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Contesting Ideologies Structuring Gender Transgression in the Swedish Marketplace

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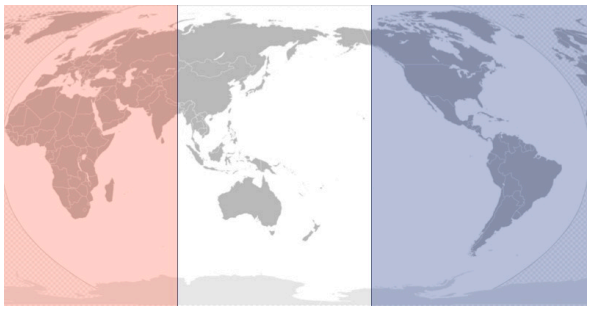

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Contesting Ideologies Structuring Gender Transgression in the Swedish Marketplace

Hossain Shahriar *Lund University School of Economics and Management, Lund, Sweden*

Introduction

This paper interrogates how contesting state and marketplace ideologies in Sweden negotiates the construction of gender transgression in the marketplace. There is always an incessant ideological battle among the different sides of a society – among the traditionalist and the more progressive, among those who embraces change and those who attempt to conserve corrupting the natural order. Between two such large ideological positions, consumers in Sweden are caught in the crossfires of different messages and strives to figure out their interpretive strategies. Given its status as a welfare State, Sweden is driven, to a large extent, by state– instigated double emancipation ideology. On the other hand, both traditional gender ideology and a more progressive gender transgressive ideology – that promotes gender inclusivity, neutrality and fluidity – also pervades consumption in the Swedish marketplace.

Review of Previous Literature

Moisander et al. (2009) and Thompson, Arnould and Giesler (2013, p. 151) expressed how the use of 'individual' as primary unit-of-analysis and overuse of phenomenological accounts in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) are "reproducing the hyperindividualising, overly agentic, and ahistoric, sociologically impoverished theoretical" accounts, and needs more "investigations into the sociocultural shaping of consumption and the ideological production of consumer subject positions". This sentiment to understand the culturally contextualised consumer subject was echoed in Askegaard and Linnet (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), Karababa and Ger (2011) and Giesler and Veresiu (2014), who called for works that integrate micro–social phenomenological consumers accounts with macro socio–historical framework, that structure the market and consumption system for better understanding of consumers and their environments. This research answers such calls to understand both the micro–social lived consumers' experiences as well as to interrogate macro– social historical and institutional forces mediating gender ideologies. There is an abundance of work in consumer research pertaining to ideologies. Scholars in CCT have investigated the role of political (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Varman & Belk, 2009) and religious (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Sandikci & Ger, 2010) ideologies in structuring consumption, in particular, how ideologies negotiate with institutional forces such as myths (Luedicke et al., 2010; Thompson, 2004), ethnicity (Üstüner & Holt, 2007; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018), and gender (Branchik & Chowdhury, 2013; Campana et al., 2020; Hirschman, 1993; Minowa et al., 2019), particularly in the context of macromarketing (French et al., 2020; Kravets et al., 2020; Nill & Shultz, 2010; Ourahmoune et al., 2014). Previous CCT scholarships have also investigated how multiple ideological forces engage in conflicts in the marketplace (Askegaard et al., 2005; Molander, 2021; Peñaloza, 1994). Molander (2021) underscored the importance of taking into account the interplay between both state and marketplace ideologies, both of which structure consumption in Sweden. Molander, Östberg and Kleppe (2019) posited that the State is usually in the backdrop, as policymakers, and its influence as an 'ideology–producing' function in shaping the consumer culture and reproducing gender imbalances is undertheorised. To ameliorate such imbalances, this study explores various ideological forces in the marketplace that structure gender.

Theoretical Apparatuses

In this study, I lean upon the notion of structure and superstructure from the theory of 'cultural hegemony' by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (2007) and borrow the conception of 'interpellation' and 'Ideology State Apparatuses' (ISAs) from the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971). According to Gramsci (2007, p. 208), "the State is the instrument for conforming civil society to the economic structure". Borrowing elements of Gramsci's historical bloc, this research demonstrates the dialectical relationship between the following: (1) economic structure, (2) ideological superstructures: a) State/political, b) civil society/sociocultural. Althusser (1971) postulated that ISAs are sites of struggle between the hegemony, who has considerably more power and rules the state, and the marginalised, and this class struggle is manifested in ideological forms of the ISA. Using Althusser (1971), this paper also showcases how the Swedish state uses the ISAs to promote and diffuse a gender equal ideology to interpellate gender.

The Swedish Context

Sweden is a perfect ground for this study, as she can be considered as "the most gender equal country on earth" (Ulver, 2019, p. 65), "infused with ideologies of egalitarianism", ranked high in Gender equality index and has low gender gap (Klasson & Ulver, 2015, pp. 1655, 1659). She is ripe with instances of how a distinct state ideology of egalitarianism has induced consumer culture evolving at the confluence of the state, consumers' lived experiences, and firms' marketing pursuits (Molander et al., 2019). Recent history of state feminism of Sweden dates back to the 1970s, when the country's ideology started to become more gender egalitarian, thanks to feminist movements ushered in by media, pop–culture and politics (Molander et al., 2019). The Swedish state believes that society would reap benefits from unbinding gender norms (Molander et al., 2019). As a country, Sweden is in the forefront of gender–neutral revolution.

Methodology and Analytical Apparatuses

To understand both the micro–social lived consumers' experiences as well as to interrogate macro–social historical and institutional forces mediating gender transgression in the marketplace, two methods were employed in this study. First, face–to–face interviews, among young urban middle–class Swedish consumers and marketing professionals, has been conducted to garner rich empirical materials. Second, media analysis has been performed to better understand the dominant cultural meanings and tensions in Swedish state ideologies, by interrogating books, websites, news, television programmes, business and consumer insight reports, government and statistical reports, political debates and speeches, marketing campaigns and advertisements. Empirical materials are being analysed and interpreted in a hermeneutically grounded way (Thompson, 1997) to extricate insights from both interviews and media, hence there is an incessant oscillation during analysis.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings indicate that gender transgression in the marketplace is structured at three spheres. At the state superstructural sphere, gender related national political agenda stems from the Swedish welfare state's distinct state ideology of gender equality, mediated through the following ISAs: religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade–union, communications and cultural ISAs (Althusser, 1971). Government Offices of Sweden (2019) cogently outlined three welfare reforms that promote gender egalitarianism in Sweden: (1) in 1971, commencement of separate income taxation for wife and husband, (2) in 1974, development of affordable public child care and (3) in 1974, Sweden became the first state to introduce gender–neutral paid parental leave policy. Through 'Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies', the Swedish government has authorised the Swedish Gender Equality agency to assist all government agencies to make gender a part of every policymaking decisions (Institute, 2019). Furthermore, policies to transgress gender is a popular topic of discussion in political speeches. For instance, in Sveriges Riksdag (2018) (Swedish Parliament), a proposal was in motion to investigate the introduction of a legal third gender in Sweden. At the sociocultural superstructural sphere, gender transgression is shaped by societal discourses, local and global media and cultural intermediaries

(Bourdieu, 1984) or specialists (Holt, 2002), such as celebrities and high profile transgender people, who are upending prescribed gender roles and norms (McNabb, 2017). Advertising diffuse meanings and images of consumption ideologies (Appadurai, 1996; Thompson & Haytko, 1997) of globally dominant countries, such as large numbers of gender–transgressive advertisements from the

United States, of brands like Mattel, H&M, Selfridges, Diesel, Covergirl, Maybelline and many other fashion brands. Global cultural norms and transgressive ideologies are also propagated by movies and TV shows. Brands/ marketers/ companies, advertising professionals/ agencies, market-researchers, media and regulatory bodies are institutional actors at the economic/ production structure that mediate gender ideologies through production of gender-neutral offerings and marketing campaigns. In Sweden, marketing communication has strived to reduce men's insecurities portraying them as more gender-neutral (Molander et al., 2019). For instance, with their 'Break the Clothing Power Structure' campaign, Åhléns inspired consumers to dress without conforming to traditional stereotypes.

Anticipated Theoretical Contribution

Gramsci (***gramsci1971selections**) highlighted the significance of ideological superstructures producing and reproducing economic spheres of production. In a similar vein, Althusser (1971, p. 154) argued that "All ideological State apparatuses...contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production". While during Gramsci's and Althusser's time of postulation, production was at the fore–front of marketplace narratives, until postmodernism elevated consumption from a 'value–destructive' endeavour to a 'value–producing' activity, in equal footing with production (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Hence, this study would extend Gramscian and Althussarian theorisations and explicate how structures and superstructures as well as ISAs reproduce consumption. Moreover, this study advances understanding of interplay between state and marketplace ideologies that can shape gender structures in a society, and hence, address social justice and equity issues. Furthermore, this study answers calls for more research interrogating ideological and institutional actors mediating consumption, in association with consumers' lived experiences. Additionally, Gopaldas and Fischer (2012) highlighted the notion of intersectionality, calling for more research

that intersects with gender. This research responds to such a call of studying the intersection of state and gender ideologies.

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