

# Consumption, Media, and Environment

## COMM 379/EVST 379

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### Course Description

The purpose of this course is to help you engage the problem of consumption. By “problem,” I do not mean that consumption is a bad thing – although we will spend much of our time in the course examining the negative aspects of consumption (rather than uncritically celebrating it, which you can do throughout the rest of the culture). Instead, I mean that the course aims to problematize consumption, to examine and question it rather than take it for granted. You will confront the problem of consumption on individual, social, and environmental levels, in order that you might achieve some degree of freedom in relation to the power of contemporary consumer discourses.

The course is explicitly cross-disciplinary, but we will persistently attend to the communicative dimensions of consumption. We will start by reading some classic texts on consumption and consider how consumption itself can be a form of communication. Then, we will consider how contemporary forms of public discourse work rhetorically to encourage consumption, with particular attention given to advertising. Finally, we will confront the environmental consequences of consumption directly, and explore a range of strategies by which citizens have begun to resist the culture of consumption.

The course also will persistently return to the topic of climate change, one of the most significant environmental dimensions of contemporary consumption. I hope you will learn how consumption contributes to climate change, how communication influences our understanding of that relationship, and how scholars and practitioners are engaging the challenges of communicating effectively about consumption and climate change. Because of this focus, the course contributes to the proposed Climate Change Studies minor.

Our approach will challenge your “common sense” by taking a critical stance in relation to contemporary public discourse. The readings for the course will demonstrate aspects of this discourse that are (arguably) morally and politically troublesome. *I don't expect or require you to agree with everything we encounter, but I do expect you comprehend the arguments of the course to such a degree that you are able to incorporate course concepts in your working vocabulary.*

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Explain how consumption is a fundamentally social process that is both constituted through and influenced by communication practices.
- Identify and explain typical persuasive strategies and appeals use to influence consumption
- Describe how the mass media is systematically distorted in favor of consumption
- Articulate the environmental consequences of consumer culture, especially with regard to climate.
- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of different strategies for addressing the problems of consumption

You will be evaluated for proficiency in each of these three areas, as described later in this document.

## Texts

1. *The Consumer Society Reader*, eds. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt. The New Press, 2000.
2. Electronic Reserve materials (password: COMM379)

## Evaluation and Grading

To achieve the objectives listed above, you will have a set of assignments that provide an opportunity to demonstrate your proficiency.

- 1) SHORT PAPERS (1/3 of final grade). You will write three to five short papers (and I mean short – one page, single-spaced) that require critical engagement with the course readings, critical analysis of contemporary consumption-related discourses (ad-supported media, political rhetoric, PR campaigns, local sustainability events, etc), or other exercises related to the course. The purpose is to train your critical eye and hone your writing skills. Due dates and assignment details will be provided in class.
- 2) FIRST EXAM (1/3). You will have an examination on the first unit of the course. It will be a mix of objective, short answer, and essay questions (i.e. it will be somewhat different from COMM 250 exams.) Details and a review guide will be provided in class.
- 3) SECOND EXAM (1/3). You will have a second examination on the second unit of the course. It will again be a mix of questions, but with a greater proportion of short answer and essay questions. For the latter, we will develop a set of questions that address the core issues regarding personal, social and political change connected to consumption practices, especially in light of climate impacts. Details and a review guide will be provided in class.

With a large class, it is difficult to grade on participation, so that is not a formal component of evaluation. However, I will bump the final grades of those who engage in ‘sustainable participation’ (consistent, thoughtful, responsive to and respectful of others) throughout the course.

## Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability that may require modification of some element of the course, please obtain the appropriate documentation and then see me so we can make arrangements.

## Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct includes cheating, plagiarism, and deliberate interference with the work of others. It is the intellectual equivalent of theft, the aesthetic equivalent of plastic surgery. Like the former, it ruins the trust necessary for a well-functioning community; like the latter, it sacrifices your unique contributions and characteristics and replaces them with a disfigured, false ideal. There is a clear statement about plagiarism and a specific process for dealing with potential plagiarism cases in the Student Conduct Code, available for download from the Student Life web page: <http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/name/StudentConductCode>. Read it. In this course, it is primarily a matter of conducting scholarship ethically: giving credit to others for their ideas, and fairly and accurately gathering and representing the discourse of others (your “data”). It results in an ‘F’ on the particular piece of work and, in some cases, an ‘F’ on your course transcript. Bottom line: don’t do it.

## Attitude

This is a course that will force you to examine some of your most deeply ingrained habits, and will generally make you uncomfortable. I see that as a good thing. Discomfort, disgust, and other visceral responses provide the impetus to investigate, resist, and transform reprehensible social practices. Thus, you may have these feelings during the course. (Other responses from students have included feelings of desperation, symptoms of depression, and statements such as, "My life is soooo shallow" and "What the @\$^&\* are people thinking?") Another typical response is denial, a defiant insistence that they are not implicated in consumption and that no evidence justifies the critique of unconstrained consumption. That sort of response is understandable, but inadequate in the context of this course. You may ultimately reject many of the arguments made in the course, but during this semester you will need to engage them, and keep an open mind

## Communication, Consumption, and Climate Course Schedule

Location of readings: TCSR = The Consumer Society Reader, , ERES = Electronic Reserve.

### The Big Picture

#### Week 1 Introduction

Peter Goodman, "A Shopping Guernica Captures the Moment," (NYT 11/30) Handout  
Michael Pollan, "Why Bother?," *New York Times* April 20, 2008. ERES

### Communicative Dimensions of Consumption

#### Week 2 Commodification as (Distorted) Communication

Don Slater, "Consumer Culture and Modernity" ERES  
Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and the Secret Thereof" TCSR

#### Week 3 Conspicuous and Competitive Consumption

Thorstein Veblen, "Pecuniary Emulation" ERES  
Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption" TCSR  
View: *The Overspent American*

#### Week 4 Communication and the Creation of Needs

John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Dependence Effect" TCSR  
Jean Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs" TCSR  
View: *The Sneetches*

#### Week 5 Consumption, Identity, and Meaning

James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism." TCSR  
Alex Kotlowitz, "False Connections," TCSR  
View: *Advertising and the End of the World*

#### Week 6 Catch-up, FIRST EXAM

Tim Jackson, "Live Better by Consuming Less?: Is There a "Double Dividend" in Sustainable Consumption?" ERES

### Commercial Rhetoric and the Struggle over Meaning

#### Week 7 Hypercommercialism and the Consumption Imperative

Matthew P. McAllister, from *The Commercialization of American Culture*. ERES  
 Robert W. McChesney, "The Age of Hyper-Commercialism," ERES  
 View: *Behind the Screens: Hollywood Goes Hypercommercial*

Week 8      Rhetorical Strategies in Advertising  
 Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, "Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning" TCSR  
 Julia Corbett, "A Faint Green Sell: Advertising and the Natural World" ERES  
 Shane Gunster, "'You Belong Outside': Advertising, Nature, and the SUV." ERES

Week 9      The Rhetoric of Green Consumerism  
 M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer, "Liberal and Pragmatic Trends in the Discourse of Green Consumerism" ERES,  
 Timothy Luke, "Green Consumerism: Ecology and the Ruse of Recycling" ERES  
 \*Michael Maniates, "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?"  
*Available via Mansfield Library website in the electronic book, Confronting Consumption, ch. 3*

### **SPRING BREAK**

Week 10      Culture Jamming  
 Kalle Lasn, "Culture Jamming" TCSR  
 Christine Harold, "Anti-Logos: Sabotaging the Brand through Parody" ERES  
 View: *What Would Jesus Buy*

### **Consumption, Environment, and Strategies for Change**

Week 11      The Big Picture  
 Betsy Taylor and Dave Tilford, "Why Consumption Matters" TCSR  
 UM Greenhouse Gas Inventory, ERES  
 Footprint Exercise

Week 12      Voluntary Simplicity  
 Duane Elgin, "Voluntary Simplicity" TCSR  
 Michael Maniates, "In Search of Consumptive Resistance: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement." *E-book, ch. 9*

Week 13      Communicating the Consumption/Climate Connection  
 WWF-UK, *Weathercocks & Signposts: The Environment Movement at a Crossroads* ERES  
 Kenton DeKirby, et al, "Irrationality Wants to Be Your Friend" ERES  
 Susanne Moser, "Communication Strategies" ERES

Week 14      Back to the Big Picture  
 Juliet B. Schor, "Towards a New Politics of Consumption" TCSR  
 Michael Renner, "Moving Toward a Less Consumptive Economy" ERES

Finals      SECOND EXAM. Thursday May 14, 8-10 am