ENVR 1080 – The Smart Consumer - Uncovering the Hidden Story behind the Product Label

School:	**Academy of Interdisciplinary Studies**
Subject Area:	**Environment**
Course Credit:	**3**
Instructor:	**SAUERWEIN Meike**
Pre-requisite/co-requisite:	**Nil**

Notes:

- The syllabi provided here is for reference only and may be subject to changes and adjustments as determined by the course instructors.

ENVR 1080
- The Smart Consumer

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Summer Semester 2026

Date and Venue

Date & Time: 13. July – 5. Aug, 2026; Mon, Wed & Fri, 14:00 -
17:20 Venue: TBA

Contact Information

Instructor
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Office Hours: Feel free to send an email to us anytime in order to schedule a ZOOM or face to face meeting. You can also approach me during breaks or after class in case you have any questions.

Teaching Assistant
Name: TBA
Email:

Course Description

The choices we make in daily life - the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the products and services we use - define our lifestyle. With increasing pressure through climate change and resource constraints, many people intend to consume in a sustainable manner. But with vague "green promises," complex ingredient lists, and opaque production processes, we often do not know what is inside the products we use and how they were made. This course will investigate everyday products and explore features that make them (un)sustainable by applying a product life-cycle approach. It will also provide insights into the factors that influence our consumption decisions and how consumer behavior can be changed. Students get the opportunity (through small exercises, activities, and discussions) to investigate about consumption in Hong Kong and explore how companies and governments can help individual consumers to make smarter, more sustainable consumption choices.

This Course has been the winner of the *HKUST Common Core Teaching Excellence Award 2024*.

Course Content & Teaching Approaches

This class aims to investigate existing consumption patterns and its consequences on the environment and our society and analyze what can be done – by individual consumers as well as institutions - to move towards smart, sustainable consumption. For that we will look at what motivates people when making purchasing decisions and how can smart, sustainable consumption be promoted. At the same time the class provides insides on what makes specific products and product groups unsustainable and what is needed to enhance product sustainability and associated consumption decisions.

During this class, students will put them self into the consumer's shoes e.g., by evaluating their own consumption behavior or experiencing challenges when trying to choose more sustainable products. This will enable students to analyze what kind of information and triggers are needed to enable sustainable consumption in general, and how knowledge can be transferred to consumers. To allow students to explore the topic and exchange their ideas a blend of lecturing and interactive tasks, discussions, and group projects will be used for teaching.

The course covers 3 major themes:

1 – What makes consumption (un)sustainable?

In the course we will look at the consequences that current consumption behavior has on societies and the environment, and dive into the questions '*What is a sustainable product?*' and '*How can we measure whether one product is more sustainable than another?*' We will also have a closer look at two specific product groups, particularly Food and Fashion and identify the sustainability hotspots (weak-points) with regard to raw-materials and ingredients, production, processing, as well as use and disposal.

2 – Why do consumers behave in an (un)sustainable manner?

The course also aims to investigate the consumption behavior of people and explore what generally motivates us to consume. Furthermore, we discuss the questions '*Why do we consume so much?*' and '*Does consumption make us happy?*' and we will explore the challenges and barriers consumers face when attempting to make more sustainable purchasing decisions.

3 – How can we enable smart, sustainable consumption?

Lastly, we will explore how different stakeholders – like policy makers, producers & retailers, educators & actors from non-governmental institutions – could enable and motivate consumers to make smarter choices.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

On completion of this course, students will be able to:

ILO-1   Explain the consequences of unsustainable consumer behavior on the environment and social welfare

ILO-2   Apply life cycle thinking to analyze production methods and consumption behaviors and identify what renders them (un)sustainable

ILO-3   Analyze what drives citizens to consume in an (un-)sustainable manner and identify enablers as well as barriers towards behavior change

ILO-4   Critically analyze "sustainable" claims to recommend areas of improvement for product labeling and marketing

ILO-5   Evaluate and develop tools that help to enhance consumer education and enable Hong Kong citizens to make more sustainable purchasing choices

Course Schedule (tentative as of 11. Nov 2025, course content changes will be made to reflect recent trends and developments as applicable)

Themes	1. What makes consumption (un)sustainable?
	2. Why do consumers behave in an (un)sustainable manner?
	3. How can we enable smart, sustainable consumption?

Lecture #	Date		Topics	
1	Mon	13-Jul	(Un)Sustainable Consumption	Why do we need smarter consumption?
				Do we consume too much?
2	Wed	15-Jul	Consumption and Happiness	How much do we need to consume to be happy?
3	Fri	17-Jul	Drivers for unsustainable consumption	Why do we consume so much?
4	Mon	20-Jul	How to change consumer behaviour?	Education and Behavioural interventions
5	Wed	22-Jul	(Un)Sustainable Products - Environmental and Social Dimensions	LCA concepts & Life Cycle Game
				There is no such thing as a green product
6	Fri	24-Jul		Modern Slavery
			How to recognize sustainable products?	Eco-Labelling, Environmental Certification & Greenwashing
7	Mon	27-Jul		
			Product Sustainability - Food	Food Life Cycle- Production, Processing, Food Waste, etc.
8	Wed	29-Jul		
9	Fri	31-Jul	Challenges & Barriers for buying sustainable products	Availability, Price and Information, Trust, Quality, Habits, Social Norms
10	Mon	3-Aug	Enabling Sustainable Consumption *Corporate Actions*	What can *producers & retailers* do to enable sustainable consumption?
11	Wed	5-Aug	Enabling Sustainable Consumption *The role of the government*	Voluntary, market-based & regulatory policies to enable Sustainable Consumption

Lecture slides /Literature / References

Lecture slides will be made available right before the lecture starts to allow students to follow along during class. Please note that many class contents will be discussion or activity based. Outcomes or solutions of such activities (if any) will be added to the slides after the lecture and a the "post-class" version will be made available for students' revision (i.e., Quiz preparation).

There is no course or reference book for this course. Information will be drawn from different sources which are listed class-slides. If you like to have more information on specific topics or recommendations, you can contact the instructor any time.

Given the interactive nature of class students are advised to bring a fully charged laptop / tablet for activities, quizzes etc. to the classroom.

References / Reading Materials

- White et al. (2019): How to SHIFT consumer behaviors to be more sustainable
- Zink, Geyer (2016) Stanford Inno rev.: There Is No Such Thing as a Green Product
- Sauerwein (2018) Case Study - REWE x Walmart - Sustainable products

Assessment Scheme (tentative as of 11. Nov 2025)

	Task	Points	Release	Due date	ILOs
Group work	Case Analysis Report	25	Lecture 7/8	TBA	ILO 4,5
	Peer evaluation	5	After all group work is submitted		
Pair work	Homework Task	20	Lecture 9	TBA	ILO 2,4
Individual	Participation & Attendance & Peer Evaluation	15 (10+3+2)	Starting after add/drop period		
	2-3 Quizzes	40	TBA		ILO 1-4

1. Group Project + Peer Evaluation

Students will receive a case study about two retail strategies to increase the share sustainable products and derive a strategy for Hong Kong retailers. The case will be set as a reading assignment at the start of the group project. The assignment will need to be submitted as a group report. Questions about the report will be posted on the Canvas discussion board for student groups to respond and defend their strategy. Each student will have to evaluate her/his groupmates after the project is submitted.

Grading Rubric (tentative, updated version will be posted on Canvas upon release of the assignment)

Category	Criteria	Report	Q&A
Content	- Information is coherently organized and demonstrated a unified piece of work - the analysis demonstrates groups mastery of the subject knowledge - adequate coverage of all questions - Argumentation demonstrates a solid understanding of the case contents - The outlined arguments lead naturally to the conclusion/ recommendation. - Arguments are supported by appropriate evidence (facts, examples, statistics, references) - Limitations are clearly outlined - Recommendations fully address the outlined limitations - Limitations and Recommendations are supported by appropriate evidence (facts, examples, statistics, references) - the contents retrieved from the case are supplemented by information from credible additional references	15pts	
Structure/ Format	- Ideas are arranged logically; they strongly support the report's /presentation's focus. - the report writing is clear and precise - report is coherently organized, answers to the 5 questions and conclusions build on each other - the report has a clear, well-presented layout - the report demonstrates good practices for referencing, captioning and other formalities	5pts	
Group Communication	Answers to questions demonstrate a very good understanding of the strategies and thought through argumentation on the solutions proposed by the group		5pts

2. Homework Task

Students will work in pairs or groups of 3 on a task that links to sustainability in consumer behavior or the local market and will conduct small field research to come up with solutions and recommendations.

Grading Rubric (tentative, updated version will be posted on Canvas upon release of the assignment)

Criteria	Points	Aspects to pay attention to
1. Methods & Data Collection	2 points	• Clear explanation of what method(s) are used, what product categories were selected, how and where sample collection was conducted (supermarket name, branch, online/offline research, etc.)
2. Data Organization	3 points	• Minimum data/ sample collection target is reached • Documentation of data collection details (location of collections, time, date, etc. • Excel sheet included with data neatly organized, labeled, and understandable • Matches/ Aligns with what is described in the method section
3. Insights & Results Summary	4 points	• Summary of findings is clear and based on collected data • Highlights relevant insights and provides interpretation • Analysis shows a clear linkage to class contents
4. Recommendations	3 points	• Provides actionable, relevant suggestions to HK retailers • Recommendations are grounded in findings (not generic)
5. Structure, Clarity & References	3 points	• Slides are clear, well-structured, not overloaded with text, including relevant pictures • Sources are fully linked and cited in an academic manner • Follows instruction format (slide count, logical flow)

3. Participation + Attendance + Peer Evaluation

Since this class heavily draws on in-class activities and discussions, 15% of the grades are allocated to evaluate each student's attendance and participation. Students are expected to attend regularly (3 points) and actively participate (10 points) and assess their peers' performance / get assessed (2 points). The participation mark will consider proactive engagement in class discussions and in-class activities. In class we will use different types of online tools and surveys for students to submit their ideas and opinions which will count towards the participation mark.

Late submission for group project, Homework task and peer evaluation will be penalized e.g., with the deduction of -1 point per day late. Students who do not submit an evaluation of their peers will receive 0 points themselves, regardless of the score given by peers.

Attendance - Grading Guideline

Attendance will be counted after add-drop - points are given based on attendance ratio. After that, partial points will be deducted for not attending.

> **Students are expected to attend the <u>full class</u>.** Arriving more than 15 min late, leaving more than 15 min early may result in partial point deduction.

Number of Lectures	Attendance Rate	Points
10	100%	3.0
9	90%	2.7
8	80%	2.4
7	70%	2.1
etc.		

Participation

Participation will be assessed based on various engagement channels in class including:

The instructor and TA will be tracking the performance over the semester. For transparency: when assessing the participation we will count each contribution. More elaborate contributions (e.g. answering questions, sharing group discussion outcomes), with get a higher weighting than e.g. poll answers. There is no fixed number of participation points that guarantees receiving full score. The quantitative tracking serve as a reference for fair grading and assigning the final participation score. However, criteria like 'consistency over the semester', 'quality of contributions', 'class and group dynamics' etc. will be taken into consideration when assigning the final participation score.

- **asks or answers questions**, sharing group work and discussion outcomes with the class (**oral contribution)** - *this form of participation is most encouraged since it enriches the class content and enables mutual learning - (counts 2x for each contribution)*
- **submitting questions, answers and comments through chat** (e.g., zoom) (*no points are given for irrelevant comments or obviously AI generated comments) - (1 count per simple submission, 2 counts for more elaborate submissions)*
- **submitting answers to polls**, **surveys, spreadsheets** or through other channels *(1 count per submission)*

Participation Grading Rubric

	Participation - *The student…*
Very Good - Excellent (8 to 10 %)	• participates enthusiastically in activities and class discussions (consistently throughout the semester) in the chat, polls, surveys etc. and/or orally. • provides great additional insights and ideas, raises challenging questions, and addresses questions with reflective thoughts. • responds to questions, and shares views spontaneously. • works collaboratively in a group setting in ways that are effective or productive
Good (6 to <8 %)	• engages in activities, in the chat, polls, surveys etc. and/or orally. • provides additional insights, gives occasional but valuable responses to questions that came up during the lectures, and asks questions during class from time to time. • responds to questions, and occasionally shares views spontaneously. • works collaboratively in a group setting and contributes his/her fair share
Satisfactory (3 to <6 %)	• Participates in polls, surveys, classwork but only occasionally provides additional personal views and insights in class. • is notably less active in response to questions and shows moderate reflection on the topic. • works with group members in a group setting but only contributes to a small extent
Unsatisfactory (<3 %)	• is passive or even disrupts the class (e.g., by chatting, arriving late, often browsing gadgets etc.), • does not pay much attention in class and stays remote from group activities. • skips class several times and has therefore little class contribution.

4. Quizzes

Quizzes will be conducted throughout the semester. The Quizzes are open book (allow students to take reference of class slides), however the **use of GenAI or search engines or browsing on the internet is NOT permitted.** The quizzes will be based on class contents of the prior lectures and reading materials (to be read in preparation for the class). **Students have to be present in the classroom to take the quiz.** Logging into the quiz from **outside the classroom will be penalized** and the quiz will be reset to 0 points. **No make-up quiz will be provided without valid exemption** (e.g, medical certificate or equivalent).

The quiz is composed of MCQ and short answer questions. For MCQ questions there can be multiple correct answers, the number of correct answers is indicated in brackets behind the question.

Grading Notes / Rubrics for MCQ
- **Full points** in a question are achieved if the student ticks **all correct answers, and no incorrect answer**
- proportionate points are given if part, but not all correct answers are given, in addition proportionate deductions are made for any wrong answer(s) ticked
- **lowest total mark per question is 0 points** (even if only wrong answers are ticked)

Course AI Policy

In general, there are no restrictions on use of generative AI for an assessment task unless further specified (e.g. Quizzes do not allow access to AI). Detailed instructions will be provided for each assignment. Example statement: "In this assessment, you are allowed to use generative artificial intelligence (AI) to aid you in any manner. However, you must give proper credit for any use of generative AI." Failure to disclose the use of generative AI will result in a failing grade for this assignment.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Group formation and preferred name

Students can indicate a grouping preference as well as the name they like to be called in class on this excel sheet. *Please follow the announcements in class and on Canvas.* Please note that we try to accommodate all requests but cannot guarantee that all students are grouped according to their preference. Students that do not provide a grouping preference will be assigned by the TA following the grouping criteria (5 students per group, at least from 2 different years of study and 2 different schools).

Other Course Policy Aspects

Academic Integrity
Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Course Copyright

All course materials students receive or to which students have online access are protected by copyright laws. Students may use course materials and make copies for their own use as needed, but unauthorized distribution and/or uploading of materials without the instructor's express permission is strictly prohibited.

Special Accommodations

If you have a documented disability, or any other problem you think might affect your ability to perform in class, please schedule an appointment to see the instructor early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

Inclement Weather

Please refer to the University website regarding bad weather policies. If you are affected by a weather-related emergency, please contact your instructor at the earliest possible time to make special arrangements.