

**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:

Instructor details and contact information

2. Meeting time and place

Overview of course content

Course mechanics (including grading)

Registration details

Student list

List of class topics and readings week by week

Additional readings (may be relevant to term papers)

1. Instructor Details:

Dr. Geoffrey Miller

Assistant Professor

Psychology, Logan Hall 160

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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

Stacey Rucas, Anthropology, srucas@unm.edu
Glenn Scheyd, Psychology, gscheyd@unm.edu
John Wagner, Anthropology, wagner@unm.edu
Jeff Winking, Anthropology, jeffwinking@msn.com

Auditing: Professor Steve Gangestad, Psychology, sgangest@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:

1. Miller, Geoffrey (2000). Marketing. In J. Brockman (Ed.), *The greatest inventions of the last 2,000 years*, pp. 121-126. New York: Simon & Schuster.
2. Miller, Geoffrey (1999). Waste is good. *Prospect*, Feb., pp. 18-23.
3. Frank, Robert (1999) 'Luxury spending' chapter. From *Luxury fever*. Princeton U. Press.
4. Twitchell, James (1999). Chapter 1, 'Attention Kmart shoppers'. From *Lead us into temptation: The triumph of American materialism*. Columbia U. Press. 'Attention Kmart shoppers'
5. Packard, Vance (1960). Chapters 1-3, 'City of the future?', 'The nagging prospects of saturation', and 'Growthmanship'. From *The waste makers*. New York: Van Rees Press.

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.
2. Frank, Robert (1999). Exerpts on 'Concerns about relative position' (pp. 109-121) from *Luxury fever*. Princeton U. Press.
 3. Haviland, William (1987). Exerpt on 'Potlatch' (pp. 187-188). From *Cultural anthropology* (7th Ed.) Harcourt Brace.
 4. Illouz, Eva (1997). Exerpts on dating and consumerism. From *Consumering the romantic utopia: Love and the contradictions of capitalism*. Berkeley, CA: U. California Press.
 5. Packard, Vance (1960). Chapter 15, 'Hedonism for the masses' (pp. 151-161). From *The waste makers*. New York: Van Rees 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:

1. Ellis, Bruce & Symons, Don (1990). Sex differences in sexual fantasy: An evolutionary approach. *Journal of Sex Research*, 27, 527-556.
- Salmon, Catherine, & Symons, Don (2001). Chapter 6 'Commercial eroticas: Unobtrusive measures of male and female sexual psychologies (pp. 55-69) from *Warrior lovers: Erotic fiction, evolution, and female sexuality*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
- Scheib, Joanna (1994). Sperm donor selection and the psychology of female mate choice. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 15, 113-129.
- Emond, Michael & Scheib, Joanna (1998). Why not donate sperm? A study of potential donors. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 19, 313-319.
- Betzig, Laura (1992). Roman polygyny. *Ethology and sociobiology*, 13, 309-349.

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:

- (1) Myers, David G., & Diener, Ed (1995). Who is happy? *Psychological Science*, 6(1), 10-19.
- (2) Diener, Ed & Diener, Carol (1996). Most people are happy. *Psychological Science*, 7(3), 181-185.
- (3) Lykken, David & Tellegen, Auke (1996). Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon. *Psychological Science*, 7(3), 186-189.
- (4) Frank, Robert (1999). Chapter 5; Does money buy happiness? (pp. 64-74). From *Luxury fever*. Princeton U. Press.
- (5) Miller, Geoffrey (2000). Social implications of the new happiness research.

From edge.org online discussion forum.

- (6) Leiss, William, & Shapiro, Stanley J. (1987). Symbolism, consumption, and the quality-of-life. In A. Coskun Samli (Ed.), *Marketing and the quality-of-life interface* (pp. 153-172). New York: Quorum Books.
- (7) Gagnier, Regina (2001). Introduction (pp. 1-18) from *The insatiability of human wants*. U. Chicago Press.

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

Assigned readings:

- Stroud, Roger S. (1993). Biophilia, biophobia, and natural landscapes. In Stephen R. Kellert & Edward O. Wilson (Eds.), *The biophilia hypothesis* (pp. 73-137). Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Heerwagen, Judith H., & Orians, Gordon H. (1993). Humans, habitats, and aesthetics. In Stephen R. Kellert & Edward O. Wilson (Eds.), *The biophilia hypothesis* (pp. 138-172). Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Stroud, Dorothy (). Reproduction of Repton's 'Redbook' illustrations (before and after views of landscape design plans) from *Humphry Repton*. London: Country Life.
- Zube, Ervin H. (1973). The natural history of urban trees. *Natural History*, November.
- Hunt, John D. (1993). The dialogue of modern landscape architecture with its past (pp. 134-143). From Mark Trieb (Ed.), *Modern landscape architecture: A critical review*. MIT Press.
- Ecko, Garrett (1993). Pilgrim's progress (pp. 206-219). From Mark Trieb (Ed.), *Modern landscape architecture: A critical review*. MIT Press.

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.
2. Borges, Bernhard, Goldstein, Daniel G., Ortmann, Andreas, & Gigerenzer, Gerd (1999). Can ignorance beat the stock market? In G. Gigerenzer & P. Todd. (Eds.), *Simple heuristics that make us smart*, pp. 59-72. Oxford U. Press.
 3. Todd, Peter & Miller, Geoffrey (1999). From Pride and Prejudice to Persuasion: Satisficing in mate search. In G. Gigerenzer & P. Todd. (Eds.), *Simple heuristics that make us smart*, pp. 287-308. Oxford U. Press.
- Hellofs, Linda L., & Jacobson, Robert (1999). Market share and customer's perceptions of quality: When can firms grow their way to higher versus lower quality? *J. Marketing*, January, 16-25.

Kirmani, Amna, & Rao, Akshay R. (2000). No pain, no gain: A critical review of the literature on signaling unobservable product quality. *J. Marketing*, 64, April, 66-79.

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:

- Pine, B. Joseph, & Gilmore, James (1999). Chapter 1: Welcome to the experience economy (pp. 1-25). From *The experience economy: Work is theater & every business a stage*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Poole, Steven (2000). Exerpts (pp. 6-14, 21-44, 93-111) from *Trigger happy: Videogames and the entertainment revolution*. New York: Arcade Publishing.
- Cassell, Justine, & Jenkins, Henry (1998). Chapter 5: An interview with Brenda Laurel from Purple Moon Inc. (pp. 118-135) and chapter 7: An interview with Heather Kelley of Girl Games Inc. (pp. 152-170). From *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and computer games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Murray, Janet (1997). Chapter 1: Lord Burleigh's kiss (pp. 13-26). From *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*. New York: Free Press.

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) 1st person shooter: Max Payne, Deus Ex, Half-Life
- (2) Real-time strategy: Age of Kings, Starcraft, Homeworld
- (3) 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:

- (1) Sproule, George (1979). Chapter 6 ‘The economics of fashion’ (pp. 83-96) and chapter 8 ‘The use of diffusion curves in analyzing fashion’ (pp. 111-121). From *Fashion: Consumer behavior toward dress*. Minneapolis, MN: Burgess Publishing.
- (2) Coelho, P. R. P., & McClure, J. E. (1993). Toward an economic theory of fashion. *Economic Inquiry*, 31, pp. 595-608.
- (3) Bikhchandani, Sushil, Hirshleifer, David, & Welch, Ivo (1998). Learning from the behavior of others: Conformity, fads, and information cascades. *J. Economic Perspectives*, 12(3), 151-170.
- (4) Henrich, Joseph, & Gil-White, Francisco (2001). The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 22 (3), 1-32.
- (5) Miller, G. F. (2000). Memetic evolution and human culture. *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 75(4), 434-436.

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:

Carroll, John (1999). The deep structure of literary representations. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 20, 159-173.

2. Shoemaker, P. J. (1996). Hardwired for news: Using biological and cultural evolution to explain the surveillance function. *J. Communication* 46, 32-47.

[Note: you can skip her pages 39-44 on cultural evolution]

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]

Abstract of: Lycett, J. E., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2000). Mobile phones as lekking devices among human males. *Human Nature*, 11, 93-104.

Miller, Geoffrey (2001). Book proposal for 'Aladdin's Cave: Consumerist dream-world and the nature of desire'.

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:

Thaler, Richard H. (1992). Chapter 6: The endowment effect, loss aversion, and status quo bias (pp. 63-78); Chapter 8: Intertemporal choice (pp. 92-106); Chapter 9: Savings, fungibility, and mental accounts (pp. 107-121). From *The winner's curse: Paradoxes and anomalies of economic life*. Princeton U. Press.

Lopes, Lola L. (1997) Between hope and fear: The psychology of risk (pp. 681-720). From William M. Goldstein & Robin M. Hogarth (Eds.), *Research on judgment and decision making: Currents, connections, and controversies*. Cambridge U. Press.

Wang, X. T. (1996). Evolutionary hypotheses of risk-sensitive choice: Age differences and perspective change. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 17: 1-15.

Sheliefer, Andrei (2000). Chapter 1: Are financial markets efficient? (pp. 1-27). From *Inefficient markets: An introduction to behavioral finance*. Oxford U. Press.

Shefrin, Hersh (2000). Chapter 10: Portfolios, pyramids, emotions, and biases (pp. 119-137). From *Beyond greed and fear: Understanding behavioral finance and the psychology of investing*. Harvard Business School Press.

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:

- Saad, Gad, & Gill, Tripat (2000). Applications of evolutionary psychology in marketing. *Psychology and Marketing* 17(12), 1005-1034.
- Frank, Thomas (1997). Excerpt from Chapter 1, "A cultural perpetual motion machine: Management theory and consumer revolution in the 1960s", from *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counter-culture, and the rise of hip consumerism*, pp. 4-31. Chicago: U. Chicago Press.
- Veblen, Thorstein (1899/1994). Excerpt from Chapter 6, "Pecuniary canons of taste", from *The theory of the leisure class*, pp. 78-101. Reprinted by Dover, New York.
- Veblen, Thorstein (1899/1994). Chapter 14, "The higher learning as an expression of the pecuniary culture", from *The theory of the leisure class*, pp. 223-244. Reprinted by Dover, New York.

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

Bourdieu, P. (1987). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Harvard U. Press.

Douglas, M. (1996). *The world of goods: Towards an anthropology of consumption*. Routledge.

Hart, S., & Murphy, J. (1998). *Brands: The new wealth creators*. London: Macmillan

Henderson, Pamela W., & Cote, Joseph A. (1998). Guidelines for selecting or modifying logos. *J. Marketing*, 62, April, 14-30.

Hersey, G. L. (1996). *The evolution of allure: Sexual selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Malamuth, N. M., (1996). Sexually explicit media, gender differences, and evolutionary theory. *J. Communication*, 46, 8-31.

Marsden, P. (1998). Memetics as a new paradigm for understanding and influencing

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

Miller, G. F. (2000). *The mating mind: How sexual choice shaped the evolution of human nature*. New York: Doubleday.

De Waal, Frans (1997). The chimpanzee's service economy: Food for grooming. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 18, 375-386.