

ENGLISH 50 FINAL EXAM, SPRING 2007
"Reaching for Luxury" by Kim Campbell
Christian Science Monitor, September 18, 2003

Maybe you've noticed it, too:

- Pottery Barn, the high-end retailer, is now a model *for* home decorating.
- Housewares at Target stores are designed by people whose names don't usually adorn toasters.
- Your friends wear no-name jeans but pay big bucks *for* a refrigerator that does everything except buy the groceries.

Despite a belt-tightening economy, environmental lobbies, and social movements calling *for* everything from recycling to voluntary simplicity, many Americans today are *reaching up for* high-style *luxury* goods. The new *luxury* kick exposes a long-running tension between the nation's Puritan roots and its infatuation with plastic credit cards. But it also suggests a newer dimension to mall frenzy.

Are Americans, who invented mass production and turned discount retailing into an art form, coming to value a higher, aesthetic style? Do candy-colored computers and granite countertops suggest the nation's tastes have matured, perhaps along European lines?

Watch TV makeover shows, or glance around a newsstand or bookstore, and it's easy to get caught up in the high-style hype, especially right now. It's fashion week in New York - when designers roll out their latest creations - and trade and fashion publications are pushing extravagant consumption (\$2,800 *for* an alligator purse) on people eager to splurge again. At least one forthcoming book proclaims that American families making \$50,000 and up are increasingly willing to "trade up" to *luxury* goods - like a \$2,000 washer-dryer combo - and are pumping hundreds of billions of dollars annually into the economy.

Those who follow consumer culture say discussions of spending in various media today are like the sermons of yore.

"[They] are part of the effort to recast the debate and suggest that a love of style, a fascination with style, is not morally corrupt," says Daniel Horowitz, a professor of American studies at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. "These issues raise profoundly moral questions about what is enough, and what is a good society, and does satisfaction in our lives come from ... consuming more," he says.

Despite the current economy, Americans over the long run have become increasingly affluent. They have more money to spend thanks to trends like women in the workplace, people marrying later, access to credit, and the rise of discount stores where low prices allow people to retain more of their cash. As a result, they can go after more big-ticket items - cars, clothing, home furnishings.

Katie Mazza and her husband bought a flat-screen computer earlier this year *for* \$2,000, preferring to spend more *for* a product that would last longer. In her view, if people are short of cash they should cut back on purchases. Otherwise, "If you have it, spend it," she says while browsing at a Boston mall. "The economy ... gets better by spending."

To some observers, American consumers appear less concerned about overconsumption and the environment than those in other Western countries.

"There's a purity to America's clarity about what it wants - there's not a whole lot of anxious second guessing," says Harry West, vice president of strategy and innovation at the Boston-based Design Continuum.

Michael Silverstein, a consultant and co-author of the forthcoming "Trading Up: The New American *Luxury*," says consumers are smart, information-seeking, and rational about their decisions.

After surveying thousands of people, he's concluded that consumers are willing to pay a premium price *for*

goods. "I don't accept that there's very much guilt any more in these purchasers," he says.

That's a departure from America's roots. Protestant sermons dating back to the 17th century extolled the virtues of keeping one's focus on higher things than overt consumption, notes Professor Horowitz. As recently as the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter called on Americans to turn down their thermostats and consume less during the nation's energy crisis. Interestingly, Horowitz notes in his forthcoming book "The Anxieties of Affluence," after the nation's latest crisis - the Sept. 11 attacks - those lobbying moral assessments at America's consumer culture were Islamic fundamentalists. And in a reversal from the Carter era, the country was encouraged by a president to go out and shop.

Of course, without shopping, a market economy wouldn't function. But on the heels of the post-9/11 call to spend, those who track consumer culture report they see few signs of restraint among consumers but more emphasis on style.

Savvy businessmen are going overseas and identifying ideas Americans might like. The Victoria's Secret lingerie stores, *for example*, were styled by a man armed with the conviction that US women would prefer a boutique atmosphere to that of a department store.

"I found myself wondering if Howard Schulz of Starbucks was sitting in the same Italian coffee shop I was, thinking to himself: 'This is great. They'd love this in America.' He applied it to coffee. Me, to lingerie and fashion," writes Leslie Wexner, CEO of the Limited Brands, in his preface to "Trading Up."

Consider a washer-dryer combo from Whirlpool that has developed a big following since 2001. Selling *for* more than \$2,000 - over three times the price of a typical combo - the Whirlpool Duet is a European-style front-loading washer and dryer.

According to "Trading Up," people love the machines, not only because the washer has greater capacity and efficiency, but because the pair makes them feel better about themselves. They say things like: "I love them," "They are part of my family," and, jokingly, "I would rather leave my husband than my washer and dryer."

Their responses, in some cases, are to the aesthetics of the machines - something Americans are increasingly taking into account.

More shoppers now have access to better-designed and more affordable goods (think Pottery Barn). But some observers say it's more than just a democratization of style. It's an increasing awareness that aesthetics, rather than being a *luxury*, is a value that can be applied to their favorite restaurant as well as their potato peelers.

"Being able to say the packaging is genuinely good ... does not mean that you endorse everything else about [a product]," says Virginia Postrel, author of the recently released book, "The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, & Consciousness."

Some in the design world disagree that this is something new. But Ms. Postrel, an economics columnist *for* The New York Times, argues that this is the first time that desire *for* style has been so intense and far-reaching. "It's not new to have aesthetics in clothes; it's something new to have it in toilet brushes," she says in an interview.

With more people achieving affluence, perhaps aesthetics is the way they are differentiating themselves. Paradoxically, in a democratic, capitalist society, materialism is often the way distinctions are made.

"I don't think that's changed," says Bernard Mergen, professor of American studies at George Washington University. "Consumerism is what allows you to express your individuality."

English 50 Final Exam

General Instructions

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus. Print your instructor's name in the upper right corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of "Reaching for Luxury" along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your exam.

Essay Format

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

Prompt

"Reaching for Luxury"

In the essay "Reaching for Luxury," Kim Campbell describes how Americans are spending greater amounts of money on luxury items, not only because we have more credit cards, but also because we like to purchase more aesthetically pleasing objects. At the end of the article, one professor that Campbell interviews notes, "Consumerism is what allows you to express your individuality." How do you express your individuality? Do you spend money on material items, or do you express your individuality and uniqueness in other ways, such as your choice of hobbies, friends, music, etc.? Perhaps you combine consumerism with these other means of expression.

Final Note

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.