Commercial Advertising: From Texaco Star Theater to Internet SponCon
MEDST 281 (40806)

Spring 2026 Syllabus

Tuesdays 1:40pm - 4:30pm - Kiely 319
Prof Jamie Cohen

Course Description:

Following the success of *Barbie* (2023), Mattel moved forward with a plan to make films for over a dozen toy based properties, basically establishing a Mattel Cinematic Universe to compete with the long running Hasbro Cinematic Universe. The 2020s branded media industry provides us with the opportunity to study the history of sponsored media, from soap operas to native advertising to brand collaborations on YouTube and this course examines the models, theory, and production of branded media production. Starting with Texaco Star Theater (1948-56) to filmic advertisements of the 1980s to branded webseries to influencer brand collaborations, the class will focus on the history of sponsored content and we will reflect on the shift in consumer culture as it responds to new models of advertising content. Students will learn through case studies that merge contextual television studies and advertising theory and will hear directly from several industry creatives who work in the realm of branded entertainment.

Instructor:

Prof Jamie Cohen, PhD (he/him).
jamesncohen@gmail.com (preferred) and james.cohen@qc.cuny.edu

Office Hours are Monday and Tuesday from 12:30pm-1:15pm in Room 207, G-Building. (G-Building is not an accessible building, therefore I will gladly meet elsewhere if you email me in advance.) Always email in advance to confirm office hours.

Additional office hours are online by Calendly. You may use my Calendly to book office hours: https://calendly.com/jamesncohen/office-hours

Course Objectives:

1. Cover the extensive history of brand sponsored media, from the 1930s to the present, from soap operas to product placement to internet based branded media.
2. Critically engage with media production concepts that combine companies and brands with production companies, advertising agencies, and distribution studios.
3. Understand the academic theory that undergirds consumer culture as it relates to commercialized storytelling.
4. Do close readings of native advertising and multi-platform, multimodal, advertising campaigns that more resemble entertainment than advertising.
5. Develop a mock influencer, television, or film treatment for a well known brand in a well produced strategy deck to be presented at the conclusion of the semester.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will understand the history of mainstream media entertainment's economic structure as it is supported by the advertising industries.
2. Students will learn the context of sponsored and branded media through the ages as it relates to the technology, aesthetics, and consumer culture of the specific time period.
3. Students will reverse engineer sponsored advertising models from soap operas to branded media to native advertising to branded cinematic universes.
4. Students will learn to develop a strategy guide for a brand to develop sponsored media in a multi-platform, multimedia environment.
5. Students will increase their media literacy by being able to identify brand media messaging as it co-exists within modern media landscapes.

Grading Policies & Assignments:

25% Class Participation and Attendance
15% Homework and responses (on Brightspace)
20% Two case analyses of native advertising (including context) (10% each)
20% Group project - Dream Collab Pitch Deck
20% Final Project and Presentation - SponCon Production Treatment

NOTE: For enrollment verification, you MUST attend on both January 27 and February 3 and complete the first response. Failure to do so may result in being dropped from the course.

Project Descriptions:

Coming soon.

Required Readings:

All Readings supplied on Brightspace. You are encouraged to bring any additional materials, especially in the case of video content, into the course for shared readings.

Course Schedule: All Tuesdays

Week One: (Jan 27) - The state of sponsored content, from Barbie to paid partnerships. A brief overview of the history of branded entertainment media.
Homework: Identify a piece of sponsored content and do a short analysis.
Reading:

Week Two: (Feb 3) - History, part 1. Procter and Gamble sponsored radio shows. Soap operas. Texaco Star Theater and selling television and televisions.
Homework: Discussion response on early television culture
Reading:

Week Three: (Feb 10) - Television as a new technology and culture shift. How television shaped Western culture
Homework: “Television is dead, long live television” response.

Week Four: (Feb 17) - No Class - President’s Week

Week Five: (Feb 24) - The difference between television commercials and branded entertainment. 1941 Bulova commercial. 1949 FCC Regulation. 1972 Home Box Office and the introduction of premium television.
Reading and response:
Homework: Case Study Analysis 01 - Due March 17

Week Six: (March 3) - How much influence a brand/company has on the media itself. Storytelling as selling products and audience behavior. On making SponCon: Television production basics

Week Seven: (March 10) - Making commercials entertainment. The 1980s and cinematic advertising. The era of brand engineering and manufacturing consent

Week Eight: (March 17) - A technological threat to commercials - TiVo! What DVR did to the world of advertising. Ad Blockers, Skipping, VOD, OTT Devices
Case Study Analysis Due
Groups assigned for Dream Collab Project - Project explained. Due April 14

Week Nine: (March 24) - New media, new rules, same ad industry… for now. The impact of broadband on television media and commercials. Early brand deals. A short history of sponsored webseries. The consequence of cord cutters.
Readings: The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Amanda Lotz.

Week Ten: (March 31) - Advertorial, Native Advertising, Corporate Propaganda. How content farms managed a new form of commercial advertising. New models of advertising: CTV and OTT. Companies *as* media: Redbull/GoPro
Homework: Case Study Analysis 02 - Due Week of April 21
Readings: John Oliver as a Cassandra

Week Eleven: (April 7) - No Class - Spring Break

Week Twelve: (April 14) - Dream Collab Presentations
Final Explained - Treatment for SponCon

Week Thirteen: (April 21) - No Class - Thursday

Week Fourteen: (April 28) - Ok Go and the art history of the internet. Merging brand deals with the personal brand. Data, data, data. When Nielson is not enough. Cross-Device campaigns.
Homework: Generation Like response.

Week Fifteen: (May 5) - Collabs, brand partners, and advertising the authentic. How the internet became a sponsored content free for all. Who are and who aren't able to be sponsored. When and where brands draw the line. What comes next in the era of AI and surveillance.

Week Sixteen: (May 12) Last Day of Class - Where is SponCon going? AI, Surveillance, Extractive Technologies, Metaverse, AR/VR/XR.

Final: Final Project Due

Course Policies:

Students are expected to come to class prepared, having completed the assigned readings or viewings before each session and ready to participate actively. Participation in discussions is a crucial aspect of the class and is **not** optional. Since class participation is an integral part of the course, attendance in class is similarly essential. Even if you attend every class, if you do not contribute, you cannot receive a class participation grade higher than **B** and your grade for that component of the course will likely be lower.

Attendance will be taken each week. Habitual lateness or abscesses will impact your class participation grade, as three or more instances of lateness will be counted against the class participation component of the course. In addition, if a student leaves class before it concludes, their departure will be counted in the same way as lateness, i.e. three early exits will be counted against your grade.

Accommodation For Students With Disabilities:

In accordance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, Students who require academic accommodation should contact the Office of Special Services, Frees Hall 111, (718) 997 - 5870 and @ http://www.qc.cuny.edu/StudentLife/services/specialserv/Pages/default.aspx.

Course Preparation:

Though an experimental course, Brand Safety requires students to devote a significant amount of preparation for each class session. Academic success in this class will be contingent upon your conscientious and timely completion of all course requirements. You will need to do much of the work for this class outside class time as there is no in class lab sessions.

Policy on Plagiarism:

There are few academic matters more serious than plagiarism. Any written work for a college course must be wholly original, or it needs to be cited. If you take any idea from an outside source, whether it is a website, book or any media form, you must indicate where you obtained that information. Copying anything off of the Internet without noting the source is considered plagiarism. If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the instructor before

submitting your work. Do not assume something is common knowledge unless it would be blatantly obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the subject. For instance, that the famous Apple MacIntosh *1984* commercial was screened for a national audience only one time during the Super Bowl in January 1984 is widely known by people even if they have never seen the advertisement; in contrast, an interpretation of the ad - it's aesthetics, it's brand positioning and its cultural and contextual use of science fiction tropes is <u>not</u> common knowledge. Copying materials from website and books without noting where it can be found and verified by another individual is considered plagiarism; it is not research! (Properly sourcing materials is research, using it without attribution is plagiarism.) Plagiarism is a violation of the Code Of Academic Integrity, not to mention dishonest and a form of fraud. Please take a moment and review the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy, which is available @ http://www.qc.cuny.edu/StudentLife/Pages/default.aspx

Work that is plagiarized will result in the following consequences:

i. You will receive an F for the assignment.
ii. Second violations will result in disciplinary action and you will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct

<u>Note on GPT use:</u>

ChatGPT and Generative AI are useful tools for synthesizing information and organizing thoughts. They are absolutely terrible at doing the research necessary for this class as these tools are unable to generate cultural nuance and context necessary for this course. I (your professor, Jamie Cohen) am fluent in Large Language Models, their processes, their datasets, and their outputs and give talks globally on the subject. In other words, I will know how much GenAI material you have used in your work. All assignments in this class aim to increase your creativity, not synthesize it for shallow learning. If you hand in something that is primarily synthetic, you will receive a very low passing grade (what a machine deserves). Be human. Mistakes are important as is learning and trying your best.