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## Contesting Ideologies Structuring Gender Transgression in the Swedish Marketplace

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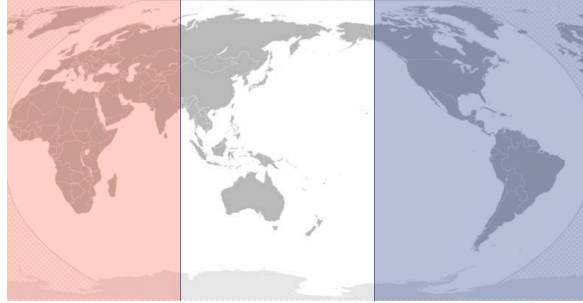
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# Program

<b>Conference Chairs Thanks</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Track Chairs</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Reviewers</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>I <i>Macromarketing Measurement and Methods</i></b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Automated Solution to Laddering Technique for Analysis of Aggregated Consumer Values</b>	<b>2</b>
Sabeehuddin Hasan	
<b>Effectuation and everyday life decisions of people in an economy under stress: Responding to economic stress, pathways to quality of life</b>	<b>4</b>
Masoud Karami	
Maryam Hejazinia	
Ben Wooliscroft	
<b>Studying Thick Concepts</b>	<b>7</b>
Siddharth P K	
<b>Investigating the Wicked Problem of Brand Externalities: A Systematic Methodology</b>	<b>15</b>
Shoailb M. Farooq Padela	
Ben Wooliscroft	
Alexandra Ganglmair-Wooliscroft	
<b>Thinking Big about Going Small: Conceptualizing Technology Miniaturization Consumption</b>	<b>21</b>
Anastasia Thyroff	

Matthew A. Hawkins  
Duygu Akdevelioglu

<b>Exploring C-OAR-SE Scaling for Macro Phenomena: Development of a Short Sustainable Product Involvement Scale</b>	<b>24</b>
Francisco J. Conejo Wilson Rojas Ana L. Zamora Clifford E. Young	
<b>The Three Dichotomies Model, the Self-understanding of Macromarketing and the Determination of its Domain</b>	<b>56</b>
Michaela Haase	
<b>Measuring different facets of frugality: Lessons learned from hotel guests' experience</b>	<b>63</b>
Farzana Quoquab Nur Zulaikha Mohamed Sadom Jihad Mohammad	
<b>Reimagining Hackathons as a Macromarketing Methodology for Community- Based Co-operative Social Entrepreneurship</b>	<b>74</b>
Martin Downes Sarah Evans Anthony Samuel	
<b>II Track <i>Degrowth</i></b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Degrowth through the eyes of business students: fostering a sense of per- plexity and critical thinking through learning diaries</b>	<b>78</b>
Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes Pia Polska	
<b>Transformative Branding — Exploring the Role of Branding in Marketing for a Better World</b>	<b>81</b>
Amanda Spry Bernardo Figueiredo Lauren Gurrieri Jessica Vredenburg	

Joya A. Kemper

**III Track *Sustainable Business* 84**

**Sketching Consumers' Experiences of Access-based Fashion Consumption 85**

Yiqun (Kelly) Wang  
Caroline Moraes  
Isabelle Szmigin

**IV Special Panel *The Effect of Covid-19 on Food Consumption Patterns: A Global Study of the Pandemic and Implications for Food Marketing Systems* 87**

**The Effect of Covid-19 on Food Consumption Patterns: A Global Study of the Pandemic and Implications for Food Marketing Systems 88**

Ann Veeck  
Ahmet Ekici

**V Track *Food* 92**

**Providing Nutrition Information on Restaurant Menus: A Systematic Review 93**

Rumaila Abbas  
Courtney Droms Hatch

**"Nutritional-Score" Pricing Effects on Food Pantry Selections 100**

Lendie Follett  
Andrew Bryant  
Daniel Beck  
Sarai Rice

**How Do Agricultural Stakeholders Perform Institutional Work Through AI? — A Macromarketing Perspective 107**

Priyanka Jayashankar  
Wesley Johnston  
Sree Nilakanta

<b>Unhealthy Food Marketing To Children and Youth: Shifting From Offline to Online</b>	<b>109</b>
Ulla-Maija Sutinen Ines Kaivonen Roosa Luukkonen Elina Närvänen	
<b>Plant-Based Meat: An Exploration of Consumer Adoption of Novel and Innovative Food Products</b>	<b>116</b>
Samantha K. White Paul W. Ballantine Lucie K. Ozanne	
<b>VI Track <i>Marketing History</i></b>	<b>118</b>
<b>The Formation of the Transgenic Food Market in Brazil: A Historical Analysis of the Controversies Reported in O Estado de São Paulo</b>	<b>119</b>
Rosana Oliveira da Silva Denise Franca Barros	
<b>Marketizing New Zealand's WWI Nurses for a 21st Century Fit</b>	<b>130</b>
Jayne Krisjanous Christine Hallett	
<b>How Fast Became Normal: Temporal Rhetoric in 20th Century U.S. Advertising</b>	<b>139</b>
Sarah C. Grace name	
<b>VII Track <i>Social Conflict and Market Dynamic</i></b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Social Conflicts and Market Dynamics</b>	<b>142</b>
Andrés Barrios Clifford Shultz Julia Pennington	
<b>The Dynamics of Markets and Social Conflicts: The Case of Colombia's 2021 Protest</b>	<b>145</b>

Andrés Barrios Clifford Shultz	
<b>Making Black Lives Matter — Becoming an Anti-Racist Marketing Academy</b>	<b>149</b>
June N. P. Francis	
<b>Examining Interactive Value Formation and Beneficiary Value in Development Programmes at the Bottom of the Pyramid</b>	<b>152</b>
Johanna Arantola-Hattab Mikko Laamanen Pia Polsa	
<b>Social Conflict and Market Dynamics: The Case for Meta-Analysis</b>	<b>157</b>
Clifford Shultz Deborah DeLong	
<b>VIII Track <i>Climate Change</i></b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Changing the Climate in the Classroom: An Enquiry-Based Approach</b>	<b>162</b>
Vicki Little Lay Tyng Chan Stephanie Kay Ann Cheah Soo Yeong Ewe Vimala Kunchambo	
<b>No Climate Change in Marketing Classrooms? The View from Best Selling Marketing Textbooks</b>	<b>170</b>
Sabrina Helm Vicki Little	
<b>Doing Something Simple for the Climate? Consumer Responsibilization and Counter-Conduct</b>	<b>179</b>
Friederike C. Doebbe Emilia Cederberg	
<b>Understanding the role of consumption and activism in coping with climate change emotions</b>	<b>222</b>
Laksitha Siriwardena Joya A. Kemper	

Biljana Juric

**IX Panel — Covid in the Americas 225**

**The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Conflict: Perspectives from the Americas 226**

Cliff Shultz

Don Rahtz

Joe Sirgy

Jaquie Pels

Marcus Hemais

Stan Shapiro

Julie Stanton

Andrés Barrios

**X Special Session: Transformative Consumer Research 230**

**Market Dynamics of Resilience and Recovery from Social Conflict 231**

Clifford Shultz

Marlys Mason

Sterling Bone

**Explosions of Conflict and Corruption: Catalysts for Mutual Prosperity in Lebanon and the Middle East 234**

Clifford Shultz

Karine Aoun-Barakat

**Consumer Trauma and the Power of Collectivity 237**

Marlys Mason

Sterling Bone

Amy Greiner Fehl

Kathrynn Pounders

**Contributions of Marketing to Restore and Maintain Normality During Persistent Conflict 240**

Alan J. Malter

<b>Small Businesses: Community Change Agents in Social Movements</b>	<b>242</b>
Stacey Menzel Baker Meredith Rhoads Thomas	
<b>XI Panel — Macromarketing Pedagogy</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>“Save the Macromarketers!”: Insights on Moving Macromarketing into the Business School Curriculum</b>	<b>245</b>
Stan Shapiro Mark Peterson Julie Stanton Joe Sirgy Tina Facca-Miess	
<b>XII Track Macromarketing Pedagogy</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Source-and-Hack: Macromarketing Pedagogy via Cocreated Course-Client Experiential Projects</b>	<b>248</b>
Linden Dalecki	
<b>Imparting Values, Challenging Neutrality- Tackling Macromarketers Pedagogical Predicament</b>	<b>251</b>
Sujit Raghunathrao Jagadale	
<b>Food for Thought: Teaching Food Sustainability through a Macromarketing Lens</b>	<b>259</b>
Leighann C. Neilson Narmin T. Banu Katie Vanderby	
<b>An “Expanded Voice” Macro-Sustainability Approach to Teaching Principles of Marketing</b>	<b>278</b>
Forrest Watson Stefanie Beninger Christine Domegan Alexander Reppel Stanley Shapiro Julie Stanton	

<b>Learning from Poverty through Ethnographic Stories: A macromarketing perspective</b>	<b>281</b>
Satyam	
<b>XIII Special Session: Connecting Macromarketing with Industry and Government</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>Connecting Macromarketing with Industry, Government and Stakeholders</b>	<b>287</b>
Ben Wooliscroft	
<b>Transvection-Based Marketing: a low-value escape hatch for New Zealand producers</b>	<b>289</b>
James Wilkes	
<b>Mimicking Real-World Systems in Macromarketing</b>	<b>306</b>
Bodo Lang	
Cliona Ni Mhurchu	
Natalie Walker	
David White	
<b>The Scrappy Entrepreneur as Macromarketer</b>	<b>309</b>
Linden Dalecki	
<b>Well-being Budgets and Perceived Quality of Life</b>	<b>312</b>
Alexandra Ganglmair-Wooliscroft	
<b>Environmental Collaboration within a Supply Chain</b>	<b>315</b>
Negin Ahmadi Saber Doust	
Mark Glynn	
Yingzi Xu	
Ivan Russo	
<b>The Story of Waiau: Promoting Systems Thinking Regarding Hydroelectric Power Generation</b>	<b>320</b>
Ken Hyde	
<b>XIV Track Ethics, Equity and Social Justice</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>The Papal Encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” and its implications for Macromarketing</b>	



Nicholas J.C. Santos Gene R. Laczniak	322
<b>Applying the Integrative Justice Model to Evaluate the Influence of Digital Storytelling on Cultural Perceptions of a Social Issue</b>	<b>326</b>
Tina Facca-Miess Maurice Emelu	
<b>Ethical value creation for equity and social justice: Aligning value pos- tures in service systems</b>	<b>334</b>
Jonathan J. Baker Victoria J. Little Roderick J. Brodie	
<b>Faith-based organisation brand equity: improving and sustaining market- ing systems for social good</b>	<b>341</b>
Janet Davey Jayne Krisjanous Eldrede Kahiya Lucy Sulzberger	
<b>XV Track Social Marketing</b>	<b>349</b>
<b>Social Marketing: The role of Facebook as a social mechanism for trans- formative behaviour change</b>	<b>350</b>
Tina Flaherty Christine Domegan	
<b>Gamification in Macro-Social Marketing Narratives</b>	<b>353</b>
Afshin Tanouri Ann-Marie Kennedy	
<b>Rainbow Cultural Competency Training for Canterbury Police Officers</b>	<b>363</b>
Johnpaul Smith Ann-Marie Kennedy	
<b>Meat Consumption and Reduction in China: Institutional and Social Change</b>	<b>369</b>
Joya Kemper	

Victoria Little

**Coming and Going in Loops: Grasping More System Complexity for Social Marketing 370**

Dmitry Brychkov  
Christine Domegan  
Patricia McHugh

**“Breast is Best” as a Constrained Marketing System 376**

Janine Williams  
Jayne Krisjanous  
Janet Davey  
Ann-Marie Kennedy

**A Design Re-frame to Address Stigma in Help-seeking of Depressed College-goers: A Case Study using Shadow Social Marketing 385**

Paromita Goswami  
Jaideep Ghosh

**XVI Track Globalization, Neocolonialism and Marketing 395**

**The 40 years of racism in advertising: a decolonial perspective on the decisions of the Brazilian National Council of Advertising Self-Regulation 396**

Laís Rodrigues de Oliveira  
Alessandra de Sá Mello da Costa

**Does Consumerism Really Mean for Marketers what Philip Kotler believes it does?: a discussion based on the decolonial perspective from Latin Americae 425**

Marcus Hemais  
Laís Rodrigues

**Channelling and Suppressing Subaltern Voices: Tourism Imaginaries and the Colonial Legacies of Spirit Possession in Brazil 428**

Chloe Preece  
Victoria Rodner

**Between Local or Global Eating: Narratives in Organic Food Market Power Dynamics 441**

Marlon Dalmor	
<b>Making the Coloniality Visible in the Brazilian Football Marketing Management</b>	<b>448</b>
Getúlio Sangalli Reale	
Marlon Dalmoro	
<b>Decolonizing Marketing Systems</b>	<b>455</b>
João Felipe R. Sauerbronn	
Klaus Pereira da Silva	
<b>XVII Macromarketing in Different Contexts</b>	<b>459</b>
<b>Building women's and girl's human rights is part of a macromarketing agenda</b>	<b>460</b>
Katherine Jones	
<b>Discouraging overconsumption — What does fashion have to do with it?</b>	<b>462</b>
Laura Davey	
Sommer Kapitan	
Jessica Vredenburg	
<b>Minerals and their Materiality: A Netnographic Account of Consumer Meaning Making Based on Social Interactions during Instagram Based Commerce</b>	<b>469</b>
Ezhil Priyadharshini Anbu Chezhian	
Paromita Goswami	
<b>STIRPAT For Macromarketing Education</b>	<b>487</b>
Anastasia Thyroff	
Sarah C. Grace	
Molly I. Rapert	
William E. Kilbourne	
<b>Has the Mens Razor completed a Sustainable Cycle?</b>	<b>489</b>
Ben Wooliscroft	
<b>COVID-19 Governance Regime in India and Consumer Identity Work</b>	<b>497</b>
Shreya Talur	

Hélène Cherrier Paromita Goswami	
<b>Multilevel Interventions for Online Pornography in The Marketplace</b>	<b>509</b>
Virginia Mwangi	
<b>XVIII Track Well-being</b>	<b>530</b>
<b>A qualitative study on consumer’s quest for wellbeing: A case of transition from offline to online education in India during COVID19 pandemic</b>	<b>531</b>
Divya Gogia Shreya Talur Paromita Goswami Jaideep Ghosh	
<b>XIX Track Externalities</b>	<b>548</b>
<b>The Dark Side of Marketing: An Empirical Examination of Marketing’s Role in the Opioid Epidemic:</b>	<b>549</b>
Rachel Ramey Sundar Bharadwaj	
<b>Aggregate Marketing Systems in a Subsistence Context: The Case of Brazilian Rafflees</b>	<b>556</b>
Ramon Silva Leite Marcos Ferreira Santos Francisco Claudio Freitas Silva	
<b>XX Track Forcibly Displaced Communities &amp; Marketing Systems</b>	<b>557</b>
<b>The Role of Aid-Agencies in Stimulating the Food Retail Market in the Time of Social Conflicts: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon</b>	<b>558</b>
Hossein Eslami	
<b>Integration of Skilled Immigrants (SIs) in Finland: Examining the “Business Lead” Program through the Lenses of Acculturation</b>	<b>559</b>
Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido	

Pia Polsa James Anyan Sanne Bor Maria Sääksjärvi	
<b>The Marketing Systems of Refugee Settlements</b>	<b>561</b>
Stefanie Beninger	
<b>Evolving Micro-Meso-Macro Dynamics: Toward refugees' inclusion and marketplace well-being in Lebanon and beyond</b>	<b>565</b>
Beatriz de Quero Navarro Karine Aoun Barakat Clifford J. Shultz, II Rafael Araque Padilla María Jose Montero Simó	
<b>Ethnonationalism in the Marketplace: An Ethnographic Study on Tibetan Refugee-Run Business in India</b>	<b>577</b>
Jie G. Fowler Arindam Das Himadri Roy Chaudhuri Ahmet Ekici	
<b>XXI Track Gender</b>	<b>581</b>
<b>Framing gender representations in advertising: An analysis of decisions by the Swedish Advertising Ombudsman</b>	<b>582</b>
Riikka Murto Johan Nilsson Hans Kjellberg	
<b>Sexualising and socialising women's inequality: an institutional logics analysis of the user-generated pornography market</b>	<b>583</b>
Laura McVey Lauren Gurrieri Meagan Tyler	
<b>Exploring the Drivers of Activism in a Vulnerable Group: How the Same Attributes that Marginalize Women may Empower Resilience</b>	<b>585</b>

Teresa Pavia  
Daniela M De Luca  
Kathrynn Ponders

<b>Contesting Ideologies Structuring Gender Transgression in the Swedish Marketplace</b>	<b>594</b>
Hossain Shahriar	
<b>Index</b>	<b>694</b>

# Contesting Ideologies Structuring Gender Transgression in the Swedish Marketplace

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## 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 Althusserian 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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