

## **Consumerism & Sustainability**

### **SUMA PS5525, Spring 2024**

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**Description:** In our current global political economic context, extractive resource consumption 1) drives environmental degradation and climate change and 2) shapes our livelihoods, well-being, daily comforts, and cultural practices. In the face of this seeming incompatibility, many call for the need for transformative changes across economies, institutions, and cultures. This course aims to provide a broad overview of the many ways through which scholars theorize consumerism and sustainability professionals, companies, and practitioners work toward change on the ground. Together we will review popular models of consumer behavior, explore the links between individual behavior and collective action, and examine how professionals across a diverse sample of sectors and industries integrate sustainability and sustainable consumption into their work. This course will also encourage students to think critically about consumerism and sustainability in the context of their own fields and interests. In-class lectures, discussions, and activities will provide a high-level overview of many complex and challenging issues, and students will individually delve deeper into material that they find intellectually stimulating. We will unpack challenges along the way in a supportive environment, brainstorming creative solutions and learning from each other.

#### **Learning objectives:**

By the end of this course, students will:

- Critically assess links between resource consumption and environmental sustainability, informed by current scholarship across social science disciplines
- Leverage best practices in communication and social psychology to evaluate strategies to promote sustainable products and industries
- Identify broad trends in sustainability action across sectors/industries over time
- Develop subject matter expertise in a specific area that contributes to professional growth

**Assignments:** Weekly Discussion Posts: For the first 12 weeks of class, students will have the opportunity to respond to discussion prompts based on the topic and readings for the upcoming class. These prompts will be available on Canvas, and students **must complete any 5 of them throughout the semester**. To participate for a given week, the response must be posted by that Tuesday at midnight EST (except for week 1). Responses do not have length requirements but should thoughtfully engage with the material, reflecting on and building on classroom readings and learnings.

**Independent Project:** This course will be structured around the completion of an individual project that develops each student’s subject matter expertise in a chosen area. Projects have no pre-defined format or medium and will be agreed upon between the student and instructor early in the semester. Students will submit benchmark assignments and reflections throughout the semester that act as building blocks to the final project, offering opportunities for instructor and peer feedback along the way. The project will include a final presentation at the end of the semester (regardless of format) in lieu of a final exam.

**Participation and attendance:** Regular attendance and weekly demonstration of engagement with all readings, as well as provision of thoughtful comments, interpretations and/or questions, is expected.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Points</b>
Weekly discussion posts (5)	30 (6 pts each)
Project proposal draft and final proposal	5 points (2.5 pts each)
Benchmark reflection 1	5 point
Benchmark reflection 2	5 point
Final class presentation	10 points
Final project submission	25 points
Attendance and participation	20 points
<b>Total</b>	100

**Course Policies:**

Note: All information in this syllabus and course schedule is subject to change. Any changes to the syllabus or schedule will be announced in the scheduled lecture periods and posted to Canvas. It is the student’s responsibility to stay informed.

*Attendance, Participation & Lateness:* Active engagement is key to this course, making attendance critical to student success. Students are allowed one unexcused absence, no questions asked. Excused absences require documentation and follow SPS guidelines, including for emergencies, religious observances, and Columbia-approved activities. If you know you are going to miss a class, please let the instructor & TA know in advance. More than 2 unexcused absences may result in a failing grade for the course. Participation is graded based on whether you participate in-class activities, such as submitting responses to Menti polls, in-class discussion prompts, etc. This is graded simply on the basis of whether you engaged in the activity, not on the quality of that

work. You are not graded on how much you talk in class, although students who feel comfortable engaging in in-class discussions are encouraged to participate.

*Timely submission of work:* Students who turn in late work will not earn full credit unless there is a special circumstance, and this is communicated to the instructor in advance of the due date. Documentation may be requested. In the case of an excused absence, the instructor will set a new deadline. Each day an assignment is late corresponds to the loss of a third of a letter grade (An A+ becomes A, a B becomes a B-, and so on).

*Mutual respect:* You are expected to treat your instructor and all other participants in the course with courtesy and respect. Your comments to others should be factual, constructive, and free from harassing statements. You are encouraged to disagree with other students, but such disagreements need to be based upon facts and documentation (rather than prejudices and personalities). It is the instructor's goal to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect in the classroom.

*Accommodations for students with disabilities:* I am committed to creating a course that is inclusive in its design. If you encounter barriers, please let me know immediately so that we can determine if there is a design adjustment that can be made or if an accommodation might be needed to overcome the limitations of the design. I am always happy to consider creative solutions as long as they do not compromise the intent of the assessment or learning activity.

### **School Policies:**

*Copyright Policy:* Due to copyright restrictions, online access to this material is limited to instructors and students currently registered for this course. Please be advised that by clicking the link to the electronic materials in this course, you have read and accept the following: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

*Academic Integrity:* Columbia University expects its students to act with honesty and propriety at all times and to respect the rights of others. It is fundamental University policy that academic dishonesty in any guise or personal conduct of any sort that disrupts the life of the University or denigrates or endangers members of the University community is unacceptable and will be dealt with severely. It is essential to the academic integrity and vitality of this community that individuals do their own work and properly acknowledge the circumstances, ideas, sources, and assistance upon which that work is based. Academic honesty in class assignments and exams is expected of all students at all times. SPS holds each member of its community responsible for understanding and abiding by the SPS Academic Integrity and Community Standards posted at

<http://sps.columbia.edu/student-life-and-alumni-relations/academic-integrity-andcommunitystandards>. You are required to read these standards within the first few days of class. Ignorance of the School's policy concerning academic dishonesty shall not be a defense in any disciplinary proceedings.

*Statement Restricting Artificial Intelligence Usage:* Students are not allowed to use AI generative or machine learning tools to complete deliverables for this course. In accordance with Columbia University's academic integrity policy, individuals must complete their own work and properly acknowledge the circumstances, ideas, sources, and assistance upon which that work is based.

*Accessibility:* Columbia is committed to providing equal access to qualified students with documented disabilities. A student's disability status and reasonable accommodations are individually determined based upon disability documentation and related information gathered through the intake process. For more information regarding this service, please visit the University's Health Services website:  
<http://health.columbia.edu/services/ods/support>.

**Course Schedule by Week:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Assignment</b>
<b>Jan. 18</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction</li> <li>● Syllabus review</li> <li>● Defining the problem</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Welcome survey due</li> </ul>
<b>Jan. 25</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Theorizing consumption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lorenzen (2014)</li> </ul>	
<b>Feb. 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resource consumption &amp; climate change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nielsen et al. (2021); 1.5 Degree Lifestyles Report</li> </ul>	
<b>Feb. 8</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consumerism &amp; culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Boucher (2016); Morgan &amp; Purge (2016)</li> </ul>	**Draft proposal due
<b>Feb. 18</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social psych, consumerism, &amp; climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Constantino et al. (2022)</li> </ul>	
<b>Feb. 22</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Behavior change interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● van der Linden &amp; Weber (2021)</li> </ul>	**Revised proposal due

<b>Feb. 29</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating about consumerism &amp; climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fischer et al. (2021)</li> </ul>	
<b>Mar. 7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Corporations, consumers, &amp; climate goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bjørn et al. (2021)</li> </ul>	**Benchmark reflection 1 is due
<b>**Mar. 14**</b>	<b>**Spring Break, no class**</b>		
<b>Mar. 21</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product lifecycles</li> </ul>		
<b>Mar. 28</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can renewable energy keep up with consumption?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jenkins et al. (2021); Volts podcast</li> </ul>	
<b>Apr. 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consumerism &amp; policy</li> </ul>		**Benchmark reflection 1 is due
<b>Apr. 11</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual &amp; systems change</li> </ul>		
<b>Apr. 18</b>	<b>Final presentations</b>		
<b>Apr. 25</b>	<b>Final presentations</b>		**Final project due Apr. 30

### Reading List:

(PDFs and links available on Canvas site; supplemental readings not included)

- Bjørn, A., Lloyd, S., & Matthews, D. (2021). From the Paris Agreement to corporate climate commitments: evaluation of seven methods for setting ‘science-based’ emission targets. *Environmental Research Letters*, 16(5), 054019.
- Boucher, J. L. (2016). Culture, Carbon, and Climate Change: A Class Analysis of Climate Change Belief, Lifestyle Lock-in, and Personal Carbon Footprint. *Socijalna Ekologija*, 25(1–2), 53–80. <https://doi.org/10.17234/SocEkol.25.1.3>
- Constantino, S. M., Sparkman, G., Kraft-Todd, G. T., Bicchieri, C., Centola, D., Shell-Duncan, B., ... & Weber, E. U. (2022). Scaling up change: A critical review and practical guide to harnessing social norms for climate action. *Psychological science in the public interest*, 23(2), 50-97.
- Fischer, D., Reinermann, J. L., Mandujano, G. G., DesRoches, C. T., Diddi, S., & Vergragt, P. J. (2021). Sustainable consumption communication: A review of an emerging field of research. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 300, 126880.
- Jenkins, J. D., Mayfield, E. N., Larson, E. D., Pacala, S. W., & Greig, C. (2021). Mission netzero America: The nation-building path to a prosperous, net-zero emissions economy. *Joule*, 5(11), 2755–2761. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joule.2021.10.016>
- Lorenzen, J. A. (2014). Green consumption and social change: debates over responsibility, private action, and access. *Sociology Compass*, 8(8), 1063-1081.

- Nielsen, K. S., Nicholas, K. A., Creutzig, F., Dietz, T., & Stern, P. C. (2021). The role of high socioeconomic-status people in locking in or rapidly reducing energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions. *Nature Energy*, 1–6.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-021-00900-y>
- van der Linden, S., & Weber, E. U. (2021). Editorial overview: Can behavioral science solve the climate crisis? *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, iii–viii.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.09.001>
- Willis, M. M., & Schor, J. B. (2012). Does Changing a Light Bulb Lead to Changing the World? Political Action and the Conscious Consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 160–190.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212454831>