

# Consumption Ideology

BERND SCHMITT  
J. JOŠKO BRAKUS  
ALESSANDRO BIRAGLIA

Ideology plays a central role in consumer decisions, actions, and practices. While there have been numerous studies of ideological formations in specific consumption contexts, an integrative theoretical framework on consumption ideology has been missing. The theoretical framework presented in this article integrates systemic, social group, and social reality perspectives from social theory with prior consumer research to conceptualize consumption ideology as ideas and ideals that are related to consumerism and manifested in consumer behavior. Consumption ideology originates from conflicts between consumer desires and the system of consumerism. It is reflected in consumers' lived experiences and expressed in social representations and communicative actions related to status-based consumption, brand affinity and antipathy, performed practices, and political consumption. By adapting to the market, consumers confirm the system, but when they resist, they accelerate conflicts in consumer experiences unless resistance is ideologically co-opted by the market. Three illustrative cases—upcycling, Zoom backgrounds, and the commercialization of TikTok—exemplify how the framework may be used to analyze consumption ideology and generate new research questions. The article concludes with future research programs that move beyond micro-theorizations to illuminate the broader role of ideology in contemporary consumerist society.

**Keywords:** consumption ideology, ideological manifestations, consumerism, desire, consumer culture

There is no escaping the specter of ideology. In 2020, when diversity, equity and inclusion came to the

Bernd Schmitt (bhs1@gsb.columbia.edu) is Robert D. Calkins Professor of International Business at Columbia Business School, Columbia University, 3022 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, USA. J. Joško Brakus (J.Brakus@leeds.ac.uk) is a professor of marketing at Leeds University Business School, The University of Leeds, Maurice Keyworth Building, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. Alessandro Biraglia (A.Biraglia@leeds.ac.uk) is an associate professor of marketing at Leeds University Business School, The University of Leeds, Maurice Keyworth Building, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. Please address correspondence to J. Joško Brakus. The authors thank panel participants of the knowledge forum on consumption ideology at the Association for Consumer Research 2019 conference for inspiration; Nour Jedidi, Zipei Lu, and Kamel Jedidi for advice and help on topic modeling; and the editor, two associate editors, and five reviewers for their comments, help, and guidance. [Supplementary materials](#) are included in the [web appendix](#) that accompanies the online version of this article.

*Editor:* Linda L. Price

*Associate Editor:* Zeynep Arsel

*Advance Access publication August 27, 2021*

forefront in US society, painting “Black Lives Matter” in big yellow letters on US streets (an idea conceived by Washington DC’s Mayor Muriel Bowser) was called a “patriotic statement” (by New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio), a “denigrating act” (by President Donald Trump), and a “performative distraction from real policy changes” (by the local chapter of the Black Lives Matter Global Network) (Ries and Andrew 2020). What some called “protests,” others called “riots.” The looting of stores that some found “morally wrong” was seen by others as “reparations” (Rahman 2020).

Conceptually, ideology has many facets and has been discussed from various perspectives in philosophy, political science, sociology, and cultural studies. Ideology has been viewed as the outcome of conflicts between oppressors and the oppressed, a struggle for meaning among social classes or groups, and as proclamations of “right” and “wrong” (Faber 2004). Depending on one’s perspective, ideology may include distorted ideas to legitimize power based on social interests; a set of action-oriented ideas of a social group that provide values, meaning, and identity; or

an indispensable part of social reality activated and shaped by individual desires and fantasies (Eagleton 2007). Ideology has been described as deliberate and easily noticeable, or as operating in subtle ways at unconscious levels (Jameson 1981).

Ideology also functions as a playground—and battlefield—in consumer markets. Some consumers seek ideology-laden products and brands that are biodegradable, organic, sustainable, non-genetically modified, vegan, and cruelty free. Consumers also monitor and hold companies accountable for their diversity and inclusion policies, social purposes, political stances, and sustainability initiatives. They blame and shame corporations on social media for social discrimination, oppression, greenwashing, and other aberrations. In turn, many companies pride themselves on their mindfulness and socio-cultural sensitivities by canceling product lines, altering product ingredients, changing brand names, and redesigning logos. Appropriating feminist discourses on body politics, Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" holds the entire beauty industry responsible for distorting the portrayal of women, and Patagonia promotes itself as the "Activist Company." While these examples portray contemporary phenomena, ideology has always been prominent in consumer behavior, corporate and product branding, and marketing communications. In the 1970s, embracing the ideology of American consumerism and the hippie zeitgeist, Coca-Cola's iconic mountain-top advertisement showed young people from all around the world singing, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke," intended to be a song of "peace and harmony."

In this article, we present a theoretical framework of consumption ideology that incorporates classic social-theory perspectives on ideology as well as prior consumer research. Ideology-related consumer research studies, by and large, ascribe to the "social group" perspective of social theory. This perspective assumes that ideological ideas of social groups (e.g., social classes or status groups) provide consumers with meaning and identity (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The social group perspective follows social theorists like Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Boltanski 1976), studying specific "ideological formations," which are enacted in highly contextualized social behaviors (Boudon 1989; Eagleton 2007). However, some consumer research has adopted a more systemic social-theory perspective (Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Giesler and Fischer 2017). Systemic social theories analyze ideology as ideas and structures in society (Althusser 1971; Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002; Marx and Engels 1848/2011), which are motivated by social interests to legitimize power (Eagleton 2007; Freeden 2003). The systemic perspective was created originally by Marxist and neo-Marxist philosophers (Althusser 1971; Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002; Marx 1848/2011), and, in part, by Foucault (1982). Finally, consumer research has largely ignored the "social reality" perspective in social theory

focused on individual desires, which is associated with the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1983) and, most importantly, Žižek (1989, 1997, 2012). This perspective advocates that ideology is an indispensable part of social reality (Žižek 1997). Therefore, ideology should not only be viewed as being imposed on the individual as a class-based consciousness (Marx and Engels 1848/2011) or through socialization as *habitus* of social groups and through power pervasive in everyday life (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1982); ideology should also include activities that are shaped by individuals' unconscious desires, which are expressed as fantasies (Faber 2004).

After presenting the theoretical framework and its various parts (ideological originations, consumption orientations, and ideological processes), we illustrate the conceptualization with three contemporary cases (upcycling, Zoom backgrounds, and the commercialization of TikTok). These cases show how the framework can be used to explain consumer phenomena and generate new questions, thus providing new insights beyond existing studies. Finally, we highlight important research gaps and discuss future research programs arising from our conceptualization.

## OVERVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Following the notion of ideology as "a system of ideas and ideals" in the socio-political space (Oxford English Dictionary 2012), we define consumption ideology as *ideas and ideals related to consumerism, which are manifested in consumers' social representations and expressed in their communicative actions in the marketplace*. Consumption ideology, as defined, pertains to a specific set of ideas and ideals, namely those related to consumerism, which is an essential part of the capitalist system. Consumption ideology also entails specific forms of social representations and communicative actions (by an individual or collective), namely those that are pertinent to an individual performing the role of a consumer in the marketplace (MacInnis and Folkes 2010). Our definition implies that consumers, knowingly or unknowingly, think and act as ideologues because they are living in a consumerist society.

People cannot escape ideology (Eagleton 2007; Faber 2004). Accordingly, we posit that consumption ideology is present at all stages of the consumer journey—from search, choice, and purchase to usage and disposal of products. It is entrenched in the discourse on product sourcing, product selection, social signaling, privacy, and environmental sustainability. Consumption ideology occurs when the goal of consumption is acquiring possessions or using access-based objects as part of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Belk 1988). Consumption ideology also

occurs in “prosumption,” a process in which a consumer participates as a producer (Humphreys and Grayson 2008; Ritzer 2014). Finally, we assume that consumption ideology operates both at the unconscious and conscious levels. We suggest that ideology is mostly unconscious when consumers go about their daily lives and feel positive about consumption. However, when their desires as consumers are not fulfilled, a conscious dissatisfaction with the system of consumerism may set in, which may lead to a deliberate motivation for change.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework. The left side of the figure (“ideological originations”) conceptualizes the sources (or originations) of consumption ideology. The right side (“consumption manifestations”) conceptualizes the phenomena (or manifestations) of consumption ideology in the marketplace. We posit that consumption ideology originates from conflictual relationships between the ideas and ideals of consumerism and consumer desires along dimensions of social class, status, and identity. Consumption ideology is reflected in the consumer’s lived experience, which leads to consumption manifestations in diverse consumption domains and consumption orientations. The theoretical framework represents four important consumption domains and a  $2 \times 2$  scheme of consumption orientations as well as dynamics within the scheme along the dimensions of mode of articulation and mode of adaptation.

As figure 1 shows, the framework also includes processes that are important for understanding consumption ideology. As part of ideological originations, we distinguish the complementary processes of consumer subjectification and consumption sublimification. In addition, consumption orientations lead to market affirmation or market rejection, thus contributing to the dialectic progression of the market. Consumers’ affirmation of the market is usually appropriated by the system whereas market rejection leads to the symptomatic oscillation of the underlying desire unless consumerism ideologically co-opts this yearning. In the following sections, we describe the constructs and interrelations of the three parts of the theoretical framework: ideological originations, consumption manifestations, and ideological processes.

## IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINATIONS

The framework postulates that consumption ideology originates from conflicts between consumerism and consumer desires. The consumer’s lived experience reflects these conflicts. We first discuss the key constructs (consumerism, consumer desires, and the consumer’s lived experience) and then the conflict dimensions (social class, status, and identity) of the framework. For each construct and the conflict dimensions, we provide an overview of the key ideas, discuss the theoretical basis in social theory and

consumer research, and then further explicate each construct or the conflict dimensions.

## Consumerism

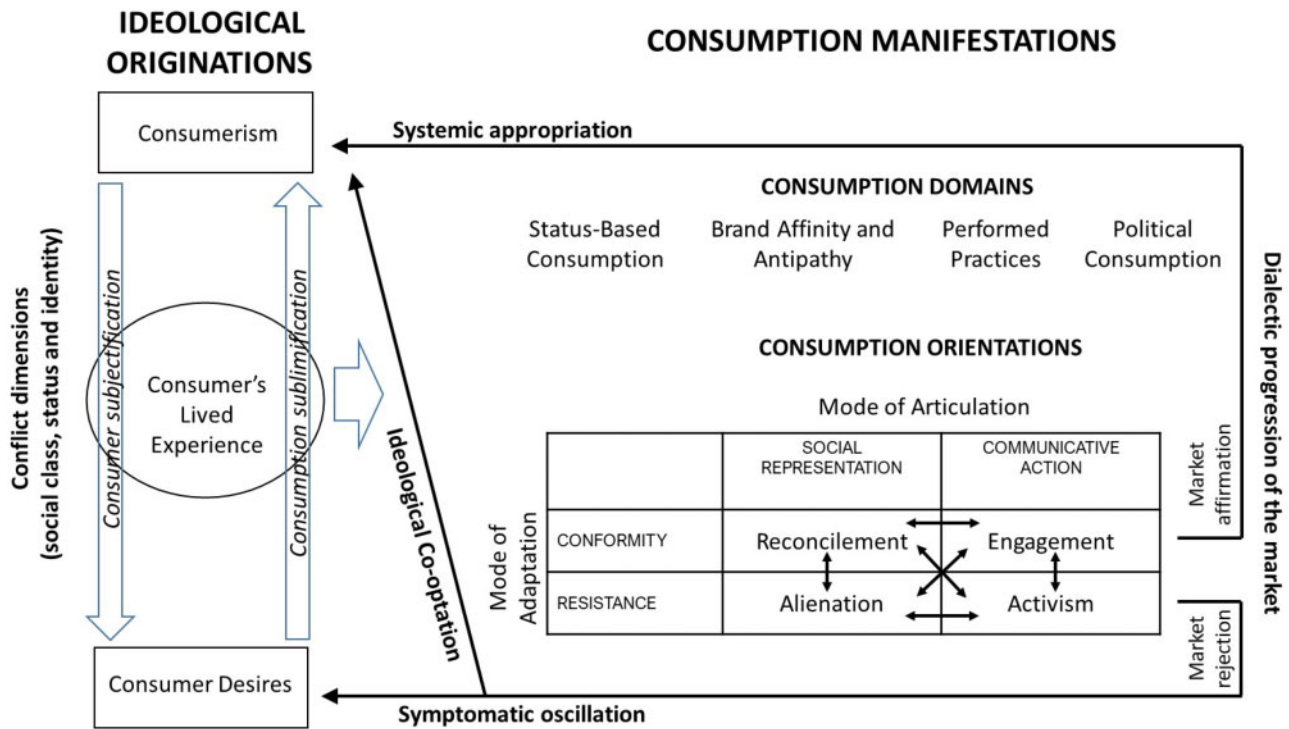
*Overview of the Construct.* Associated with the constant acquisition of consumer products (goods and services), consumerism is the essential ideology of global capitalism (Heilbroner 1985; Sklair 2012; Stearns 2006), and thus the key systemic construct in our framework. Consumerism constrains an individual acting in the role of a consumer by providing formal and informal rules and regulations about consumption. More generally, the system of consumerism assigns the role of a consumer to an individual (including norms and expected behaviors) through a process we call “consumer subjectification.”

*Theoretical Basis in Social Theory and Consumer Research.* In social theory, systemic analyses of ideology arise mostly from the Marxist perspective. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coauthored a series of classic texts, collectively referred to as *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology), in which they argued that dominant ideas of the ruling class, as the *herrschende geistige Macht* (the ruling mental power), obfuscate exploitation and operate as “false consciousness,” preventing the oppressed from realizing that they are being exploited (Marx and Engels 1848/2011). Neo-Marxist critical thinkers of the Frankfurt School argued that the uniformity of mass media induces docile conformity among the masses and demand for capitalist products while inhibiting pluralism and independent thought (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002). Neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) analyzed the social institutions (police, the court system, schools, and family) that guarantee the survival of an ideology and guide the lives of social subjects. Finally, according to Foucault (1982), who took a Marxist stance in his early but not in his later writings, “power-knowledge” permeates everyday life. That is, power, which is widely distributed in the system, is imposed on the individual as knowledge. An individual adopts this knowledge through a process referred to as “subjectification” (Foucault 1982). Subjectification processes and effects are far from being crystallized; they are constantly dismantled and reproduced with the possibility of contradictions and reversals. Those who cannot be aligned with the system are ostracized (Foucault 1977/1991)<sup>1</sup>.

1 During the final review round of this article, major international newspapers (e.g., The New York Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, The Times) reported allegations of serial sexual child abuse and denigration of young boys, committed by Foucault when he held a position at the University of Tunisia (Campbell 2021). (Tunisia is a former French colony.) Foucault was a proponent of “consensual” adult-child sex and in 1977 had led the signing of a petition to legalize such sexual relations (Doezema 2018), which was also signed by Althusser, Deleuze, Guattari and other prominent French intellectuals, doctors, jurists, and psychologists. We believe these actions shed a dubious light on Foucault’s work on power and power-knowledge. The

FIGURE 1

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSUMPTION IDEOLOGY



Consumer researchers have alluded to systemic theorizing in a few studies and analyses. Hirschman (1988) refers to neo-Marxist thought, in part, to analyze ideology in popular American TV shows (*Dallas and Dynasty*), and Peñaloza (2001) refers to Marx and the Frankfurt School in an ethnography of a cattle trade show and rodeo. Murray and Ozanne (1991) propose an emancipatory research program inspired by the Frankfurt School. Relatedly, transformative consumer research advocates a pragmatic change of consumerism to improve the general well-being of society and provide consumers with information for more socially responsible choices (Mick 2006). Consumer research has also adopted Foucault's notion of power-knowledge. For example, a study of advertising shows how the discourse of power mythologizes products and brands (Thompson 2004). Research has also analyzed how moralistic governance influences consumer subjectivity through the active

management of consumers as moral subjects (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). A study of financial credit illustrates how the marketplace—as “a panoptic apparatus” (Foucault 1977/1991)—controls and punishes consumers “who break the rules” (Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005). Finally, a study of casinos demonstrates that casinos deny employment to “undesirable” individuals (Humphreys 2010).

*Further Explication of the Construct.* We posit that the system of consumerism includes objectives, normative doctrines, and social institutions that induce people to consume, thus guaranteeing the effective operation of the system and its survival. The objective of consumerism is spending: to get consumers to constantly buy and consume goods and services and to increase consumption over time (Heilbroner 1985). Consumerism evokes normative doctrines that facilitate spending, such as the free choice of goods and services, fair distribution of goods and services based on supply and demand, equal access to commercial resources, and new product innovation (Stearns 2006). The development of brands plays a prominent role in enticing consumers to spend their money (Sklair 2012). Most doctrines of consumerism originate from neoliberal thinking, which supports economic liberalization policies as a means to achieve well-being (Harvey 2007; Veresiu and Giesler 2018).

authors condemn Foucault's positions and (alleged) sexual child abuse. Because Foucault's ideas—the notion of subjectification in particular—inform our framework, we have included these ideas into our framework, but we have largely excluded the work on power *per se*. We wish to stress that in no way should the inclusion of Foucault's ideas be construed as an endorsement of his advocacies and behaviors regarding adult-child sexual relations.



Historically, consumerism started in the middle of the twentieth century triggered by a transnational elitist capitalist class and has progressed to inventions like the shopping mall and credit cards, and the cultural dominance of globalized media (movies, radio, and television) as well as advertising and marketing (Sklair 2012). Consumerism resulted in a new global system for distributing goods and services, including global brands and mass media (Sklair 2012). In the United States, a “Consumers’ Republic” emerged to create a fairer democracy and a better society (Cohen 2004). The “consumerist lifestyle” became a dominant theme, and Hollywood and Madison Avenue further pushed this systemic ideology in the interest of capitalist globalization. Consumption emerged as a personal indulgence. The mantra of buying “more, newer, and better” continues unabated and digital media and e-commerce reinforce this mantra (Cohen 2004).

In line with Althusser (1971), the ideological system of consumerism appropriates and establishes rules and regulations for consumption either informally or formally. These rules are enforced through social institutions such as governmental organizations, private firms, entrepreneurs, and consumer agencies. For example, in the food and drink category, products are labeled as healthy, addictive, and containing too much or not enough of a certain ingredient (e.g., caffeine, fat, sugar, gluten, vitamins). Consumerism also structures knowledge in consumers’ minds (e.g., about desirable bodies) in such a way that this supports products, brands, and entire industries (e.g., dieting and weight, plastic surgery, fitness and wellness, and self-help). In our theoretical framework, following Foucault’s (1982) notion of subjectification, we refer to this “top-down” process that constrains an individual acting in the role of a consumer as “consumer subjectification.”

## Consumer Desires

*Overview of the Construct.* In a capitalist–consumerist marketplace, internal needs are transformed instantly into desires for specific products and brands because the market offers an endless variety. Consumer desires are powerful and pleasurable but also discomfiting emotions of longing for particular products and brands (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). Through the expression of their desires and a process that we call “consumption sublimification,” consumers participate in the ideological system and, in part, offset the structural coercion of the system.

*Theoretical Basis in Social Theory and Consumer Research.* In social theory, the concept of desire is most closely associated with the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1983) and the extensive, contemporary work on ideology by Žižek (1989, 1997, 2006, 2012). These authors study the influence of individual factors on systemic factors, thereby following, in part, the notion of voluntary

participation in the ideological system, first proposed by Neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1951/1992). In the influential book *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher, and Félix Guattari, a psychoanalyst, specifically critique the neglect of desire, that is, the direct “libidinal investment” that individuals make into social structures (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). To explain the relevance of desire for ideology, they relate their work to Reich’s (1933/1970) analysis of fascist ideology, thereby departing from Arendt’s (1953) more rational analysis of totalitarian systems. Following Reich (1933/1970), Deleuze and Guattari (1983) point out that one cannot understand fascism or any totalitarianism by arguing that people were tricked or fooled into believing a false social reality. Rather, one needs to understand the dynamics of desire in societal and economic production.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek fuses Hegelian-Marxist dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand ideology (Žižek 1989, 1997). Žižek’s contributions conveyed through books, films, and social media, cover many topics including popular culture and daily politics, as well as consumer-related phenomena (e.g., Starbucks, Google, Coca-Cola, product design, and “green” consumption). Žižek (1989, 2012) describes contemporary socio-political issues and consumption as a dialectic progression, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, which then becomes a new thesis for another dialectic cycle. Žižek (1989, 21) also asserts that people are not conscious of ideology: “Ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness,’ an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’—‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence.”

Following Lacan (1981), Žižek (2006, 61) argues that in their role as consumers, people fail to recognize the fact that “the most elementary desire is the desire to reproduce itself as desire (and not to find satisfaction).” For Lacan, a pre-social “real world” (simply capitalized as “the Real”) is not intelligible to a social subject; the “Real” is a void or an absence experienced as a lack. The desiring subject chases this lost other (*autre*) “object” in the form of *jouissance* (roughly, “enjoyment”) of an *objet petit a* (“a” stands for *autre*). For Deleuze (1966) and Žižek (1989, 1997), the *objet petit a* is the virtual embodiment of the void; it includes “a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object” (Žižek 1997, 53). As social subjects, people need an “ideological fantasy” (Žižek 1989, 1997), which includes the constant production and reproduction of desire as an enjoyable diversion. Consumption, which permanently pursues *jouissance*, becomes what Žižek (2012) calls a “symptom,” striving to satiate a neurotic desire that would not exist in the same form without an ideologically conceived (i.e., symbolic) “reality” such as consumerism. As Donahue (2002, 7)

notes, Žižek's theorizing "seems to capture perfectly the workings of ideology in our post-ideological times" where traditional ideologies related to class and hierarchy have been largely dismissed in favor of ideology defined by identity (e.g., lifestyle experiences) and promulgated in commerce and pop culture.

The reception of Deleuze and Guattari's and Žižek's works in consumer research has been sparse, except for a few mentions in research on consumer desire (Belk et al. 2003; Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017; Rose and Wood 2005). For example, following Žižek (1997), Rose and Wood (2005) study how consumers seek authenticity through consumption of reality television. The authors argue that as long as viewers trick themselves into (falsely) believing that the program is not scripted, the show signifies "reality" and communication unfolds as a successful misunderstanding.

*Further Explication of the Construct.* We follow Žižek (1989, 1997) in considering consumer desire as a continuous force of yearning—a "desire to desire"—which is similar to Lacan's concept of *jouissance*. Because the system of consumerism separates desire from real needs, consumers engage in fantasies for "sublime objects" that can never be fully satisfied. In this sense, consumer desires contribute to the operation and survival of the system. The system supplies objects of desire in the form of products and brands, and consumers transform them into sublime objects of their desires (Žižek 1989). In a Kantian sense, transcending and stylizing an object makes it sublime. Similarly, the Freudian concept of sublimation refers to a process that turns ordinary, libidinous urges into more cultural and consumable forms. In the context of consumer behavior, we will refer to the process that turns consumption objects (product and brands) into sublime objects as "consumption sublimification."

Consumption sublimification includes numerous forms of commodity fetishizing such as ascribing a "personality" or "relationship" to brands; revering some products and brands as "luxuries"; mythologizing the iconography of product designs; anthropomorphizing products and brands; and stylizing ads as art. When consumers turn products and brands into sublime objects of desire, they create ideological fantasies about the desire to consume (e.g., "I need this now"), about outcomes of consumption (e.g., "it will satisfy me; it will make me happy; I will gain recognition from others"), and about the presumed benefits of consumption (e.g., "it is healthy; it is sustainable; it elevates my social status"). Note that consumerism and its rules and regulations may change in response to consumer desires. Such change has occurred, for example, in relation to environmental issues, health and nutrition, trade, conspicuous consumption, consumer technology, and consumer vices (Dinnin Huff, Humphreys, and Wilner 2021). When such changes occur, consumers render new consumer products

and consumption activities as sublime (e.g., electric cars, juices without sugar, fair-trade products, minimalist consumption, social media, and cannabis). In other words, systemic consumerism and consumer desires are dynamically interrelated (Baudrillard 1970/1998).

## Consumer's Lived Experience

*Overview of the Construct.* We conceptualize the consumer's lived experience as the unique relationship and the central meeting point between the system of consumerism and consumer desires. The lived experience is a dynamic concept, which as actionable knowledge subsequently affects the ideological manifestations (the consumption domains and consumption orientations) in our framework.

*Theoretical Basis in Social Theory and Consumer Research.* In philosophy, psychology, and consumer research, the concept of experience is associated with encountering and living through events. From Kierkegaard and Dewey to Husserl and Brentano, experiences have been characterized as the unique relationship an individual has with the world (Schmitt 2010). Experiences are subjective yet referential (i.e., "of" or "about" something) and have intentionality. Habermas (1984) describes lived experience generally as an individual's or group's *Lebenswelt* ("life world"). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the lived experience may be viewed as an assemblage. Experience, in this sense, is complex, fluid, and subject to constant rearrangement through processes referred to as coding, stratification, and territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Social theory within the social group perspective explicates how ideology enters and affects the lived experience. Bourdieu (1977) argues that cultural capital manifests itself in the *habitus* of societal groups and the development of taste. Cultural capital is ideological because an elitist, high-status group sets the rules of what constitutes taste and thereby augments its privileges over other social groups. Thus, *habitus* and taste continuously reproduce existing social divisions and ideologies (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1976; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Eagleton 2007). Bourdieu's ideas as well as those by other classic social theorists (e.g., the neo-Marxists and Foucault) have been employed and further developed in critical theory on gender and feminism, queer theory, race theory, and post-colonialism. These latter ideas have culminated in the overall notion of the "intersectionality" of the lived experience, referring to social categories and identities combined to create unique modes of discrimination or privilege for certain groups (see Ger [2018] for a research curation). The table in the appendix provides key references for such inquiries, examples of consumer studies, and critical propositions.

Consumer research has studied the subjective nature of the lived experience in terms of sensations, cognitions, feelings, and actions (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theorizing on assemblages has been used to study the consumer's lived experience in the contexts of family networks, brands, and technologies such as the internet of things (Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Hoffman and Novak 2018; Parmentier and Fischer 2015). Following Bourdieu, consumer culture research has also investigated how marketplace performance relates to status and cultural capital (Üstüner and Thompson 2012), and how consumers signal their cultural capital, *habitus*, and taste through their aesthetic preferences (e.g., for visual arts or music; Arsel and Thompson 2011), lifestyles (e.g., members of less industrialized countries adopt Western lifestyles; Üstüner and Holt 2010), and choices of specific objects of consumption (e.g., craft beer; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017).

*Further Explication of the Construct.* We suggest that the consumer's lived experience is a form of actionable knowledge including sensations, cognitions, feelings and intended actions. The lived experience is ideologically entrenched because it is affected by the consumerist system through the process of consumer subjectification and by consumer desires and fantasies through the process of consumption sublimification.

We further propose that the consumer's lived experience is, in part, socially constructed intersectionally (Ger 2018). That is, the lived experience is partially constituted by class, status, and identity as well as correlated with social categories such as gender, race, nationality, and mobility, which altogether result in a socially determined consumer *habitus* and lifestyle (Bourdieu 1977; Baudrillard 1970/1998). Viewing the lived experience as an assemblage, we propose that the content and forms of expression of the consumer's lived experience are not static. Instead, they are frequently transformed through a process referred to in assemblage theory as reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). New components (e.g., new values, mythologies, identities, and practices) are forged, resulting in a new assemblage of the consumer's lived experience.

How the lived experience is affected by both consumerism and consumer desires may be further explicated by applying Hegel's well-known dialectic from *Phänomenologie des Geistes* of *Herr und Knecht* (often wrongly, but tellingly, translated as "master" and "slave"), which both Lacan and Žižek consider a foundational text of social theory. Like a *Herr* and a *Knecht*, consumerism and consumer desires are dialectically bound in a subject-object relationship. While consumerism controls consumer desires through the process of subjectification, consumerism is also dependent on consumer desires, which are expressed through the sublimification of consumption objects. The consumer's lived experience (expressed in consumer

sensations, cognition, feelings, and actions) thus incorporates both the system of consumerism and individual desires, and the two are dialectically related. For example, consumerism instills desire for products and brands, but consumers may not be able to afford them, or may consider these products and brands as detrimental to the environment. Conversely, consumer desires for certain products and brands (carbon free, cruelty free, equitable, upcycled) may not yet be fulfilled by the system. The lived experience is the prime social construct in our theoretical framework where systemic demands and individual desires intersect and may conflict. Next, we discuss conflict dimensions.

## Conflict Dimensions

*Overview.* Our framework proposes that consumerism and consumer desires have an enduring conflictual relationship. Specific conflicts characterize the consumer's lived experience. These conflicts occur along three dimensions: social class, status, and identity.

*Theoretical Basis in Social Theory and Consumer Research.* Conflict is common to all social theories of ideology. According to Marxist theory (Marx and Engels 1848/2011), society entails conflicts between social classes. The social group perspective, primarily associated with Bourdieu (1977), theorizes about conflicts between societal groups of varying status. Finally, the social reality perspective (Žižek 2012) prominently features values and identity conflicts about the "right" and "wrong" values and lifestyles.

Extant ideology-related consumer research illustrates conflicts across groups of consumers and between consumers and corporations, and how these conflicts occur and may be resolved in consumption domains (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Crockett 2017; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Holt 2002; Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Klein, Smith, and John 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Luedicke et al. 2010). For example, Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) show how political ideology can shape shopping as an expression of social and political conflict between households confronting attenuated access to goods and services. In addition, Holt (2002) shows how postmodern brands give rise to conflicts and contradictions.

*Further Explication of the Dimensions.* Following social theory on ideology and extant consumer research, we propose that conflicts may occur along three dimensions. First, bringing to bear the Marxist notion of class conflict, we propose that one source of conflict is that oppressed, disadvantaged, or marginalized consumers may have a strong desire for certain products or brands but cannot afford or consume them. They may fantasize about possessions, or they may reconcile their desires by settling for less expensive products or brands. They may also actively

resist the market and protest. We conjecture that the consumption behavior of upwardly mobile consumers also reflects a class conflict, which in this case includes the desire to overcome the conflict through possessions. Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) describe two groups of consumers (“parvenus” and “pretenders”) that seem to experience such conflicts. Similarly, middle-class African American consumers disavow racial stigma through ostentatious status-oriented displays (Crockett 2017).

Second, the Bordieuan conflict between social groups occurs around displayed taste and is likely reflected in consumers’ desire for conspicuous consumption, for example, luxury brands as well as other aspirational products which signals status and prestige (Berger and Ward 2010; Holt 1998). Selecting the right “tasteful” products and brands reflects this conflict and constitutes a core component of the consumer’s lived experience (Arsel and Thompson 2011). Resolving the conflict requires considerable consumer knowledge about the social prerequisite of what constitutes taste.

Finally, arguably, the most relevant conflict related to contemporary consumption is the identity conflict theorized by Žižek (2012). For example, the mandate of continuous spending may conflict with the desire to be socially and environmentally responsible (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). This identity conflict is a permanent social reality in the lived experience of a “green consumer” who prefers organic or sustainable products and brands.

In sum, the framework postulates that three types of conflicts may occur between consumerism and consumer desires and may be reflected in the consumer’s lived experience. The outcomes of these conflicts affect the ideological consumption manifestations of our framework, which we discuss next.

## CONSUMPTION MANIFESTATIONS

On the right side of figure 1, we portray the consumption manifestations of our theoretical framework. Consumption manifestations include the consumption phenomena (or “domains”) that are generally affected by ideology and, specifically, by the conflict reflected in the consumer’s lived experience. Consumption manifestations also include what we call “consumption orientations” within each domain that consumers hold based on these conflicts.

In principle, any consumption domain can be analyzed as an ideological manifestation. Consider the following very simple and ostensibly nonideological choice: a consumer considers buying a cup of coffee. While this choice may seem straightforward and nonideological, it involves a series of conscious and nonconscious choices that are implicitly ideological. Should the coffee be ordered with or without milk, with whole or skim milk or dairy-free oat

milk, and with white or brown sugar? Should it be roasted coffee from a local coffee shop with its own roastery, or can it be from a global retail chain? These choices relate to consumer desires and fantasies, but they also support or oppose socially shared consumerist ideas and ideals regarding the desirability of product ingredients, the sustainability of coffee production, and local community or global engagement. Depending on the consumer’s choices, the lived experience may be characterized as supporting “indie” or global brands, as “hipster” or functional, or as ordinary consumption or consumption with a social concern. Coffee consumption, therefore, constitutes a manifestation of consumption ideology as part of an enacted discourse about how commerce affects health (through coffee ingredients), the environment (through the packaging), the community (e.g., the notion of “third place” appropriated by Starbucks), and fairness (e.g., high-end pricing of latte varieties). Regarding consumption orientations, consumers may feel reconciled and engaged with current ideology, or they may feel alienated from it and even become activists (e.g., protesting the “hegemony” of Starbucks) (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Next, we further explicate consumption domains and consumption orientations.

## Consumption Domains

While our framework is applicable to a wide range of domains, prior consumer research indicates that consumption ideology seems to manifest itself primarily in certain domains. These central domains emerged among the topics in a textual review and analysis (“topic modeling”) of ideology-related consumer studies, which we conducted as part of this project. Web appendices A and C provide the methodological details of the topic modeling analysis and our interpretation of the topics. Using multi-dimensional scaling, web appendix B shows visually how the topics are related to each other. Table 1 displays the eight topics revealed in the analysis, the relation of the topics to our theoretical framework, and representative articles. The first four topics in the table concern how ideology affects consumer thoughts and behaviors in four consumption domains: status-based consumption (topic 1), brand affinity and antipathy (topic 2), performed practices (topic 3), and political consumption (topic 4). Research on status-based consumption investigates how consumers signal their cultural capital, habitus, and taste through their lifestyles (Üstüner and Holt 2010), status-oriented displays (Crockett 2017), mass-cultural artifacts (Holt 1998), and even apartment décor (Arsel and Bean 2013). Research on brand affinity and antipathy studies brands as ideological icons (Holt 2006), and why, based on ideology, consumers endorse or reject brands (Shepherd, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2015).

Studies in the domain of performed practices investigate how consumers (and other market stakeholders)



**TABLE 1**  
TOPICS, RELATIONSHIP TO THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, AND REPRESENTATIVE ARTICLES

Topic	Relationship to the framework	Representative articles
Topic 1: Status-based consumption	Consumption domain	Arşel and Bean (2013), Crockett (2017), Holt (1998), and Üstüner and Holt (2010)
Topic 2: Brand affinity and antipathy	Consumption domain	Coulter, Price, and Feick (2003), Holt (2006), Muñoz and Schau (2005), and Shepherd et al. (2015)
Topic 3: Performed practices	Consumption domain	Arşel and Thompson (2011), Brunk et al. (2017), Crockett and Davis (2016), Thompson (2004), and Tumbat and Belk (2011)
Topic 4: Political consumption	Consumption domain	Crockett and Wallendorf (2004), Fernandes and Mandel (2014), Jost (2017), and Kaikati et al. (2017)
Topic 5: Consumption as a socio-economic accord	Consumption orientation	Firat and Venkatesh (1995), Hirschman (1988), Holt and Thompson (2004), Thompson and Tambyah (1999), and Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989)
Topic 6: Resistance to dominant forms of consumption	Consumption orientation	Izberk-Bilgin (2010), Mikkonen and Bajde (2013), and Thompson and Haytko (1997)
Topic 7: Communities and consumption movements	Market process	Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), Dolbec and Fischer (2015), Kravets and Sandikci (2014), and Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007)
Topic 8: Legitimation processes of consumption practices	Market process	Giesler (2008), Humphreys (2010), Karababa and Ger (2011), Kozinets (2002), and Scaraboto and Fischer (2013)

NOTE.— Each representative article loaded most strongly on the topic with which it is associated.

mythologize or demythologize other market participants to negotiate and manage various marketplace tensions (Arşel and Thompson 2011; Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2017; Crockett and Davis 2016; Thompson 2004; Tumbat and Belk 2011). Finally, studies on political consumption show how ideological values affect the behavior and choices of liberal and conservative consumers (Fernandes and Mandel 2014; Jost 2017; Kaikati et al. 2017). As Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) posit, contemporary consumption is a primary domain in which political ideology is constructed and expressed.

The remaining four topics shown in the table relate to other parts of the framework. Topic 5 (consumption as a socio-economic accord) and topic 6 (resistance to dominant forms of consumption) relate to consumption orientations (e.g., conformity and resistance), which we will discuss next. Topic 7 (communities and consumption movements) and topic 8 (legitimation processes of consumption practices) align with market process dynamics of the framework, which we will discuss after the section on consumption orientations.

## Consumption Orientations

Ideology can result in different orientations in each consumption domain. We distinguish four orientations based on a  $2 \times 2$  analytical scheme along two dimensions: mode of adaptation and mode of articulation. Echoing Merton (1938), prior research related to topics 5 and 6 addresses the dichotomy of conformity vs. resistance as two modes of adaptation. The articles in topic 5 demonstrate that conforming to the market is often the dominant consumption

orientation in contemporary society (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Consumers frequently manage tensions in their lived experience in accord with the market (Holt and Thompson 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Topic 6 presents the opposite orientation: some consumers resist dominant consumption norms (Izberk-Bilgin 2010; Mikkonen and Bajde 2013). Regarding mode of articulation, some of the studies that we analyzed as part of topic modeling (i.e., mostly articles on social status and brands) analyze manifestations at the social representations level. Other studies (i.e., mostly articles on performed practices and political consumption) focus on actions and behaviors. Next, we first explain the two dimensions (mode of adaptation and mode of articulation) further as part of a  $2 \times 2$  matrix and then discuss our theorizing regarding consumption orientation types and dynamics.

## The $2 \times 2$ Consumption Orientation Matrix: Types and Dynamics

The first dimension, mode of articulation, includes social representations and communicative actions. Moscovici (2000, 13) defines social representations as “systems of values, ideas and practices which . . . enable communication to take place among the members of a community.” Social representations are not simply mental schemas that process information. They are constructed through discourse, action, and interaction and play a key role in the ideological construction and contestation of reality (Moloney, Hall, and Walker 2005). Social representations are the outcome of “battles of ideas” and “ways of world-

making” (Moscovici 2000). Importantly, they enable communicative actions by providing members of a community with a code for social exchange (Habermas 1984; Moscovici 2000). Following Habermas (1984), we propose that when people engage in consumption, they communicate their *Lebenswelt* or lived experience, including their desires and stance toward consumerism. The second dimension, mode of adaptation, includes Merton’s sociological distinction of conformity and resistance. Merton (1938) defines conformity as a capability to pursue goals through socially approved means. Alternatively, people can also reject goals and means. These individuals are “strictly speaking, in the society but not of it” (Merton 1938, 677). While resistance may be maladaptive, individuals may also actively react, and by reacting, they reduce their frustration and promote change.

The  $2 \times 2$  matrix depicts four core types of orientation: *reconciliation*, a conformist mental stance that embraces existing consumerist ideology; *alienation*, a resistive, anti-ideology mental stance; *engagement*, a conformist communicative action; and *activism*, a resistive communicative action against mainstream consumerist ideology. We briefly illustrate each type and then discuss the dynamics in the matrix.

*Reconciliation.* Most consumers seem to accept and embrace consumerism. That is, at least *prima facie*, they reconcile with the existing ideology. They have their favorite products and brands that they like or are attached to. Reconciliation is an unreflective way of going about one’s daily life as a consumer. From a critical perspective, reconciliation has been viewed through the lens of lacking alternatives. Holt and Thompson (2004) observe that for certain US men, the only way to assert masculinity is to be reconciled with the market. These men rely on the class-dependent ideology of heroic masculinity to construct themselves as man-of-action heroes through the specific choices they make as consumers. Information-processing studies often cite reconciliation based on political ideologies. For example, conservative (vs. liberal) consumers are less likely to complain or dispute (Jung et al. 2017). Neoliberal reforms in developing markets often lead to shared, socio-ideological sensibilities that inform consumer reconciliation with the market (Kravets and Sandikci 2014). Arnould (2007) makes a positive case for reconciliation by illustrating the dangers of market exclusion with a marginalized African community deprived of the means of consumption.

*Alienation.* Instead of reconciling with existing ideology, some consumers feel alienated from consumerism or certain facets of it. They experience dissatisfaction with consumption and the image that certain products, brands, and lifestyles convey. As a result, they may unconsciously experiment with alternatives or consciously consider alternatives. In the social movements of the 1960s, “hippies”

took a decidedly anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist stance. Recently, “hipster” consumers attempted to relive the revolutionary spirit as a lifestyle alternative by adopting anti-mainstream commercial approaches that prioritize sustainable consumption or handcrafts (Larsen and Kahle 2019).

*Engagement.* This orientation is a positive, conformist communicative action, such as when consumers purchase mainstream products and brands, upgrade consumption over time in aspirational ways, or buy what is expected of them by a group. It may be unconscious or conscious. Consumers with a strong desire to belong to a particular social class or group use overt consumption to signal their achievement (Han et al. 2010; Kozinets 2001; Luedicke 2015). Conservatives differentiate themselves in a vertical social hierarchy by purchasing products that signal that they are better than others; liberals differentiate themselves horizontally through products that signal that they are different from others (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018). Finally, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) show how “fatshionistas” (i.e., plus-sized consumers) collectively engage so they have more options from fashion brands.

*Activism.* To resolve the conflict between unfulfilled desires and consumerism, some consumers become activists. They consciously avoid certain product categories, seek alternatives, or pursue minimalist, simple consumption. They might also protest or boycott specific brands and corporations (and even participate in the destruction of products or corporate property), or they could invent new forms of consumption as forms of resistance and rebellion against capitalism. Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) study of “adversaries of consumption” investigates spiritual and religious identities and how they make individuals commit to movements that seek to transform consumerism. Klein et al. (2004) study consumers who decide to boycott a firm after it closes factories and they find that digital media facilitates mobilization and recruitment of activists. Dormant networks of cultural groups who share common interests can be mobilized by meso-level online actors, such as encouraging them to protest restrictions on illegal downloading (Odou, Roberts, and Roux 2018). Stigmatized-identity threat cues also might prompt anti-consumption including boycotts (Chaney, Sanchez, and Maimon 2019).

*Dynamics in the  $2 \times 2$  Matrix.* Consumption orientations usually do not fall neatly into one category. Consumers may hold one orientation toward one consumption object and a different orientation toward another. Orientations may also differ by context and change over time. In short, consumption orientations are flexible, malleable, and dynamic. These dynamics are represented by arrows in the  $2 \times 2$  matrix in figure 1.

To illustrate, a consumer who initially attended the Burning Man festival out of alienation (e.g., resulting from

*ennui* with mainstream consumption) may find reconciliation with the alternative ideology promoted at the festival and, ultimately, may permanently engage by regularly attending the festival (Kozinets 2002). Over time, however, the festival may re-alienate the attendee because of its increased commercialization. Conversely, a reconciled consumer may become alienated through excessive “over-consumption” of food (Kjellberg 2008), for example, but ultimately reconcile again when embracing the ideas of the “body-positivity” movement. As another example, the initial engagement with a lifestyle brand may turn into activism against it when the company’s focus on profit clashes with the consumer’s environmental concerns (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Conversely, activism can turn into positive engagement when a company seems responsive to the consumer’s desire (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), or when the firm placates the consumer with a corporate social responsibility campaign.

In addition to these vertical and/or horizontal movements, there are also diagonal dynamics between alienation and engagement, and between reconciliation and activism. Thompson and Haytko (1997) illustrate this dynamic between alienation and engagement as follows: consumers can simultaneously feel alienated from but also engage with the fashion system and ultimately conform to the dominant system. Information-processing research has also demonstrated that ideological values drive engagement with some brands and alienation from other brands (Shepherd et al. 2015). Consumers who engage with specific brands while simultaneously rejecting others often portray supporters of brands they reject in moralistic tones (Luedicke et al. 2010). Consumers also establish moral norms depending on the use (or misuse) of specific brands (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001).

Arsel and Thompson (2011) illustrate the dynamic between reconciliation and activism in the context of indie consumption. To protect their identity (and worldview), consumers who are reconciled with indie consumption insulate their cultural capital from potential devaluation by demythologizing unwanted (“commercial”) consumption practices by hipsters, whom they consider unwanted imitators who were late to engage with their preferred music. Indie consumers employ subtle forms of activism such as buying unpopular brands, ostracizing hipsters as illegitimate imitators, and invoking an alternative system of symbolic meaning. Moreover, Kozinets (2008) illustrates the dynamic between reconciliation and activism regarding technology. Consumers may see technology in a reconciling mode as a myth to worship and as a positive force (what Kozinets refers to as “techtopia”) or, from an activist’s perspective, as a destroyer of nature (“green luddite”). Notably, consumers use and combine different elements of ideology fluidly and shift from one ideological element to another in their speech acts and practices.

## IDEOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Žižek (1989, 2012) describes contemporary socio-political issues and consumption as dialectic progression, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Our theoretical framework reflects this dialectic thinking by proposing that a consumerist-capitalist marketplace changes constantly in a similar manner. That is, a specific manifestation of a consumption ideology at a given time is a thesis that can lead to an antithesis, which may evolve into a synthesis that becomes a new thesis, and so on. In our topic modeling, this dialectical progression is captured by two closely related market process topics: topic 7 (communities and consumption movements) and topic 8 (legitimation of consumption practices) (see table 1).

Using the previous coffee consumption-manifestation example, one might view the centuries-old practice of home-brewed coffee consumed at home as an original thesis. An antithesis is consuming instant coffee instead, which stems from the consumerist ideology of convenience demanded by a faster pace of modern life. A synthesis occurs when consumers seek quick but still well-brewed coffee (e.g., from Starbucks), which also relies on the logic of consistent quality delivered by a global chain. Independent cafés offer consumers, especially hipsters, a new thesis as local (vs. global) places that provide roasted and brewed coffee in a nostalgic way. This was the state of affairs when Thompson and Arsel (2004) conducted their study on the “Starbucks Brandscape.” Since then, the market has again moved on. By incorporating hipster and indie elements, Starbucks began to co-opt the new thesis and created yet another synthesis (e.g., Starbucks Reserve Roastery). As the hipster lifestyle is becoming a fad of the past, a new thesis is likely to emerge. In sum, from a consumption ideology perspective, coffee consumption in its various forms over time must be understood in terms of dialectic progression.

Similarly, in fashion, prêt-à-porter (mass-produced “ready to wear” apparel) is an antithesis to hand-made, haute couture luxury; yet the two are dialectically related, as well-illustrated in the Cerulean Monologue in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Dialectic conflicts also occur in the adoption of new technologies. To be digitally connected and to be part of a hyper-connected world, individuals must share personal information (including very private aspects) (Swaminathan et al. 2020). At the same time, they may challenge the dominant view, e.g., boycotting social media such as Twitter and subscribing to alternative social media platforms.

Dialectic progression is a “hyper-process” that can lead to three other processes, which we refer to as “systemic appropriation,” “symptomatic oscillation,” and “ideological co-optation.” When consumers conform to the market (Hirschman 1990; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), such conformity affirms the market, and the

behavior is appropriated by the system of consumerism by offering “more of the same.” In contrast, when consumers resist, market rejection may lead to “symptomatic oscillation,” following Žižek (2012). Consumers are calling for an antithesis to the popular thesis to fulfill their desires. The lack of fulfillment of the desire may result in an oscillating crisis of desires and fantasies and quasi-existential questions about consumerism related to issues such as sustainability, poverty, and injustice. However, the system may also respond and incorporate the anti-thesis, thus guaranteeing the market’s dialectic progression. Co-optation theory views the latter process as an ideological force that assimilates the symbols and practices of counter-cultures into dominant norms (Hebdige 1979/2012), acting as a countervailing market response (Giesler 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

To summarize, we have developed and presented a theoretical framework of consumption ideology that integrates social theory and prior consumer research related to ideology. This new framework posits that ideas and ideals related to consumerism are part of a consumer’s lived experience and manifest themselves in consumption. We propose that consumerism and its institutions prescribe how consumers satisfy desires, and, conversely, how consumers evoke marketplace fantasies. Consumption ideology is present in various consumption domains and affects consumption orientations, thereby contributing to the dialectic progression of markets.

Next, we illustrate the consumption-ideology framework with three contemporary consumption cases—upcycling, Zoom backgrounds, and TikTok. We then identify research gaps and lay out mandates for future research programs on consumption ideology.

## CASES ILLUSTRATING THE FRAMEWORK

The following three cases are not meant to be complete studies of consumption ideology. Rather, to illustrate the value of the framework, we discuss how contemporary consumption phenomena may be approached and studied using the framework.

### From Trash to Fifth Avenue: Upcycling

Upcycling is the transformation of waste materials or discarded products into new materials or products (Wilson 2016), for example, by making flowerpots out of old car tires, furniture out of empty oil barrels, or jewelry from skateboards. Some companies have capitalized on the commercial opportunities of this new consumption phenomenon generated in response to the overproduction of waste. For example, Swiss company Freitag sells one-of-a-kind bags and accessories made from recycled truck tarps;

Gucci sells fishnet bags; and Adidas in a collaboration with Stella McCartney sells upcycled sneakers and clothing.

Upcycling originated as a class-based phenomenon in developing countries among the poorest segments of consumers who re-use and transform old materials and items because they lack the fundamental resources for the products they need (Goldsmith 2009). In developed countries, upcycling has taken the form of an active resistance to consumerist pressure to always buy new products (e.g., purchasing new clothes every season or changing home accessories frequently without a real need to do so).

Drawing on the relevant constructs, and their relationships in our theoretical framework, we conceptualize upcycling as a manifestation of consumption ideology resulting from conflicts in the consumer’s lived experience between the consumerist objective of constantly buying new products and consumers’ desire to reduce consumption. Following our framework, while certain consumers conform to the idea of constantly acquiring new and original products and thus enforce the systemic appropriation of consumption, other consumers resist consumerist pressures. The rejection of the market leads consumers into an oscillating crisis: they want to fulfill their desires and maybe acquire new products, yet they are concerned about the environmental impact this outcome can have. We propose that consumers attempt to resolve the symptomatic oscillation through participation in the creation of new objects by reusing materials and products they possess. While some consumers do so for their personal use, others sell them on specialized platforms (e.g., Etsy.com), thereby moving from activism against the market to engagement with it. Such a path may lead to an ideological co-optation by the market that incorporates the upcycling manifestation into consumerism. As companies start producing upcycled items on their own, they subjectify the desiring and fantasizing of individuals in their role as consumers. Hence, the product is not just “upcycled” (and therefore sustainable), but “upcycled by Freitag” (or Gucci, or Adidas and Stella McCartney), thereby turning the product into a sublime consumption object. Consumers are prepared to pay a higher price for it after this sublimification; they can also use the product or brand in status games (e.g., as a luxury upcycled product) and as an identity or lifestyle symbol (e.g., as a niche subcultural brand).

As consumers accept or reject the market, they socially represent an upcycled item as an expensive and elitist product, a must-have object, or an outrageous attempt to capitalize on an environmental issue. Consumption ideology inherent in upcycling may then enter another cycle of the dialectic process. Consumers can affirm the market by reconciling with the idea of upcycling as a new form of fashion. Conversely, they may reject this proposition and find alternatives to the ones the market offers.

Examining upcycling through the lenses of our theoretical framework may also generate future lines of enquiry.



For example, future studies should investigate whether the commercialization of upcycled goods generates new forms of consumer entrepreneurship, and even counterfeiting, by consumers seeking economic opportunities. As our framework implies, consumers who think that big corporations capitalize on the re-use of waste may cease to recycle—a new form of boycott—, paradoxically going against the pro-environmental ideas of upcycling in the future. Alternatively, consumers may engage in upcycling for progressive reasons—to help disadvantaged groups. For instance, an initiative is making rounds on WhatsApp among parents whose children attend private primary schools in well-off districts in central London. The campaign asks the parents to financially support “a worthy eco-project,” aimed at producing upcycled goods for the homeless (e.g., waterproof sleeping bag covers).

### “Masking” Reality: Zoom Backgrounds

The global Covid-19 pandemic has forced millions of people to safeguard their health by staying at home and working remotely. Such a measure has led to the proliferation and vast use of online communication platforms for video-telephony such as Zoom. As a result, homes have been transformed, in part, from private into public spaces.

We propose that the background spaces behind the meeting participants constitute a manifestation of consumption ideology. From curated bookshelves to abstract paintings, from exotic plants to precious souvenirs from vacation trips, from sophisticated technological equipment to minimalist furniture and Peloton exercising gear, these backgrounds provide a plethora of ideological objects to showcase consumption fantasies and dreams. Zoom calls are thus transformed into glamorous activities, with specific social prescriptions and *netiquettes* depending on the occasion (Kaysen 2020). Virtual bookshelves have become arenas where consumption sublimification reaches its peak: *Das Kapital* or *Capitalism and Freedom*? *The Holy Bible* or *On the Origin of Species*? *Experiential Marketing* or *No Logo*?

Following our framework, the backgrounds become sublime objects of consumption rather than mere masking devices (Canniford and Shankar 2013). Once the Lacanian Real is concealed, consumers can freely desire to be somewhere else (on vacation at a remote Pacific atoll) or even be someone else, for example, someone with a different status (posing in front of a Lamborghini) or with a different identity (sitting in a library representing human knowledge). The background, therefore, abandons its original relegated role of a mere contour of the call experience to become the core of the experience itself: a sublime object that is ready-made for consumption itself. At the same time, institutions including corporations and universities subjectify users by recommending—or demanding—the adoption of plain and opportune backgrounds that may at

once safeguard the institution’s reputation, achieve equity objectives, or protect individual privacy (Fosslien and West Duffy 2020). Platforms such as Zoom support such systemic efforts by providing individuals with default virtual backgrounds that can be used to mask their real private or public settings. Consumers, in turn, may conform by reconciling and engaging with such prescriptions, thereby affirming and perpetuating what the market has to offer. Consumers may also contribute by creating their own settings based on their desires and fantasies, and the most popular backgrounds may be analyzed and commercialized by service providers. However, consumers may also reject the adoption of backgrounds. As our framework suggests, this rejection may engender an alienation that may turn into activism, namely, refusing to turn on webcams during meetings.

By examining the Zoom background phenomenon from a consumption-ideology perspective, our framework contributes new insights into consumer-market processes in the realm of technology adoption and diffusion. As our analysis shows, the market can profit from consumers’ fantasies and desires. As other virtual objects such as emojis or apps (Ge and Gretzel 2018), virtual backgrounds can be co-opted and transformed into profitable products. Niche websites like *helloworldbackground.com* and even mainstream companies like Penguin Random House have begun to sell packages of professionally edited backgrounds. Similarly, new professional figures like “background advisors” or “bookshelves curators” have emerged to help consumers stylize their Zoom backgrounds.

Future research questions may emerge from the application of our theoretical framework to Zoom backgrounds. Scholars may study how consumers seek to fulfill their desires of being somewhere else or someone else once they leave their secure and controllable household environment. For example, the return to “reality” (a life not staged in the front of a Zoom background) may impact consumer well-being, luring consumers toward engaging in conspicuous consumption or overconsumption of certain goods (including, perhaps, addictive ones), which may constitute new masking devices that consumers may turn to.

### The Commercialization of TikTok

Launched in China in 2016, the social media platform TikTok has rapidly grown in popularity, with 500 million monthly active users by the end of 2020. Beyond its “outsider” origins (the first major social media platform created outside the hegemony of Silicon Valley), the nature and features of TikTok have revolutionized the consumption of social media. By applying our theoretical framework to analyze the TikTok phenomenon, we can unveil the processes that characterize TikTok as an example of consumption ideology.

Aimed mainly at a 14- to 24-year-old target audience, TikTok focuses on creating entertainment content. Users can upload their own one-minute videos, for example, comedy sketches, dancing, music performances, often imitating famous singers (with the lip-syncing function being one of the major selling points of TikTok). Following our framework, such features enable individuals to redirect their desires and fantasies and transform their lived experience. Some consumers may want to just have fun while pretending to be comedians, dancers, or singers. Others may experience a symptomatic oscillation: they desire to showcase their talent and fantasize about success while protesting the systemic apparatus of show business. For example, singer Lyn Lapid started a TikTok account to express disappointment with a greedy music producer who had turned the singer down (Smith Galer 2020). The account rapidly hit over 64 million followers, turning Lyn Lapid into a celebrity. Since TikTok heavily relies on algorithms to provide users with content they may like, some have argued that the app almost mimics a democratic society. Allegedly, users have the same baseline opportunity for their content to become a hit, regardless of the current number of followers or likes. However, TikTok, like other platforms, also subjectifies users with several regulations about the content. Such prescriptions entail, among others, a restricted length of the content (one minute or less), the preference for certain genres and styles, as well as a ban on and control over content that may be considered “dangerous.” Hence, even if multifaceted, the cultural capital of the content on TikTok is still indirectly controlled and filtered. Furthermore, from a systemic perspective, other agencies may interfere in the proliferation of content. Private companies may dictate which content is worth sponsoring, or national governments may impose bans or restrictions based on political, religious, or other ideological grounds.

Applying our framework to this scenario, consumers may interact with TikTok in various ways: they can reconcile with the idea of this new form of entertainment by only watching the provided content without creating their own videos. Interestingly, even if this mode of articulation may seem passive, it still contributes to feeding the algorithms and in determining what the dominant trends are. Consumers may also engage in the production of their own content, thus perpetuating the system. Alternatively, consumers may reject TikTok, and even actively protest it (by boycotting the platform and the content it promotes). Notably, consumers may shift back and forth among these modes over time. Consumers who were initially alienated from such platforms may gradually become interested in them and reconcile with the idea, ultimately becoming content creators. Conversely, content creators who are dissatisfied with the platform may actively contest it or abandon it and move toward other entertainment platforms.

As TikTok becomes increasingly commercialized, new content could arise from user desires and fantasies, eventually becoming co-opted and integrated into TikTok. Brands are using the platform already for influencer marketing (Swaminathan et al. 2020). However, our framework can also generate future research directions beyond influencer marketing. For example, future research may investigate how the platform co-opts other parts of the entertainment and cultural industries (beyond music) (e.g., micro-videos on arts, education, and politics). Researchers may also investigate whether new partnerships between the public and the private sectors generate more inclusive and accessible cultural resources or result in new form of cultural hegemonies. Simplicity and brevity may, for example, replace depth and thoroughness in determining consumer decisions and preferences. Finally, future research may investigate how new artists and con-artists, social influencers and political leaders can arise and be chosen through the platform, pushing it beyond the entertainment experience and kindling the dialectic process of consumption ideology.

## Summary

Three cases—upcycling, Zoom backgrounds, and the commercialization of TikTok—illustrate how the consumption-ideology framework can offer valuable insights about these phenomena and their progression over time. As we illustrated, a consumption-ideology analysis should not only focus on parts of the framework—for example, class, status or identity conflicts, the lived experience, conformity or resistance orientations, or co-optation, as much prior research has done—but rather analyze ideological originations, manifestations, and processes jointly to do full justice to consumption ideology at play. Furthermore, by illuminating how ideologically mediated consumer desires make consumption objects and experiences sublime and contribute to market dynamism, we add theoretical clarity and nuance toward explaining how consumers and institutions engage in ideological co-work to sustain markets. Finally, the consumption-ideology framework can help researchers generate new research questions on consumption phenomena such as upcycling, Zoom backgrounds, and the usage of TikTok.

## FUTURE RESEARCH PROGRAMS ON CONSUMPTION IDEOLOGY

The framework presented here highlights several major research gaps. First, prior research has mostly examined manifestations in highly circumscribed consumption domains and at best alluded to ideological formation (specific constructs applied in that context such as *habitus*, responsabilization or governmentality). These studies amount to what Pham (2013), in a critique of consumer research, has called “theories of studies,” that is, in this case,

“micro-theorizations” of ideological manifestations in specific contexts. Because of the lack of a full-fledged theory of consumption ideology, few attempts have been made to integrate analyses at the group level (e.g., Bourdieuan work) with an analysis of the system (e.g., Foucauldian theories of governmentality and subjectification) and an analysis of individual desires (e.g., Lacanian and Žižekian theories of desire). Relatedly, much research has focused on manifestations without accounting for their ideological originations. Finally, with few exceptions (e.g., the work on co-optation and marketplace drama), ideology has not been studied dynamically as a dialectic progression over time. This critique, together with our theoretical framework, leads to three research mandates for multiple research programs on consumption ideology: (1) incorporating the system and desires into the consumer’s lived experience, (2) tracing consumption manifestations back to ideological origins, and (3) elucidating the dialectic progression of consumption ideology.

### Incorporating the System and Desires into the Lived Experience

Research has primarily concentrated on social-group-based concepts to study the role of ideology in social values, meaning, and identity. We recommend more integration of this largely ethnographic perspective, which is centered on cultural aspects of the consumer’s lived experience, with a systemic, sociological perspective that focuses on social interests and a psychological/psychoanalytic perspective that considers ideology as an indispensable part of social reality motivated by desires and fantasies. Combining the intergroup perspective with the systemic and social-reality perspectives may result in research programs that examine the sociological, ethnographic, and psychological underpinnings of consumption ideology in a multi-disciplinary fashion, leading to the following exemplary research questions: How can systemic aspects related to consumerism (e.g., “buy more,” “buy new things,” or “signal your status through consumption”) stimulate consumer desires, be embraced as values, and become a part of consumer identity? Which institutions (e.g., sales channels like retailing or e-commerce, trade vs. consumer protection, advertising or social media) best represent consumerist ideologies? Finally, what new positive ideas, ideals, and institutions do consumers imagine as representing their desires (e.g., virtual assistants, empowering apps, or sustainability squads)?

A related research program should examine the complementary processes of consumer subjectification and consumption sublimification, as well as the conflict dimensions we identified. This research program would address several unanswered research questions: How are ideological, consumerist knowledge and power structures (e.g., the notion of consumer value, the importance of

consumer choice, or the distinction of material vs. experiential consumption) systemically instilled into consumer desires? What processes are involved in turning ordinary marketplace artifacts (products and brands) into sublime objects of desire? How do consumers interpret and negotiate the information/prescriptions that come from institutions and may affect their lived experiences by constraining their desires such as when restrictive policies are introduced through “nudges” or in “politically correct” consumption?

### Tracing Consumption Manifestations Back to Ideological Originations

Many studies that we reviewed focus on ideological formations in highly circumscribed consumption contexts such as buying halal burgers (Johnson, Thomas, and Grier 2017), pursuing natural hair care practices in Kenya (Ndichu and Upadhyaya 2019), or engaging in illicit consumption of rhino horns (Truong, Dang, and Hall 2016). We propose that these highly contextualized, in-depth studies be supplemented by a broader consideration of explanatory factors. In other words, we propose a research program that traces consumption manifestations back to their ideological origins. This may address the following research questions: Do the types of consumption domains that we distinguished based on topic modeling (i.e., status-based consumption, brand affinity and antipathy, performed practices, and political consumption) show distinct origination patterns? How important are systemic consumerist factors relative to consumer desires in leading to these types? For example, are political consumption and performed practices more systemically determined whereas status-based consumption and brand affinity and antipathy reflect unfulfilled desires? In addition, do the orientations of reconciliation, engagement, alienation, and activism, which numerous studies have investigated contextually, relate more generally to conflicts or conflict resolutions between the system and consumer desires? Finally, future research should investigate how ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, feminism, environmentalism, or postmodernism) interact with the ideology of consumerism to engender novel manifestations of consumption ideology in specific contexts.

### Elucidating the Dialectic Progression of Consumption Ideology

Finally, we suggest research on dialectic progression and its related processes of systemic appropriation, symptomatic oscillation, and ideological co-optation. When are these processes likely to occur? How do dialectics and their related processes unfold over time? Longitudinal and even historical studies using a dialectic perspective may be instructive (Arsel and Thompson 2011). For example, a

research program on digital technologies may investigate how ideas and ideals about technology affect society, social life, and social reality dialectically over time. In this respect, [Negroponte \(1995\)](#) provides a core dimension—“atoms” versus “bits”—which seems to be relevant for investigating consumer experiences in stores versus online, with augmented versus virtual realities, and real money versus cryptocurrency. How does this dichotomy shape consumers’ ideological discourse and actions dialectically over time? Another dimension that is relevant to studying the ideological aspects of technology is “real” versus “fake.” In a Lacanian sense, is an anonymous “friend” online part of the “Real” or is the “friend” entirely a consumer fantasy? Finally, a third dimension that may dialectically progress is “human” versus “machine.” Technology invades consumers’ lives in the form of AI and robotics, but, conversely, consumers may technologically augment their bodies and minds via implants of non-human, technological parts or synthetic tissue and organs, for example.

Digital technologies also create new ideological categories in terms of what is being sold and what is of value. For Marx, neo-Marxists, and Bourdieu, social reality is tied to and desire is triggered by the “material” (ownership of material possessions). In contrast, digital experiences are intangible and transient. They exist “in the void” as possibilities. Consumers have nothing to show for the cost of a digital product unless it is massively shared as part of an elusive network, creating a digital symptomatology in sharing selfies and “food porn” ([McDonnell 2016](#)), as well as tagging shopping locations and joint app usage to gain commercial benefit.

## CONCLUSION

There is no escaping the spectral hand of ideology. Ideology is omnipresent in people’s lives and manifests itself as a consumption ideology when consumers buy and use marketplace products, services, and experiences. That is, consumption ideology is part of any consumer’s social reality. Consumers are subject to the workings of ideology either consciously or unconsciously when they reflect and enact ideology through consumption. We have much to learn from research about the dialectic nature and effects of consumption ideology.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The data set comprises 168 abstracts of published articles. Based on all authors’ instructions, a research assistant performed the search of relevant published articles based on ideology-related keywords. The initial total search was supplemented based on all authors’ decision to include additional articles suggested as part of the review process. The initial search was done in May and June 2019, and it was updated in May 2020. The topic modeling reported in the article was done from December 2020 to February 2021. The same research assistant wrote the code for LDA and ran the topic modeling based on the authors’ instructions. The data, the R code, and the custom dictionary are stored in a project directory on the Open Science Framework at [https://osf.io/cxk2g/?view\\_only=fb495bb0c63b4dbbab085c3a48c5d80e](https://osf.io/cxk2g/?view_only=fb495bb0c63b4dbbab085c3a48c5d80e).



## APPENDIX: SELECT CRITICAL THEORIES ON SOCIAL CATEGORIES

	Key references	Examples of consumer research related works	Critical propositions
Gender and feminist theories	Butler, Judith (1990), <i>Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity</i> , New York, NY: Routledge Haraway, Donna (1997), <i>Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium: Famaleman_Meets_Oncomouse</i> , New York, NY: Routledge Smith, Dorothy E. (1990), <i>The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge</i> , Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press	Bristor, Julia M., and Eileen Fischer (1993), "Feminist Thought: Implications for Consumer Research," <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 19 (March), 518–36 Schroeder, Jonathan E., and Janet L. Borgerson (1998), "Marketing Images of Gender: A Visual Analysis," <i>Consumption, Markets &amp; Culture</i> , 2(2), 161–201 Tuncay Zayer, Linda and Catherine A. Coleman (2015), "Advertising Professionals' Perceptions of the Impact of Gender Portrayals on Men and Women: A Question of Ethics?," <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , 44 (3), 1–12	Sex and gender are social categories. Social power is embedded in gender. Power is reproduced in the gendered everyday activities of individuals
Post-colonialism	Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, (eds), (1995), <i>The Post-Colonial Studies Reader</i> . London, UK: Routledge McLeod, John (2010), <i>Beginning Postcolonialism</i> (2nd ed.). Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press Young, Robert J.C. (1995), <i>Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race</i> . London, UK: Routledge	Olivotti, Francesca (2016), "The Paradox of Exclusion and Multiculturalism in Postcolonial Identity," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i> , 19(5), 475–96 Brace-Govan, Janice and Hélène de Burgh-Woodman (2008), "Sneakers and Street Culture: A Postcolonial Analysis of Marginalized Cultural Consumption," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i> , 11(2), 93–112 Rohit Varman (2017), "Curry," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i> , 20 (4), 350–56	Individuals' behaviors and identities are shaped as a consequence of the control and exploitation exercised by colonizers on the physical, political, cultural, and economic environments
Queer theory	De Lauretis, Teresa (1991), "Queer theory: Gay and lesbian sexualities," <i>Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies</i> , 3 (2), 3–18 Jagose, Annamarie and Corinna Genschel (1996), <i>Queer theory</i> , Melbourne, AU: Melbourne University Press Turner, William B. (2000), <i>A Genealogy of Queer Theory</i> , Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press Wilchins, Riki (2004), <i>Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer</i> , Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books	Kapoor, Vikram and Russell W. Belk (2020), "Coping and Career Choices: Irish Gay Men's Passage From Hopelessness To Redemption," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i> , doi: 10.1080/10253866.2020.1784733 Kates, Steven M. (2002), "The Protean Quality of Subcultural Consumption: An Ethnographic Account of Gay Consumers," <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , 29 (March), 383–99 Walters, Andrew S., and Lisa J. Moore (2002), "Attention All Shoppers, Queer Customers in Aisle Two: Investigating Lesbian and Gay Discrimination in the Marketplace," <i>Consumption, Markets &amp; Culture</i> , 5(4) 285–303	Socially established norms and binary categories restrain possibilities and identities through dichotomies, e.g., masculine/feminine or heterosexual/homosexual

TABLE (CONTINUED)

	Key references	Examples of consumer research related works	Critical propositions
Race theories	<p>Hall, Stuart (1980), "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in <i>Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism</i>, Paris, FR: UNESCO, 305–45</p> <p>Merchant, Carolyn (2003), "Shades of Darkness: Race and Environmental History," <i>Environmental History</i> 8(July), 380–94</p> <p>Said, Edward W. (1979), <i>Orientalism</i>, New York, NY: Vintage Books</p> <p>Wilderson, Frank (2010), <i>Red, White &amp; Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms</i>. Durham, NC: Duke University Press</p>	<p>Crockett, David (2008). "Marketing Blackness: How Advertisers Use Race to Sell Products," <i>Journal of Consumer Culture</i>, 8 (July), 245–68</p> <p>Schaap Julian and Pauwke Berkers (2019), "Maybe it's . . . Skin Colour?" How Race-Ethnicity and Gender Function in Consumers' Formation of Classification Styles of Cultural Content," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i>, 23 (6), 599–615</p> <p>Sobande, Francesca, Anne Fearfull, and Douglas Brownlie (2019), "Resisting Media Marginalisation: Black Women's Digital Content and Collectivity," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i>, 23 (5), 413–28</p>	<p>Race is used as a systemic exploitative social category. Discourses in society are infiltrating racialized subjects</p>
Intersectionality	<p>Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989), "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," <i>University of Chicago Legal Forum</i>, 139–68</p> <p>Collins, Patricia Hill (1990), <i>Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment</i>, New York, NY: Routledge</p> <p>May, Vivian M. (2015), <i>Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries</i>, New York and London, UK: Routledge</p>	<p>Karababa, Eminegül (2012), "Approaching Non-Western Consumer Cultures from a Historical Perspective: The Case of Early Modern Ottoman Consumer Culture," <i>Marketing Theory</i>, 12 (March), 13–25</p> <p>Peñaloza, Lisa (1994), "Atravesando Fronteras/Border Crossings: A Critical Ethnographic Exploration of the Consumer Acculturation of Mexican Immigrants," <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>, 21 (June), 32–54</p> <p>Varman, Rohit and Ram Manohar Vikas (2007), "Freedom and Consumption: Toward Conceptualizing Systemic Constraints for Subaltern Consumers in a Capitalist Society," <i>Consumption Markets &amp; Culture</i>, 10 (2), 117–31</p>	<p>Several aspects of an individual's personal, social, and political identities are combined to create unique modes of discrimination or privilege</p>

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