ‘The Sims’ for at least an hour

For The Sims, please take notes on the following issues:

- What human motivations and needs are represented as needing fulfillment?
- What is the role of consumerism in the fulfillment of these needs?
- How does consumerism relate to social and sexual success in the game?
- In what ways do the sims enjoy utility from work versus solo leisure versus social leisure?
- How might knowledge of evolutionary psychology have better guided the design of the sims as models of human nature?
- Comment on any other aspects of the game you find intriguing.

Suggested videos:
(1) **Existenz** (1999, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jude Law)
(2) **The Game** (1997, Michael Douglas, Sean Penn)
(3) **Strange Days** (1995, Ralph Fiennes, Angela Bassett)

**Week 9 (October 26): Fads, fashions, information cascades, and memes**

Assigned readings:

Assignment: Please come to class with your favorite example of each of the following phenomena:
(1) the social conformity (bandwagon) effect
(2) the social rejection (snob) effect
(3) the Veblen (conspicuous consumption) effect
(4) the perceived rarity effect
**Week 10 (November 9): Discussion of student term paper topics**
No assigned readings; students to work hard on term paper development

In class:
Roundtable discussion of term paper topics for each student

**Week 11 (November 16): Language products (literature, narrative, books, news)**
Assigned readings:


Steen, Francis., & Owens, Stephanie A. (unpublished, 2000). Evolution's pedagogy: An adaptationist model of pretense and entertainment. [Note: you can skim the sections on play]


**Suggested video (optional):**
You’ve got mail (1998, Tom Hanks, Meg Ryan)
Note the use of language products at several levels: (1) competing notions of ‘good service’ in the bookstore industry, (2) the use of email in romance, (3) the use of face-to-face conversation in romance, (4) the use of language to construct and display different personal identities in different social contexts.

(No class November 23: Thanksgiving holiday)

**Week 12 (November 30): Financial products**
*NOTE: Term papers due at the beginning of this session!*

**Assigned readings:**


**Suggested video (optional):**

**Boiler Room** (2000; Giovanni Ribisi, Ben Affleck): Very gripping and funny look at the selling of financial products by a morally questionable brokerage.

**Week 13 (December 7): Last class: Summary and review**

Assigned readings:

**8. Additional readings** that may be of interest in preparing term papers on various topics


customer behavior. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 16*, 363-368
