Communication, Consumption, and Climate  
COMX 349

Instructor: Steve Schwarze  
Email: steven.schwarze@umontana.edu  
Office: LA 357  
Hours: W 2-4 pm, and by appt

Course Description and Objectives
The purpose of this course is to help you understand and engage the problem of consumption. By this I do not mean that consumption is bad—although we will spend more of our time examining the negative consequences of consumption than celebrating it, the latter of which dominates our culture and can be observed during the other 165 hours of your week. Instead, I mean that the course aims to problematize consumption—to examine it and ask questions about it rather than take it for granted. We 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 discourses about consumption, consumerism, and anti-consumerism.

The course is explicitly cross-disciplinary, but we will persistently focus on the communicative dimensions of consumption—both the rhetorical strategies intended to influence consumption, as well as the way that consumption itself can be a form of communication. The course will focus especially on how communication and consumption practices are related to climate change.

The course intends to explore a range of perspectives while also attempting to make several arguments about communication, consumption and climate. I don’t expect or require you to agree with these arguments, but I do expect you to understand those arguments well enough that you can engage them effectively in the process of developing your own arguments.

By the end of the course, you should be able to:
- Explain how consumption is a fundamentally social process that is constituted through and influenced by communication practices
- Identify and explain typical rhetorical strategies and appeals that influence consumption and contribute to consumerism
- Articulate the environmental consequences of consumer culture, especially in relation to climate change
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different strategies for communicating about consumption and climate change, and apply that knowledge to develop communication strategies for different audiences
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to anti-consumerism

Texts
Most course readings will be made available via Moodle. I expect you to bring readings to class, either in hard copy or digital format. We may read a couple of books later in the semester; I have not yet ordered them at the bookstore. The ones I have used in the past are Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark, The Burning Question (Greystone, 2013), Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything (Simon & Schuster, 2014), Andrew J. Hoffman, How Culture Shapes the Climate Debate (Stanford, 2015), and Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, Talking Climate (Palgrave 2017).

To be clear, I am not asking you to order these books yet. They are here for our reference in case we decide to use them later.
Evaluation and Grading
You will be asked to perform a series of assignments that demonstrate your proficiency relative to the objectives above. Because the enrollment is larger than I anticipated,

- HOMEWORK (1/2 of final grade). For most weeks, you will have a short homework assignment (writing, answering questions, bringing things to class) that requires critical engagement with the course readings, consumption-related discourses, or relevant campus and local events related to climate change. Due dates and assignment details will be provided in class and on Moodle.
- FIRST UNIT EXAM (1/4). You will have an examination on the first unit of the course. It will be mostly objective questions (multi-choice, T/F).
- FINAL EXAM (1/4). Typically an essay exam in which you answer a subset of questions distributed ahead of time. Tuesday, May 5, 8-10 a.m.

With a large class, it is difficult to evaluate participation, so that is not a formal component of your grade. However, I will bump the final grades for those who engage in consistent, thoughtful participation that is responsive to and respectful of others.

Students with Disabilities
If you have a disability that may require modification of some element of the course, please obtain documentation from DSS and then see me to make specific arrangements.

Registration Changes
Through Feb. 4, you can drop or change grading option without penalty.
From Feb. 5- March 24, you need my signature to withdraw or change grade option.
After March 24, you must petition to withdraw, and only for extenuating circumstances (not poor performance). I will not permit grading option changes after March 24.

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. UM’s policies and procedures are in the Student Conduct Code. Read it. In this course, it is primarily a matter of 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 instances, an ’F’ for the course. Bottom line: don’t do it.

Attitude
This course forces you to examine some of your ingrained habits, as well as the wreckage that we are doing to our life support systems. It may make you uncomfortable. I see that as a good thing. Discomfort, disgust, and other visceral responses provide the impetus to investigate, resist, and transform practices. (Other responses from students have included feelings of desperation, symptoms of depression, and statements such as, “My life is sooo shallow” and “What the @#$^&* are people thinking?”) Another typical response is denial, a defiant insistence that you personally are not implicated in consumption, or 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 decide to reject many of the arguments made in the course, but during this semester you will need to engage them.

Yet another response is to spend all your time moralizing about other people’s consumption, since of course none of this applies to you; you already have the right attitude and are doing your part. This
attitude bothers me the most. I will hold up the mirror whenever possible so you can see how ineffective this is in promoting the change you want to see.

Communication, Consumption, and Climate
Spring 2020 schedule—first unit

The Stakes
R 1/16 Mary Annaise Heglar, “I don’t care if you recycle”
Leor Hackel and Gregg Sparkman, “Reducing your carbon footprint still matters”
Bill McKibben, “Recalculating the Climate Math”

Consumer Culture and Consumerism
T 1/21 Don Slater, “Consumer Culture and Modernity”
R 1/23 Kim Humphrey, Excess, pp. vii-48
View prior to class: “Consumerism and the Limits to Imagination
Recommended: Justin Lewis, “The Dead-End of Consumerism”

Conspicuous Consumption
T 1/28 Thorstein Veblen, “Pecuniary Emulation” and “Conspicuous Consumption”
R 1/30 Jean Baudrillard, “The Ideological Genesis of Needs”
Rachel Dwyer, “Making a Habit of It: Positional Consumption, Conventional Action, and the Standard of Living”
View in class: “The Sneetches”

Complicating Conspicuous Consumption
T 2/4 Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming
Kim Humphrey, “Interpreting Material Life”
R 2/6 Elizabeth Shove and Alan Warde, “Inconspicuous Consumption”

Consumption, the Ecological Critique, and Green Consumerism
T 2/11 Juliet Schor, “From Consumer Boom to Ecological Bust”
Annie Leonard, “Consumption”

Michael Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”

Toward Sustainable Consumption
T 2/18 Tim Jackson, “Live Better by Consuming Less?: Is There a “Double Dividend” in Sustainable Consumption?”
R 2/20 FIRST EXAM