



BUS/PSYC 335: Why We Buy: The Psychology of Consumer Behavior

Course Syllabus Spring Semester 2027

Instructor: Francesca Hansstein, PhD

Credits: 3

Contact Hours: 45

Prerequisites: None

Class Meeting Days & Time: TBD

Office Hours: By appointment after a class or via Zoom (see Moodle site)

Course Type: Standard Course

Course Fee: TBA

Course Description

How are psychological theories reflected in consumers' everyday decisions? What factors influence attention, preferences, and purchasing behavior? This course introduces students to the fascinating field of consumer psychology, exploring how psychological principles shape the way individuals perceive, evaluate, and choose products, services, and experiences.

Students will examine how psychological theories and findings are applied in consumer research and marketing practice. Topics include perception, attention, motivation, emotions, decision-making, cognitive biases, persuasion, pricing strategies, advertising, visual communication, and consumer experience design. The course has a strong empirical focus and uses real-world examples, case studies, and contemporary marketing practices to illustrate key concepts. By the end of the course, students will develop a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer behavior and become more critical and informed consumers themselves.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Measures

Below are the course's learning outcomes, followed by the methods that will be used to assess students' achievement for each learning outcome. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Differentiate key psychological theories and concepts relevant to consumer behavior.
- Reflect upon common psychological tactics used in marketing and consumer communications.
- Critically evaluate the role of psychological processes and cognitive biases in consumer decision-making.
- Design simple conceptual models of consumer behavior and formulate basic research questions and hypotheses.
- Compare consumer psychology theories and practices across different cultural contexts.
- Apply consumer psychology concepts to real-world marketing and consumer behavior cases.

Course Materials

Readings

A course reader, including all the indicated readings, will be available. The course's Moodle site is the primary location for readings and assignments.

Assessment

Attendance	10%
Field assignment	20%
Course Journal	20%
Midterm	20%
One-On-One Prof Meeting	2%
Final Project	28%

Grading

Students are reminded that it is their responsibility to note the dates of exams and other assignments. No alternative exam dates will be offered, and professors are not required to give partial credit for any late work (they do so at their discretion: the Institute's default policy is no extensions and a zero for any work turned in late). Students who book travel during an exam or other assessment will have to change their plans or accept a zero. Letter grades for student work are based on the following percentage scale:

Letter Grade Range	Numerical Score Equivalent	Student Performance
A	93% - 100%	Exceptional
A-	90% - 92%	Excellent
B+	87% - 89%	Superior
B	83% - 86%	
B-	80% - 82%	
C+	77% - 79%	Satisfactory
C	73% - 76%	
C-	70% - 72%	
D+	67% - 69%	Low Pass
D	63% - 66%	
D-	60% - 62%	
F	59% or less	Fail (no credit)

Please note: decimal numerals between 1-4 are rounded down while 5-9 are rounded up: e.g., expect 89.4 to be 89.0 while 89.5 to round up to 90.

Course Requirements

Grades are based on the following criteria.

Attendance (10%)

Attendance is an essential part of this course. If you attend all the meetings, you will receive 10% for this part of your grade. There are no make-ups offered for attendance.

Field Assignment (20%)

For this assignment, students will act as *Consumer Psychology Investigators* by exploring supermarkets, local pharmacies, cosmetic stores, bookstores, food shops, or other retail environments. The goal is to identify real examples of psychological persuasion techniques used on product packaging and marketing communication. Rather than evaluating whether a product is good or bad, the task will consist of analyzing how marketers attempt to influence consumer thinking and behaviors. Students will select three products belonging to different categories (food and beverage, personal care, souvenirs, stationery, etc.) and will reflect on how the usage of colors, words, and design might trigger unconscious consumer responses. A detailed prompt, including suggestions and tips to overcome the language barrier, will be provided on Moodle.

Course Journal (20%)

Students will use their paper (or digital) notebook at the start of the semester, which will serve as a personal space to reflect on course material and ideas. In-class journal entries (e.g., summaries of assigned readings, analyses of primary sources, mental maps, reflections, predictive exercises) will be regularly scheduled and graded twice throughout the semester, i.e., before the mid-semester break (in Week 6) and at the end of the course (Week 12). Each of these checks is worth 10% of your grade, for a total of 20%.

Midterm (20%)

The Midterm Examination is an in-class, individual assessment designed to evaluate students' understanding of the fundamental concepts introduced during the first half of the course. Students will answer two open-ended questions requiring them to explain consumer psychology theories, critically discuss psychological mechanisms influencing consumer behavior, and apply course concepts to real-world marketing examples. Rather than testing memorization, the exam emphasizes the ability to interpret psychological phenomena, connect theory with practice, and communicate ideas clearly using appropriate terminology. The meeting before the Midterm will be dedicated to a general review of the key concepts covered in the first half of the course, Q&A, and a short mock exam.

One-On-One Professor Meeting (2%)

Getting to know your professor makes you more comfortable with that person and, therefore, more likely to ask for help. It also might help for you to ask questions about the various assignments or discuss a paper idea. In this course, you get 2% of your grade for coming to the office hours one time before Week 9.

Final Project (28%)

Working in teams of 3–4 people, students will design and conduct a small-scale consumer psychology research project addressing a real consumer behavior question relevant to the Italian context. The project should apply one or more psychological theories discussed during the course to explain, predict, or better understand consumer decision-making. Students are expected to collect original data, analyze their findings, and discuss managerial implications. A detailed prompt will be uploaded on Moodle.

Extension & Submitting Late Work

Work submitted after the deadline will receive a grade of zero, not partial credit. Each student is allowed one extension of 24 hours over the entire semester. This can be used for any assignment but the final project. Students need to email the instructor before the deadline and inform the instructor of their use of the extension. Any work submitted after the 24-hour extension will be marked zero.

As for all policies, exceptions can be made by the Director for students with special accommodations or in case of medical emergencies, etc.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is expected and mandatory for classroom times and co-curricular activities. All students are allowed **2 unexcused absences**, which do not need to be justified. It is the student's responsibility to keep them in case of real necessity. i.e., sickness or any other unforeseen inconvenience that may prevent students from being in class. More than 2 absences will affect your final grade by 2% per absence up to a maximum of 10%. Excessive unexcused absences (6 or more) may result in a failing grade or disciplinary action.

If students miss class, they are responsible for obtaining class notes from other students and/or for meeting the professor during office hours. Any work missed in class because of an excused absence may be made up within one week of the return to the class. Any work missed that was a quiz or other test must be made up outside of class time and will, in the interest of intellectual honesty, be a slightly different test than the one given in class.

Presence during mandatory field trips is especially important. Missing a mandatory field trip for a course, unless for a very serious reason that is communicated to Umbra staff in a timely manner, will lower the students' grade by half a letter grade (i.e., a final grade of a B+ would be lowered to a B).

Legitimate reasons for an excused absence or tardiness includes: death in immediate family, religious observances, illness or injury, local inclement weather, medical appointments that cannot be rescheduled. Absences relating to illness may be excused by the Director but only if a medical certification is provided. Students who request an approved absence to observe a religious holiday must submit a formal request to the Institute's Director within one week after the add/drop period when course schedules, including any field trips, are finalized. No exceptions will be made after this deadline.

Tardiness Policy

Students are expected to attend all classes punctually. Any student arriving up to 15 minutes late or leaving up to 15 minutes earlier than the scheduled class end time will be marked as tardy. Each incident of tardiness (late

arrivals to or early departures from class) is 0.5% off the final grade. However, should a student arrive more than 15 minutes late or depart more than 15 minutes before the conclusion of the class, it will be recorded as an absence.

Students are also expected to remain in class during the time of instruction except for a reasonable amount of time to use the restroom. Students who leave class and do not return during the class session will receive an unexcused absence or late penalty.

Academic Integrity

All forms of cheating (i.e., copying during exam either from a fellow student or making unauthorized use of notes) and plagiarism (i.e., presenting the ideas or words of another person for academic evaluation without acknowledging the source) will be handled according to the Institute Academic Policy, which can be found in the Umbra Institute Academic Policies and Conduct Guidelines.

Utilizing ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence (AI) tools for the generation of content submitted by a student as their own as part of any assignment for academic credit at the Institute constitutes a form of plagiarism. Should the Institute become aware of a student's use of such platforms and services, the student will be subject to the same consequences and judicial proceedings as are in place for plagiarism (defined above).

Laptop & Classroom Policy

Students are expected to follow the policy of the Institute and demonstrate the appropriate respect for the historical premises that the school occupies. As a general rule, the consumption of food in the classroom is not permitted. Exceptions may be made at the discretion of the professor for specific cases, such as food tastings integral to the course content. Please note that cell phones must be set on silent mode before the beginning of each class. Computers and other electronic devices (e.g., ear buds, smart watches, etc.) cannot be used during class lectures and discussions, unless there has been a specific academic accommodation. This policy also applies to earbuds and headsets.

As an instructor and as a person, I am dependent on both my computer and my telephone. That said: An ever-increasing body of research shows that open laptops and telephones in the classroom create distraction (both visual and auditory) for those using them and those around them. You can type faster than you can write, and as a result you end up processing less when you're simply typing notes. For this reason, I have a physical notebook policy: I ask you to leave your computers in your bags and phones in your pockets and use a regular notebook. There are four exceptions: 1) if you have an accommodation; 2) if you're using a tablet to take notes, 3) if you make an office hours appointment with me to discuss the use of a computer; or 4) if we have an in-class tutorial about online research tools.

While food and drink are sometimes part of Umbra classes, your grade is never dependent on consuming anything.

Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments

WEEK 1

Introduction to Consumer Psychology

Meeting 1: *Introduction and Course Description*

Meeting 2: *Consumer Behavior and Psychology: key concepts*

Readings for the week:

Cialdini, R. B. (1993). The psychology of persuasion. *Harper Collins College Publishers*. Chapter 1, Weapons of Influence, pp. 1-22.

Schiffman, L., O'Cass, A., Paladino, A., & Carlson, J. (2013). Consumer behaviour. *Pearson Higher Education AU*. Chapter 1, Consumer Behavior and Technology, pp. 32-55.

WEEK 2

Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases

Meeting 1: *Understanding Heuristics and Cognitive Biases*

Meeting 2: *Consumer Psychology Applications in Marketing*

Readings for the week:

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases: Biases in judgments reveal some heuristics of thinking under uncertainty. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124-1131.

White, K., Hardisty, D. J., & Habib, R. (2019). The elusive green consumer. *Harvard business review*, 11(1), 124-133.

WEEK 3

Consumer Behavior and Personality

Meeting 1: *The Dynamics of Consumer Motivation*

Meeting 2: *Psychographic Segmentation: from theory to practice*

Readings for the week:

Schiffman, L., O'Cass, A., Paladino, A., & Carlson, J. (2013). Consumer behaviour. *Pearson Higher Education AU*. Chapter 3, Consumer Motivation and Personality, pp. 78-102.

Cherry Kentra (2026). What are the Big 5 Personality Traits? *Very Well Mind (Web Article)*.

WEEK 4

Consumer Perception and Positioning

Meeting 1: *The Gestalt Psychology Principles applied in Marketing*

Meeting 2: *Psychological Pricing Strategies*

Readings for the week:

Cavallo, C., & Piqueras - Fiszman, B. (2017). Visual elements of packaging shaping healthiness evaluations of consumers: The case of olive oil. *Journal of sensory studies*, doi: DOI 10.1111/joss.12246, pp. 1-9.

Rancic Stefan (2025), 6 Psychological Pricing Strategies With Examples, Price2Spy (*Web article*).

Assignments:

Deadline for Field Assignment Submission.

WEEK 5

Field Assignment and City Tour

Meeting 1: *Field assignment students' presentations*

Meeting 2: *Sensorial Marketing in practice: visit to La Città del Cioccolato*

Readings for the week:

Schmitt, B. (1999). Experiential marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15(1-3), 53-67.

Castaldo R. (2025). The fashion entrepreneur who invented Baci Perugina: a short journey through the streets of Perugia. *Gambero Rosso International* (Web Article).

WEEK 6

Midterm Exam

Meeting 1 *Review and Q&A*

Meeting 2: *Midterm Exam (mandatory, in-class, no make-up allowed).*

Assignments:

Deadline for Course Journal submission (1st part, from W1 to W6).

Semester Break

WEEK 7

Midterm Correction and Consumer Learning

Meeting 1 *Midterm Correction, Course Roadmap, and Info about Final Project*

Meeting 2: *Personal Branding: an exercise*

Readings for the week:

Schiffman, L., O'Cass, A., Paladino, A., & Carlson, J. (2013). Consumer behaviour. Pearson Higher Education AU. Read Chapter 5, "Consumer Learning", pp. 146-170.

WEEK 8

Consumer Learning and Memory

Meeting 1 *Conditioning theories and models*

Meeting 2: *Applications in marketing*

Readings for the week:

Solomon, M. R. (2006). *Consumer behavior: A European Perspective* (3th ed.). Pearson Education. Read Chapter 3, "Learning and Memory", pp. 62-83.

WEEK 9

Attitude Formation and Consumer Beliefs

Meeting 1: *Definition, Formation, and the Tri-Component Model*

Meeting 2: *The Theory of Planned Behavior*

Readings for the week:

- Schiffman, L., O'Cass, A., Paladino, A., & Carlson, J. (2013). Consumer behaviour. *Pearson Higher Education AU*. Chapter 6, "Consumer Attitude Formation and Change", pp. 173-193.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 50(2), 179-211.

WEEK 10

Identity, Status, and Symbolic Consumption

Meeting 1: *Easter Monday, no class.*

Meeting 2: *Conspicuous Consumption and Luxury Psychology*

Readings for the week:

- de Groot, E., Philippy, D., Tunca, B., & Morhart, F. (2026). Conspicuous consumption research: Thematic evolution, theoretical structure, and future directions. *Journal of Business Research*, 215, 116307.

WEEK 11

Persuading Consumers

Meeting 1: *Principles of Consumer Persuasion*

Meeting 2: *Trust, Risk Perception, and Ethical Persuasion*

Readings for the week:

- Cialdini, Robert B. 2001. Harnessing the Science of Persuasion. *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (9): 72–79.
- Bertoli, G., Busacca, B., & Imperato, M. (2020). Premium private label: how product value, trust and category involvement influence consumers willingness to buy. *Italian Journal of Marketing*, 2020(2), 143-161.

WEEK 12

In-class Work for the Final Project

Meeting 1 *Final review*

Meeting 2: *Groupwork for the final project*

Assignments:

- Deadline for Course Journal submission (2nd part, from W7 to W12).
- Deadline for Final Project submission.

WEEK 13

Final Classes, Exams, & Special Academic Events

Meeting 1 *Final Project Presentation*