

Overall Impressions

READING 1

Prereading

Before you read, discuss the following questions with your classmates.

1. Do you think it is acceptable for people to go into debt to buy the things they want? What is your opinion of credit cards?
2. In terms of economic prospects, do you have more or less opportunity than your parents had? Do you think your children will be better off than you?
3. Some people say that “money is the root of all evil.” Do you agree or disagree?

Predicting

Predicting can help you understand what you read. Before you read, do the following activities. They will help you predict what the reading selection will be about.

1. The title of this reading includes the word *consumerism*. What do you think this reading is going to be about? What is *consumerism*?
2. Read the Language Note on page 5. How does the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” relate to the idea of consumerism?

Previewing Specialized Vocabulary

Listed here are some of the specialized words that you will find in this reading selection. Knowing and understanding these words will help you understand the reading selection better.

- Review the definitions of these words.
- Identify which of these words, if any, you already know.
- Try to paraphrase the meaning of each word.
- Underline these words in the reading selection.

social mobility (*n. ph.*)—the ability to move from one social or economic level to another (paragraph 1)

conspicuous consumption (*n. ph.*)—an obvious display of wealth to attract attention (paragraph 2)

totalitarian society (*n. ph.*)—a society in which the government has total control of all aspects of life (paragraph 4)

robust economy (*n. ph.*)—a healthy and strong economy (paragraph 8)

intergenerational mobility (*n. ph.*)—social mobility that occurs from one generation to another, as when children move into a higher social class than their parents (paragraph 11)

Consumerism and Social Mobility

- 1 The United States has the world's largest single-nation economy. Why? Largely because people in the United States are very active consumers of material goods. In 2003, personal consumption accounted for 70 percent of the domestic¹ economy. Many Americans are in the habit of spending the money they have rather than saving it. In fact, a significant number of Americans will even spend money they don't have. They will borrow money to buy the things they want.
- 2 Such energetic² consumerism is nothing new. It has a long history in the United States. In 1899, Thorstein Veblen, a renowned social critic, described a social phenomenon he called "conspicuous consumption." He said that the Americans of his day exhibited a constant desire for bigger and better things. Many economists note that this attitude still persists in American society. To use a familiar English expression, Americans want to "have it all."



- 3 What does the term *consumerism* mean? As used in economics, the term describes economic policies that emphasize consumption. The assumption³ behind these policies is that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable. There are many obvious advantages to the consumer culture of the United States. A tremendous volume⁴ of goods is available. People in the United States have many options when it comes to the products they buy. Competition is high, so the prices of goods are relatively low compared to other countries. A comfortable

¹**domestic** (*adj.*) — relating to the internal affairs of a country

²**energetic** (*adj.*) — full of energy; active; lively

³**assumption** (*n.*) — a preconceived idea that something is unquestionably true

⁴**volume** (*n.*) — amount or quantity, especially a large amount

lifestyle is available to almost everyone. Most economists believe that a vigorous, consumer-oriented economy provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Consumerism

- 4 Advocates of the American consumer culture say that consumerism is entirely natural. People must judge for themselves what is necessary for a good life and what isn't. No one has the right to dictate what others can or cannot purchase. What is excessive and wasteful in one person's eyes may not be so from another person's point of view. Supporters of unregulated⁵ consumerism believe that any attempt to restrict or curtail⁶ the free access to goods is the first step toward a centrally planned or totalitarian society.
- 5 According to some critics, however, there are major disadvantages to the consumer culture of the United States. There are problems on both the personal and the societal levels. When a society promotes consumerism, people will often believe that personal happiness comes from purchasing material goods. Some people purchase goods or consume materials in excess of their needs. In a consumer culture, people are more likely to believe that the "good life" comes from owning things. Luxury items become necessities.
- 6 In a consumer culture, people will sometimes *identify* with a particular product. In other words, they find it desirable to link themselves to the product or to a brand name. They want the status of the product to say something about their personality. They hope that other people will associate the status of the product with the person who has purchased it. In this way, people try to enhance⁷ their own status. Owning many brand-name products might help improve a person's image in the eyes of others.
- 7 An intense consumer culture puts pressure on people. They feel that they must spend more and more money in order to achieve status. They believe that they must buy certain products if they are to be accepted into a particular social class. In such a culture, people are always comparing what they own to what other people own. If some people are buying new or upgraded products, soon everyone else will want to buy those same products.
- 8 As a consequence, one very serious problem is personal debt. Unlike the citizens of some other countries, Americans are willing to go into debt to buy the things they want. Some economists believe that this willingness contributes to the nation's robust economy. Other financial experts point out that it can also have disastrous⁸ consequences, especially for individuals. For example, some people in the United States borrow money to buy things they don't really need. Credit cards are very easy to obtain⁹ and use in the United States, but the credit card companies charge a high interest rate for their use. Consequently, some people end up owing more money to banks than they earn in income. Such habits have become a national problem affecting even the U.S. government. The foreign debt of the United States is the

⁵unregulated (*adj.*) — uncontrolled by rules or laws

⁶to curtail (*v.*) — to shorten or reduce

⁷to enhance (*v.*) — to make greater in value or quality

⁸disastrous (*adj.*) — very bad; terrible

⁹to obtain (*v.*) — to gain possession of; to acquire

largest of any country in history. Some critics say that the “borrow-and-buy habit” in the United States is an addiction.

Land of Opportunity?

- 9 One great advantage of the American economic system, many people believe, is the opportunity that it creates for people at all levels of society. The United States is commonly called the “land of opportunity.” For much of the nation’s history, Americans have believed that they live in a socially and economically mobile society—that is, a society in which it is possible for hardworking poor people to improve their economic and social status. Americans continue to cherish¹⁰ their self-image as a unique land where past and parentage put no limits on opportunity. Many Americans believe that their country remains a land of unbounded opportunity.
- 10 A report appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* has suggested, however, that “the reality of mobility in America is more complicated than the myth.” The author of the report, David Wessel, notes that “Americans still think of their land as a place of exceptional opportunity” even though “the evidence suggests otherwise.” In fact, most data indicate that the gap between rich and poor in the United States has been steadily widening since 1970.
- 11 The report also quotes Gary Solon, an economist at the University of Michigan. Solon says that “intergenerational mobility” in the United States “has not changed dramatically” in several decades. In 1992, Solon challenged the conventional academic wisdom, arguing that there is “dramatically less mobility than suggested by earlier research.” Subsequent¹¹ research work confirms¹² his conclusions, leading many economists and sociologists to a new conclusion. Despite the spread of affirmative action, the expansion of community colleges, and other social changes designed to give people of all classes a shot at success, Americans are no more or less likely to rise above or fall below their parents’ economic class than they were thirty-five years ago.

¹⁰**to cherish** (*v.*) — to think of fondly; to have great affection for

¹¹**subsequent** (*adj.*) — following in time

¹²**to confirm** (*v.*) — to establish the certainty or truth of something

LANGUAGE NOTE

“Keeping up with the Joneses”

This popular phrase identifies people’s desire to equal or match the economic status of their neighbors, usually by owning the same things that the neighbors own. The suggestion is that if the neighbors (the Jones family) buy a new car, one must “keep up” with them by also buying a new car. Why the name Jones? It is a common last name in English-speaking countries, so it is possible that every neighborhood will have a Jones family living it. Cultural historians believe that the expression originated with a comic strip drawn by Arthur “Pop” Momand called *Keeping Up with the Joneses* that ran in American newspapers from 1913 until 1941. In the comic strip, the Joneses lived next door to the strip’s main characters. The Joneses never actually appeared, but the main characters spoke of them often, sometimes expressing jealousy for the fancy things the Joneses owned.

READING SKILLS

EXERCISE 1

Finding the Main Idea

To understand the main idea of a reading selection, it is important to understand why it was written. Choose the main purpose of this reading selection from the following choices. Explain why you think your choice is the best answer.

What is the main purpose of this reading selection?

- a. Americans think only about money.
- b. Consumerism has helped the U.S. economy but has also created problems for some people.
- c. Americans are getting richer with each succeeding generation.
- d. Personal debt is the number one problem in the United States.

EXERCISE 2

Reading for Details

Choose the correct answer based on the reading selection.

1. What phenomenon did the social critic Thorstein Veblen describe?
 - a. consumerism
 - b. personal debt
 - c. conspicuous consumption
 - d. social mobility
2. In the reading, consumerism is defined as
 - a. 70 percent of the domestic economy.
 - b. economic policies that emphasize consumption.
 - c. a philosophy necessary for living the good life.
 - d. a tremendous volume of available goods.
3. According to advocates of consumer culture,
 - a. a comfortable lifestyle is available to almost everyone.
 - b. people believe that personal happiness comes from purchasing material goods.
 - c. luxury items are necessary.
 - d. consumerism is entirely natural.
4. Which of the following is *not* a disadvantage of a consumer culture?
 - a. People consume materials in excess of their needs.
 - b. Unemployment is a major problem.
 - c. Personal debt is hard to overcome.
 - d. People are pressured to spend more in order to achieve status.
5. Consumers choose products that say something about their personality.
 - a. True
 - b. False

6. Why is the United States called the “land of opportunity”?
 - a. People in the United States believe that they can improve their economic status by working hard.
 - b. Credit cards are easy to use.
 - c. The gap between rich and poor has been steadily widening.
 - d. Everyone can keep up with the Joneses.
7. The economist Gary Solon believes that Americans easily rise above their parents’ economic class.
 - a. True
 - b. False
8. Which of the following was reported in the *Wall Street Journal*?
 - a. The borrow-and-buy habit in the United States is an addiction.
 - b. Americans no longer think of their land as a place of opportunity.
 - c. The gap between rich and poor has widened.
 - d. The reality of social mobility in the United States is complicated.

VOCABULARY SKILLS

EXERCISE 3

Academic Word List

The following words are frequently found in academic writing. Knowing these words will help you read all kinds of academic texts. There are many ways to learn new vocabulary words. Each reading selection will have suggestions on how you can learn the Academic Words. Try the different suggestions until you find the one that works the best for you. The number in parentheses indicates the paragraph in this reading selection where the word appears.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1. economy (1),
economists (2),
economics (3),
economic (3),
economically (3) | 7. persists (2) | 16. image (6) |
| 2. consumers (1),
consumption (2),
consumerism (3) | 8. policies (3) | 17. intense (7) |
| 3. significant (1) | 9. obvious (3) | 18. achieve (7) |
| 4. phenomenon (2) | 10. purchase (4),
purchasing (5),
purchased (6) | 19. consequence (8),
consequently (8) |
| 5. exhibited (2) | 11. advocates (4) | 20. financial (8) |
| 6. constant (2) | 12. restrict (4) | 21. data (10) |
| | 13. access (4) | 22. evidence (10) |
| | 14. promotes (5) | 23. conventional (11) |
| | 15. identify (6) | 24. research (11) |
| | | 25. expansion (11) |

EXERCISE 4

Vocabulary Notebook

A vocabulary notebook is a good way to learn vocabulary words because it gives you an opportunity to easily review the words. It is important