



# “To Spanx or not to Spanx”: How objects that carry contradictory institutional logics trigger identity conflict for consumers<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Institutional carriers  
Extended materiality  
Identity conflict  
Shapewear  
Institutional logics

## ABSTRACT

Despite claims supporting its relevance, the role of objects as carriers of institutional logics has been overlooked in marketing research. This study examines how the extended materiality of consumption objects—that is, the material substances, designer intentions, and marketing efforts objectified in them—may trigger identity conflict for consumers, particularly when such objects are carriers of contradictory institutional logics. We collected and analyzed qualitative data on body-shaping undergarments (i.e., shapewear), which carry the contradictory logics of constricted femininity and flexible feminism. We explain how the extended materiality of shapewear creates intimate tension for consumers by interfering with how consumers relate to their own bodies and to other people, thereby prompting identity conflict.

## 1. Introduction

Institutional logics are socially constructed, supra-organizational patterns through which social reality acquires meaning by producing and reproducing material and symbolic practices (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Consumption objects are infused with institutional logics (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Slater, 2014) and transmit them through their usage in diverse functions and routines, thereby acting as institutional carriers (Scott, 2003). As marketers attempt to secure legitimacy for their products in markets that are characterized by multiple sources of institutional pressures (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015), they offer consumption objects that carry contradictory institutional logics. The sorts of tensions and conflicts that such injunctions can cause for individuals has not received sufficient attention, with the exception being a few studies considering marginalized individuals (e.g., Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010). This study contributes to addressing this gap by examining the conflicts for consumers that emerge from engaging with objects whose materiality carries contradictory institutional logics.

Institutional theorists have recently manifested interest in understanding artifacts in their roles as institutional carriers (Scott, 2003). Friedland (2018), for instance, proposes the concept of *institutional objects* to refer to artifacts that are connected with social systems, embody social complexities, and contribute to transmitting values and

beliefs through their physical properties (Jones, Meyer, Jancsary, & Höllerer, 2017). These conceptualizations have sparked interest among institutional theorists in developing understandings of the agentic role of materials in maintaining institutional orders or enabling institutional change (Monteiro & Nicolini, 2014).

This emerging stream of research at the intersection of institutional theory and material studies falls in line with an expanding literature in marketing that examines the agentic role of objects in consumer culture (e.g., Epp & Price, 2009; Martin & Schouten, 2014). An understanding of extended materiality, recently advocated by Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) in the *Journal of Business Research*, provides a useful perspective for considering the role of consumption objects as institutional agents. By paying particular attention to designers' intentions, marketing efforts, and the consumer's sensorial and physical interactions with the material substances that constitute consumption objects, Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) note the emergence of a creative space in the interaction between consumers and objects where consumer identity work is triggered.

Despite such advancements, neither stream of research has examined how extended materiality—understood as a combination of the tangible material aspects and symbolic meanings that constitute an object—acts as a carrier of institutional pressures and how, as such, it can interfere with identity projects. Considering prior research suggesting that institutional contradictions are resolved through embodied

<sup>☆</sup> The authors thank the editor and the review team for their helpful feedback on previous versions of this article.

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identity work (Creed et al., 2010) and that identity conflict precedes identity work (e.g., Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012), we ask: *How do objects that carry contradictory institutional logics trigger identity conflict for consumers?*

To address this research question, we examine consumer interactions with body-shaping undergarments, also known as shapewear. Shapewear includes several forms of constructed undergarments that compress or enhance body parts. The history of shapewear can be traced back to the Victorian corset, and the object has been involved in multiple controversies related to the role of the female body and its place in the world (Humphreys, 2010; Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018). Shapewear garments are marketers' response to institutional pressures related to the role of women and their bodies in society (Entwistle, 2015; Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018). Consequently, these objects carry in them contradictory logics: the logic of constricted femininity, which subjugates female agency to restrictive boundaries by imposing physical and symbolic constraints on the female body, and the logic of flexible feminism, which promotes female empowerment as facilitated by market resources by claiming to reconcile body acceptance and confidence with contemporary beauty standards.

There is accumulating evidence suggesting that it may be challenging for consumers to experience these salient contradictory logics. Such challenges are manifest in detailed blog posts, videos, and discussions shared online by individual consumers; condemnations of the practice by body-positive movements (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013); and public mockery of shapewear in mainstream media outlets (Goddard, 2017). As such, consumer engagement with shapewear provides a rich context in which to examine how objects carry contradictory institutional logics and the consequences thereof.

Our dataset consists of a long-term netnographic study of online communities dedicated to the intersection between body positivity and fashion, interviews with consumers who wear shapewear, and archival data from media outlets that directly or indirectly discuss shapewear. Our findings show how the extended materiality of shapewear carries contradictory institutional logics and explain how the material substances, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts objectified in shapewear provoke consumers who interact with these objects at an intimate level by interfering with their relationship with and understanding of their own bodies. We demonstrate how these uncomfortable interactions lead some consumers to perceive an incongruence between their identity projects and their wearing of shapewear, thereby experiencing identity conflict.

Our contributions to the literature are as follows. First, we contribute to neoinstitutional theory by adding to the recent stream of research focusing on micro-level analysis that starts to unveil how individuals perceive, experience, and engage in dialogue with institutions. By demonstrating how the extended materiality of objects manifests contradictory institutional logics, we introduce consumer–object interactions as an essential aspect in explaining how individual consumers experience institutional contradictions.

Second, we build upon Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016), who conceptualize extended materiality but do not examine the role of objects as institutional carriers. In doing so, we extend the understanding of objects as institutional carriers (Scott, 2003). We account for how the designers' intentions, marketing efforts, and materials that constitute a consumption object enact and enforce contradictory institutional logics that lead consumers who interact with that object to experience identity conflict.

Finally, our study calls researchers' attention to the body as a site where institutional contradictions are manifested. As consumers try on, wear, and take off shapewear garments, these objects and consumers' bodies interact to reveal the incompatible demands of the contradictory logics of *constricted femininity* and *flexible feminism*.

In the following sections, we briefly review relevant research on institutional contradictions and identity conflict, present our methods,

introduce the case of the contradictory logics of contemporary shapewear, and trace our analysis of how extended materiality triggers identity conflict for shapewear consumers. We then discuss the implications of our findings for institutional theory and consumer research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Institutional logics and identity work

Institutional theorists and marketing researchers alike (e.g., Creed et al., 2010; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Wright et al., 2012) have noted how contradictory institutional logics may prompt identity work, which “denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298) while aiming for the construction of a coherent self (Wright et al., 2012). Identity work has a positive undertone when consumers feel able to construct desired identities with the resources available to them (Thompson, 2014). However, contradictory institutional logics may prompt individuals to reflect on the competing identities contained within their self-concept, thereby triggering identity conflict and negative emotions (Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015). As Croft et al. (2015) note, “[i]dentity conflict occurs when individuals feel that others perceive them as acting in a manner incongruent with a desired group identity, or when they themselves feel unable to sustain multiple identities” (p. 115).

Previous marketing research has discussed how identity work is triggered when consumers experience limitations on their desired identities imposed by the market (Rojas Gaviria, Cardoso, Scaraboto, & De Araujo Gil, 2018; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Such limitations, which are experienced as identity conflict, may lead consumers to engage in identity politics—performativity strategies for making a stigmatized identity legitimate and for consumer mobilizations that seek to attract more market resources to themselves (Thompson, 2014). Marketing scholars have also noted that consumers who experience contradictory institutional logics may paradoxically both resist and accommodate these logics through discursive identity work (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009). Intentionally or not, the emergence of identity conflict and the subsequent identity work developed to appease it may promote institutional change (Creed et al., 2010; Leung, Zietsma, & Peredo, 2014).

Institutional theorists have focused precisely on how identity work can promote change in discourses, organizations, and societies (e.g., Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). As Brown (2019) notes, “[t]hese studies often illustrate how conflicting but for individuals equally compelling identity prescriptions lead people to construct identities that broker identity tensions in ways that promote new (or reinforce existing) institutional forms” (p. 12).

What is less evident from these streams of research is how materiality—an important basis for institutions (Jones et al., 2017)—partakes in the relationship between contradictory institutional logics, identity conflict, and identity work. Despite Jones, Boxenbaum, and Anthony's (2013) call for research on “how material objects and their physical properties anchor and carry logics” (p. 64), little attention has been devoted to objects as carriers of institutional logics, particularly in the context of contradictory logics and their consequences for individuals.

An exception is Courpasson and Monties's (2017) analysis of how material bodily practices of shaping, toning, displaying, and cleaning are important in symbolic enactments of identity and how they help workers in police forces deal with contradictory occupational demands. Their work aligns with others that have explored the important role that bodies and their enactments have in dealing with institutional challenges (e.g., Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015). In other disciplines, the role of the body as a point of connection between objects and meanings has been further explored. Scholars in

fashion studies, for instance, have discussed how the body is objectified when “conventions of dress attempt to transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture” (Entwistle, 2015, p. 8). In fashion and other aesthetic-related fields (such as interior design and art), markets are inhabited by the human body, which functions as a location of aesthetic consumption (Entwistle, 2015). In such markets, without the body, materials cannot act and market meanings cannot be created or reproduced. The important role of the body can be noted even in markets that are not necessarily aestheticized or body-centered (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018). For example, baby-care technologies enable different forms of parenting as they mediate parents' interactions with the baby's body (Bettany, Kerrane, & Hogg, 2014), and connoisseur markets evolve as consumers' bodies engage with taste-formation practices (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016). Yet the body, despite having a crucial role, is only one of the material actors that carries institutional logics. In the next section, we discuss how this role is played by artifacts, particularly consumption goods.

## 2.2. Materiality and institutional logics

Institutional objects (Friedland, 2018) are defined as those artifacts that embody social complexities and contribute to transmitting values and beliefs through their physical and symbolic properties (Jones et al., 2017). Such objects are carriers of institutional elements (Scott, 2003). We quote extensively from Jones et al. (2017) because their recent review of the material and visual basis of institutions provides us with a clear foundation from which to understand the role of objects in mediating relations between individuals and institutional aspects: “Material artifacts, whether with the human body (e.g., voice, movement) or instruments and tools (e.g., pen, telescope or computer) provide the foundation upon, and the means by, which ideas, values and meanings are expressed, shared, transmitted and stored. The symbolic—ideas, beliefs and schemas—must be made material in order to signify ... In this way, the material is the foundation for institutions and shapes key institutional processes such as how acts and actors are legitimized, how identity is evoked and invoked, which logics are stabilized and durable due to encoding into material form and how ideas are translated, theorized and transported across space and time” (p. 626).

Jones et al.'s (2017) explanation aligns with the extensive trajectory of consumer research studies that examine the intertwining of material and symbolic systems (Levy, 1959) and also challenges the understanding of artifacts and symbolic systems as different types of carriers of institutional elements (Scott, 2003), as consumer culture research has shown how objects interact with consumers both materially and symbolically (Bode & Kristensen, 2016; Epp & Price, 2009).

Notably, Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) have pointed to how marketers have a prominent role in configuring objects as carriers of logics by infusing them with meanings. They argue that “marketing efforts invest the object with additional cultural ideals and meanings producers want to mobilize. Producers and their intentions also reach consumers through a variety of channels (e.g., advertising, pricing, branding) beyond the consumption object” (p. 194). From this perspective, the consumption object is imbued with branding, packaging, pricing, and other marketing efforts in pre-objectification. Such marketing efforts become part of the extended materiality of a consumption object and affect consumers' interactions with it. Often, the material and social ontologies of consumption objects carry contradictory meanings (Slater, 2014) and can provoke paradoxical (Bettany & Kerrane, 2011) or ambiguous experiences for consumers. Researchers have also considered how the materials from which objects are made influence how consumers react to a particular product and respond to a brand (Cova & D'Antone, 2016; Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016), thus drawing attention to the importance of further examining how the elements that constitute consumption objects—that is, the material substances, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts—generate multiple outcomes for consumers.

Hence, this stream of studies indicates that, by producing, embodying, and transmitting material and symbolic patterns, materiality provokes consumer subjects (Borgeson, 2013). In sum, previous literature indicates that contradictory institutional logics might trigger identity conflicts in consumers and that materiality might be an important element in this process, given that artifacts are carriers of such logics. Consumer studies, however, have explored how the body and other material elements act in processes of identity work. Nevertheless, previous research does not detail how institutional logics are materialized in the relation between consumers (in particular consumers' bodies) and objects. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on consumer–object interactions to address the following research question: *How do objects that carry contradictory institutional logics trigger identity conflict for consumers?*

## 3. Research methods and context

### 3.1. Data collection

This study initially focused on how shapewear was adopted and contested in plus-size fashion communities. Later, it expanded to a broader analysis of how consumers engage with shapewear. Both authors have long-term online ethnographic involvement with the fields of plus-size and mainstream fashion through a five-year-long observation of the online communities situated at the intersection of these fields. A large dataset of text and images downloaded from blogs in Portuguese and English as well as field notes regarding the participant observation process were generated during our fieldwork. This large dataset has offered us an understanding of how fashion and the body are mobilized by consumers in identity work. It has also directed our attention to the contradictory logics present in the fashion field (Rocamora, 2002; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Nevertheless, only a subset of this data discussed shapewear (Table 1).

To complement the netnographic data, we conducted 19 ethnographic interviews (cf. Spradley, 1979) with female consumers in Brazil and Chile (Table 1). Participants were recruited to participate in interviews that would cover topics related to fashion and the body. Interacting with prompts from the informants' wardrobes, we asked interviewees to reflect on the interaction between their bodies and the garments, thus eliciting stories and experiences of use. Five of these interviewees discussed shapewear at length, and several others had shapewear outfits in their wardrobes and referred to occasions of use.

**Table 1**  
Profiles of the participants of the ethnographic interviews.

Profiles of the participants of the ethnographic interviews		
Pseudonym	Occupation	Age
Andrea	Lawyer	31
Astrid	Lawyer	29
Blair	Businesswoman	29
Camila	Student	25
Dominga	Secretary	46
Elizabeth	Secretary	27
Faith	Nurse	41
Fiona	Nurse	32
Heather	Master's student	31
Karla	Student	20
Laura	Lawyer	31
Maria Ignacia	Student	21
Michelle	Student	18
Paulina	Student	21
Raquel	Engineering drafter	39
Ruby	Teacher	47
Samantha	Chef	37
Tamara	Student	28
Tania	Engineer	60

**Table 2**  
Online and archival data coded.

Data source	Number of posts/articles	Pages
Fashionista LiveJournal	5	67
Plus-size fashion blogs	21	73
<i>InStyle</i>	156	1108
<i>Vogue</i>	100	247
Data entries for “wearing Spanx”	100	396

Interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2016 and were audio/video recorded. Interviews lasted, on average, 50 min and resulted in 582 double-spaced pages of transcribed text.

We also consulted a broad range of archival data, including websites, Instagram profiles, patents, books (Bruna, 2015; Ecob, 1892; Rousseau, 1921; Steele, 2001), and archives from specialized media outlets (*Vogue United States* and *InStyle*) to understand the origins and historical trajectory of the practice of wearing shapewear. Finally, upon identifying Spanx as the most prominent brand of contemporary shapewear, we conducted a Google search with the keywords “wearing Spanx” to reflect consumers' embodied interaction with the object and included the first 100 resulting entries in our dataset. These entries included blog posts, articles published on mainstream media and online media outlets, product reviews, and forum discussions. Overall, the archival data analyzed from media outlets and from the Google search amount to 1891 pages of text and images (Table 2). This set of data allowed us to assess the more salient themes surrounding shape-wearing.

### 3.2. Data analysis

As we conducted a preliminary round of analysis through a close reading of the dataset (Thomas, 2006), materiality surfaced across data sources as an important agent mediating the relation between fashion and the body. With that understanding, we redirected our attention to shapewear as a particularly controversial object (Bettany & Kerrane, 2011; Slater, 2014).

In a first round of purposive coding, the first author coded the entire dataset for consumer interactions with shapewear and its elements. Codes included interactions between body and shapewear and their consequences (e.g., adjustments, discomfort, bruises), actions involving shapewear and the body (e.g., trying it on, taking it off), occasions and contexts in which consumers engage in the practice (e.g., wedding, romantic date, daily use), and meanings attributed to both shapewear and the body (e.g., questioning the shape of one's own body, oppressive meanings related to shapewear). Both authors then jointly discussed the coded excerpts and developed an interpretation of how consumers engage with shapewear.

The second round of coding was inspired by the theoretical understanding developed as the authors familiarized themselves with research on extended materiality and contradictory institutional logics. The authors jointly developed a coding scheme connecting the codes identified in the first round with the theoretical understanding of consumption goods as conformed by material substances, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts (Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016) as well as objects as carriers of institutional logics (Scott, 2003). The first author applied these codes to the entire dataset, and both authors discussed selected excerpts for disambiguation. This analysis allowed us to identify the contradictory logics of *constricted femininity* and *flexible femininity* and to evidence how shapewear carries these logics. Finally, in a third round of coding, the first author coded the entire dataset for the consumers' consequences of interacting with objects that carry contradictory institutional logics. In this round, we paid particular attention to instances when consumers reflected on their bodies and social positions and noted when such reflections were triggered by shapewear or any of its elements.

## 4. Findings

The findings are structured as two sections. The first section introduces the logics of constricted femininity and flexible femininity and explains how the different elements of the extended materiality of shapewear carry such logics while making them visible and available to consumers. The second section shows how the interaction of consumers with these elements triggers identity conflict. We note that, even though consumers often refer to one or another element in their reflections about shapewear (which justifies our choice to present these elements separately), in practice, material substances, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts cannot be disentangled from each other. In their injunction, shapewear becomes what it is: a carrier of contradictory institutional logics and a trigger for identity conflict for consumers.

### 4.1. The logics of shapewear: constricted femininity and flexible femininity

Shapewear: miracle fix or torturous ordeal? As most anyone who has dabbled in the squeezezy, stretchy, sucked in world of compression fabric can tell you, these two scenarios don't live that far apart—and you definitely don't want to get stuck in the wrong one.

—Cleary & Williams, 2016

When considering the extended materiality of shapewear, we identified two salient institutional logics carried by shaping undergarments: the logic of constricted femininity and the logic of flexible femininity. These two logics are deeply grounded in the root paradigms of womanhood (Turner, 1979), given that, historically, shapewear has been an accessory in promoting fundamental recognizable standards for women (and their bodies) to partake in culture (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018).

The first institutional logic of shapewear is what we refer to as *constricted femininity*. Femininity relates to domesticity (Maclaran, 2012), modesty, and self-discipline (Bordo, 2003). Hence, this logic is rooted in socially constructed beliefs that the ideal role for women is that of a docile domestic subject (as favored in patriarchal societies) and that the female body should be tamed, controlled, and pressured into fitting restrictive standards. A symbolic image for the logic of constricted femininity is that of a woman in a corset: as her social role is domestic and ornamental, she does not have the need for movement or action, she should not overindulge in food, and her main goal is to look beautiful, decent, and modest (Steele, 2001).

The second institutional logic carried by shapewear is what we call *flexible femininity*. Roughly, the term *feminism* covers a wide range of movements and ideologies promoting gender equality (Offen, 1988). The logic of flexible femininity is rooted in a recent ideological wave of feminism labelled “choice feminism—the idea that feminism means women can individually choose whatever they wish and consider it an inherently feminist act” (Cross, 2015). Unlike the typical second-wave feminist woman, who would eschew both physical and metaphorical constrictions (including shapewear), the choice feminist can decide whether or not she will wear shapewear—and either option is fine, because she is the one making the choice about her body and her appearance. She is choosing and mobilizing market resources to achieve her individual goals (Budgeon, 2015). Choice feminism has been rightly criticized for disregarding limitations set by intersectional subject categories (Gopaldas, 2013) and for not considering that, in most societies, options available to most women are limited and determined by power structures, thus making *choice* a misnomer. In response to choice feminism, sorority and positiveness movements have emerged, mostly grounded and spread on social media (Maclaran, 2015). However, coopted by corporate logics (Prügl, 2015), these act as a superficial representation of female empowerment. A symbolic image for the logic of flexible femininity is the woman who “has it all”: a career, a relationship, a family, and a life of her own. She leads a dynamic

productive life and, hence, needs to be in constant movement, to present herself faultlessly in many circles. She looks and feels empowered, confident, and comfortable in her skin.

Historically, the material substances, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts of shapewear have most evidently carried the logic of constricted femininity, mostly evidenced in the corset (Steele, 2001; Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018), the most iconic embodiment of the logics of constricted femininity. As the role of women in society changed, fashion evolved as well, both reflecting and helping define the symbolic space occupied by the female body in society (Crane, 2012). In that sense, women's garments have become more flexible and more suited to industrial and urban environments (Entwistle, 2015). Shapewear, however, even if adjusted in terms of materials, design, and marketing efforts to the new modern flexibility required of women, has constantly reappeared in the body–fashion relationship as a tool for molding, squeezing, fashioning, and finally, constraining the body and has carried in itself the idea of a foundation—a second form—for the female body (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018). The next sections show how the three elements became infused with the two contradictory logics through the process of pre-objectification, that is, the materialization of marketers' and designers' work on shapewear.

#### 4.1.1. *The materials of shapewear*

Contemporary shapewear blends Nylon and Spandex, materials developed by DuPont that revolutionized the textile industry upon their launch by enabling the manufacturing of products that offer both structure and elasticity. Nylon was first developed as a substitute for natural silk in the hosiery industry. Spandex, however, was developed mostly to provide elasticity, a fundamental characteristic of contemporary shapewear. Spandex was one of the many attempts to create a synthetic substitute for rubber without the undesirable consequences (e.g., chaffing, allergic reactions) of wearing rubber against the skin (Shivers, 1962).

Nylon and Spandex were essential in changing the undergarment industry, as their flexibility and softness replaced the rigid materials (e.g., whalebone, wire) used to achieve body compression and shaping during the corset era. Indeed, the Spanx patent indicates that its blend of Nylon and Spandex minimizes discomfort or suffering for users (Blakely, 2002). However, as elastic substances, Nylon and Spandex materialize two contradictory logics: on the one hand, they adapt to the body (connecting to the root paradigm of flexible feminism), and on the other, they still constrict body movements (connecting with the logics of constricted femininity). The contemporary shapewear industry, whose beginning is marked by the creation of Spanx (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018), was popularized not only due to the adoption of these flexible materials but also due to new designs.

#### 4.1.2. *The design of contemporary shapewear*

Spanx, the most popular brand of contemporary shapewear, started when Sara Blakely, the entrepreneur behind the brand, realized “she didn't have the right undergarment to provide a smooth look under white pants,” and therefore, “she cut the feet off her control top pantyhose and the SPANX revolution began!” (Spanx, 2017). Spanx's early patents outline the design principles of adapting and transforming objects (cutting the feet off pantyhose) to address a need (a smooth look under white pants). They emphasize that the bare lower leg allows women to wear different types of shoes (therefore, adjusting to fashion choices) while hiding and compressing “saddlebags” (Spanx, 2017).

From footless hosiery in 2002, Spanx expanded its portfolio to create over 80 different models of shapewear designed to compress multiple body parts. As such, contemporary shapewear design is supposed to increase the adaptability of the body to different situations, thus augmenting the array of possibilities for women. Spanx, for instance, offers slips, shorts, full bodysuits and other models across three levels of compression (smooth/shape/sculpt), achieved by the juxtaposition of panels of fabric with different proportions of Nylon and

Spandex. It also uses seams and gathering to help create slimming strength and shape. Certain features were incorporated into the designs to provide comfort, such as the “Easy Access Gusset®,” a slit on the crotch of bodysuits to facilitate bathroom use, and a “360° seamless waistband [that] anchors garment in place” and prevents the edges of shapewear from uncomfortably rolling down one's waist.

While these design features carry the logic of flexible feminism, shapewear, across different possible designs and despite improvements, continues to be designed to compress the body. Spanx merges materials into designs that include, for instance, an “engineered shaping panel to provide more control at the lower stomach,” “double-layer fabric [in which the] first layer has 360° shaping powers, and the second layer conceals lumps and bumps,” and a “graduated mesh that targets the tummy” (Spanx, 2018). These features materialize the logics of constricted femininity.

#### 4.1.3. *Marketing efforts: “why you need it”<sup>1</sup>*

Marketing communications interact with cultural meanings and their evolution (McCracken, 1986). In the case of shapewear, a product that has been historically debated, marketing efforts are a frequent target of critique by different women's movements. As such, contemporary marketing discourses for shapewear brands focus on the symbolic aspects of building a better version of oneself. Spanx, for instance, claims to provide women with empowerment and “to help women feel fabulous, not just about their clothes but also themselves and their potential” (Spanx, 2017). On Valentine's Day, Spanx (2018) used its Twitter account to promote the following message: “At Spanx, we believe nothing is sexier than a confident woman who is comfortable in her clothes.” Spanx's claims suggest that shapewear should be comfortable to wear, both physically and psychologically.

However, these messages of confidence and comfort are still connected with the need to modify one's body with the aid of a product to achieve a certain level of sexiness and the full female potential. As “the leggings' guide” on the Spanx website says, “Flat Gut, Great Butt™” (Spanx, 2018). As such, despite the empowering claims, shapewear still relies on the idea that a woman's body alone does not suffice for the contemporary ideal of womanhood.

Therefore, overall, the three elements of modern shapewear emphasize the paradoxical nature of shapewear: constricting one's body to adjust and adapt it to both fashion and traditional female roles of passive beauty while also searching for empowerment, confidence, and comfort. These contradictory logics are at play in the interactions between consumers and shapewear, which we unpack in the following section.

#### 4.2. *How the extended materiality of shapewear triggers identity conflict*

I thought I had found God. It smoothed everything from just under my bra right down to my hip. ... I headed to the office with an unusually elevated level of confidence, which lasted about an hour until the discomfort set it—so much so that by 4 p.m., I had barely done any work because I was so distracted. It also messed with my self-esteem because it made me feel like I was this enormous Godzilla-like monster squeezing into a party dress.

—Stephanie Trong, fashion features editor of *InStyle* (Cleary & Williams, 2016)

In this section, we show how the extended materiality of shapewear evidences the contradictory logics of the product in its interaction with consumers. Focusing on those encounters, we examine how shapewear's materials, designers' intentions, and marketing efforts prompt consumers to reflect upon the (in)compatibility between their identity

<sup>1</sup> This is a feature in the description of every Spanx product on the company's website.

**Table 3**  
How materiality triggers consumers' identity conflict.

Element of extended materiality	Examples of how contradictory logics are evidenced in consumer–shapewear interactions	How it provokes identity conflict
Materials	<p>“In my dressing room, hands full of ivory colored Spandex that was tanner than my actual skin, I began the painful process of pulling and tugging, and full on Lil Wayne groping myself to see which material sucked harder. [...] Today, as I scroll through the endless sea of Facebook wedding albums full of unfortunate bridesmaid dresses I ask myself, ‘why do women do this?’ Why do we willingly submit ourselves to the body bandage? Women have been doing it since the beginning of time—and still are. When I Google the word ‘corsets’ there is no history lesson waiting there for me. Instead, ‘shop sexy corsets’ and ‘cheap bustiers’ from Frederick’s of Hollywood pop up in a long vertical line down my screen.” (Sims, 2015)</p> <p>“As I held it up again, I still had my doubts—how on earth were my thighs supposed to go into that thing? It really seemed impossible, but I reminded myself that it was supposed to be my size and stepped in and started pulling it up. Slightly above my knee, things got dicey. The Spanx no longer wanted to be pulled up. I sucked my breath in—because apparently this helps with getting things over one’s thighs—and pulled. And pulled.” (Watts, 2018)</p> <p>“5 a.m.: Sitting is starting to get terribly uncomfortable. I’m very aware of my stomach. I can feel my ribs begging me to take a scissor to these God forsaken devil constrictors, but I resist temptation and focus on work ... until I realize my control top is totally hanging out of the skirt I am wearing that is waaaaay too short when I sit. God dammit ... hope no one saw that.” (Concannon, 2011)</p> <p>“1:30 p.m.: I immediately regret the decision of eating. As sucked in as I am, I feel bigger than I am because it is all so constricted and uncomfortable ... even more than before. I’m now starting to feel the pain of women in the early 20th century who had to rock corsets. No wonder there wasn’t an obesity problem back then, no one could eat for fear of having their ribs collapse.” (Concannon, 2011)</p>	<p><i>Discomfort</i>: consumers become conscious of their bodies, acknowledge the discomfort, and reflect on the outcomes of constriction (logics of constricted femininity) in relation to the movement of their bodies (logics of flexible feminism)</p>
Designers' intentions	<p>“Unlike the poorly-constructed, too restrictive garments of the past, Spanx offered smoothing and shaping that didn’t make you completely miserable. Or at least, that was the promise—if you’ve ever sweated through a pair of Spanx at an outdoor wedding, you know that these claims are not exactly scientific. But you shrug and carry on, because you can’t imagine life another way.” (McCarthy, 2015)</p> <p>“I took off the Spanx as fast as I could and never put them back on again. Because that night, shoving myself into shapewear designed to hide my flaws, made me feel anything but beautiful. And as much as I didn’t want my husband to see me in them, the real reason I vowed not to wear Spanx again was because I didn’t want me to see me in them. Turns out my flaws were prettier than something designed to hide them.” (Gordon, 2018)</p> <p>“Some time ago my friend and I were commenting on how ugly shapewear is. We do not understand why the industry does ugly objects which are supposed to make us feel pretty. Does it make sense?” (Bacchi, 2012)</p> <p>“No. Never, because I take it off before (her husband sees it), right? [...] Shapewear is a turn-off... Just the color of it... no way.” (Laura, interview)</p> <p>“But what if she is considering going out with someone? Because it creates an illusion, a false body.” (Faith, interview)</p> <p>“Spanx made me feel ugly and dumpy—something my imperfect body even didn’t do. [...] But here’s the thing: I found the experience of putting Spanx on to be totally humiliating. I felt like a sausage squeezing myself into a too tight casing.” (Gordon, 2018)</p> <p>“I was embarrassed about wearing Spanx because, as commonplace as they are in both men’s and women’s wardrobes, they’re considered as deleterious to a partner’s libido as a pre-coital fart.” (Evers, 2015)</p> <p>“Deception: I remember one night when I went out with a friend to celebrate her birthday. I wore this oversized sweater and a few awesome statement necklaces, but my pièce de résistance was this animal-print midi length bodycon skirt. I’m one of the few ethnic girls that were born without any ass to speak of. It’s kind of embarrassing. I didn’t think that I could pull the skirt off at all, but Spanx—my savior—smoothed out my slight booty doo and catapulted me into ‘banging’ status. I got attention all night. But I couldn’t fully revel in it—because it was the Spanx. And not me. And I don’t want to sell dreams.” (Underwood, 2014)</p> <p>“Having pretty shapewear definitely helps alleviate the embarrassment of wearing it and feeling I have to wear it. But regardless of how beautiful, intricate, or expensive my shapewear might be, the feeling that shapewear is still all about altering my body still wears at my brain.” (Tonic, 2016)</p>	<p><i>Discredibility</i>: the design of shapewear (making the body adjustable to the external world, but inappropriate to intimate moments) evidencing contradictions in how consumers present themselves to the world, to intimate partners, and their own identities, causing shame, inappropriateness, embarrassment during use, and a general feeling of being discredited.</p>

Table 3 (continued)

Element of extended materiality	Examples of how contradictory logics are evidenced in consumer–shapewear interactions	How it provokes identity conflict
Marketing efforts	<p>“This isn't a screed against you if you want to wear Spanx or a corset or a full-body Spandex cocoon—everyone is allowed to wear what they want, and that includes body-shapers. But I decided that I'm done with Spanx. I'm sick and tired of women's bodies being made small. I say we let our bellies and curves run free. We'll not only save money refusing to buy things you don't need, to impress people you don't like—or who prescribe to the singular, capitalist driven image of beauty—you'll also be proclaiming to yourself and to the world that you like your body, just as it is; that you like yourself just as you are. Burn the Spandex. Cut the corset loose. Your waist is fine, I promise. No one needs to look like a Kardashians to be worth something. You are worth something in whatever shape you are, naturally.” (Sims, 2015)</p> <p>“No woman needs to wear Spanx in the same sense that no woman needs to wear makeup. They're simply a strange, excellent way to make you feel more confident if you need that extra boost to wear a skin-tight dress or skirt. But after you've gone through your 'is it supposed to feel like this?' stage, you suddenly start to glance around the room at other women, jealous of their non-Spanx looks. Look at them, dancing around in their freedom, with feeling in all of their limbs. You get bitter.” (Muentzer, 2014)</p> <p>“I wore this dress a few weeks ago to attend an art show opening &amp; then to see my favorite local band with 2 of my friends [...]. I nearly didn't wear this dress because I felt it was too tight, but I ended up feeling quite sexy. I've never worn shapewear of any kind because I like to be comfortable &amp; because I feel like it would be dishonest. This is my body &amp; I like it. But I also feel I could wear more formfitting dresses like this if I had some shapewear to smooth out the bumps. But if I am comfortable in my body, why should I cover up lumps &amp; bumps? How do you all feel about this? And if I were to explore shapewear, what would you recommend for someone who is a size 26/28?” (Ladymeshel, comment on “OOTD and shapewear question,” February 22, 2014, <i>Fashionista LiveJournal</i>)</p>	<p><i>Dissociation</i>: amplifying contradiction, as a consumption object's communications are confronted with cues from the same discursive sources that influence its commercial message (in this case, body positiveness and choice feminism), consumers reflect upon the “sincerity” of the logics promoted by the brand communication.</p>

projects and the logics carried by shapewear, thus triggering identity conflicts for these consumers. We found that consumer–shapewear interactions produce identity conflict by provoking (1) discomfort, (2) discredibility, and (3) dissociation for consumers (see Table 3). We explain each one of these below.

#### 4.2.1. Discomfort

The materials used to make shapewear prompt identity conflict for consumers by *provoking uncomfortable interactions* between shapewear and consumers' physical bodies. The higher the compression level of the garment, the more rigid its fabric, which can make it extremely uncomfortable to wear. For example, self-declared “Spanx addict” Amy McCarthy (2015), in an article on *Marie Claire* online, discusses why she quit her lifelong practice of wearing shapewear:

At some point, the chafing and gastric distress of wearing these restrictive garments all sort of came to a head. There really is no watershed moment for deciding that you no longer want to struggle into one of those pairs of flesh-toned shorts and “Power Panties”—it's more of a cumulative thing, a barrage of moments like picking the Nylon out of your buttcrack in the middle of five-star restaurant, or sneaking off to a bathroom to readjust the shaper that's settled onto the wrong part of your thigh and rubbed a wicked blister.

In her account, McCarthy points to the discomfort produced by the interaction between her flesh and skin and the synthetic, non-breathable fabric of which shapewear garments are made. She describes how the materials (and design) poked her body on several different occasions and provoked a series of uncomfortable sensations: blisters, chafing, gastric distress. As those materials caused discomfort to her body, she became intimately aware that shapewear is restrictive. Her writing makes clear the conflicting manner in which she experienced the contradictory logics of shapewear: even

when wearing Power Panties,<sup>2</sup> she was left powerless—for she had to frequently interrupt her activities to address her body's calls to resolve the problems caused by the shapewear.

Body-positive activist Marie Ospina (2016) asks “Why?” when reflecting upon her experiences with shapewear. Ospina discovered that “the friction created by my sweat rubbing against too-tight, lycra-esque material had left me with peeled skin and sore wobbly bits.” Similar accounts of the inflictions on the body caused by the materials that compose shapewear are frequent in our interviews, and such inflictions include bruises, irritated skin, difficulty breathing properly, body heat, and movement restrictions.

For instance, in our interviews, Dominga stressed that “shapewear is too tight and heats my body,” while Tamara indicated that she cannot stand wearing shapewear for more than five consecutive hours, and Layla recalled distress over wearing one-piece shapewear that complicated her trips to the bathroom. Similarly, Faith described how challenging it was to eat during a party while wearing shapewear. At some point, she took the garment off in the bathroom, and never wore that particular piece of shapewear again.

[I was wearing] one of those that has brackets at the front, so I did not eat much... I was drinking, but at a graduation party, you drink... But then, I thought “No! I need to go to the bathroom.” ... I'll rip this thing off! ... Of course I would not be eating until I burst, right? That's not the point—but ... the bracket thing bothers you!

(Faith, interview)

Faith's interview revolved almost entirely around her quest for shapewear that will reduce her body measures without restraining her movement. Even though she likes wearing shapewear “to look better,”

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy may be referring to Spanx's Higher Power Panties, a product in their bestseller Power Series.

she reflected on how the physical discomfort enacted by the object seems too high of a price to pay for a bulge-free body. As such, consumers are frequently prompted to question their own motivations for subjecting their bodies to such uncomfortable, painful experiences. Such reflections push consumers to acknowledge the contradictory logics carried by the object.

#### 4.2.2. Discredibility

The second way in which shapewear triggers identity conflict is when the interactions consumers have with the designers' intentions manifest in the object *evidencing identity contradictions* for consumers. The different shapes and forms of shapewear indicate that shapewear prepares different bodies to be dressed in different types of clothing and to be presented in different situations. Many celebrities, upon having been “caught in Spanx,” admit their love for the product and jokingly dismiss any concerns about self-esteem or body acceptance that wearing the product could represent. Nevertheless, across the multiple sources of data we analyzed, wearing shapewear was unequivocally associated with distress in one particular context: relations with intimate and/or sexual partners. When the body should be undressed, shapewear becomes a shameful, unsightly cover, provoking the discredibility of one's body. It leads consumers to admit that they consider their naked body an inappropriate flawed one. In such occasions, the designers' intentions for shapewear become all too evident, as discussed in an article on *HuffPost's Life* website:

No matter the design, no matter the color—both of which there are many—there is nothing I find sexy about Spanx. It's a workout to put them on, they resemble an ACE bandage when you're wearing them, and taking them off is a slow, peeling process that can sometimes require the help of another person. But the point isn't to look sexy *in* them. The point is to squeeze our bodies into smooth, sexy silhouettes and dupe the rest of the world into believing we were—cue the Lady Gaga—Born This Way.

(Evers, 2015)

As this quote illustrates, shapewear could be interpreted as a deception. Despite some recent modifications for shapewear, including versions in darker tones and adorned with lace, the object is not perceived as lingerie, which is a type of garment designed to achieve sexiness with the half-naked body (Jantzen, Østergaard, & Vieira, 2006). Rather, shapewear is seen as an object that deceives the male gaze (Sandikci & Ger, 2010) with a fake body while undermining intimate sensuality.

Indeed, a common practice among our interviewees is “hiding” their shapewear from their husbands or partners. Ruby, for example, stated, “(my husband) does not see it...., I have my lingerie for sexy moments.” Andrea recognized that her husband “mocked” her shapewear a little, but “he did not notice a lot, because, you know, he did not see me put it on or take it out, I would not let him to,” and Fiona, to justify why she would not wear shapewear on nights out with her friends, stated that “we go out and do not know what might happen, we need stylish lingerie.”

An interesting metaphor further illustrates how shapewear designs prompt the acknowledgment of the contradictory institutional logics carried by the object: the “Bridget Jones Conundrum.” Addressed in an *InStyle* article on how to wear Spanx in which the writer answers consumers' questions regarding shapewear, the term refers to a scene in the popular movie *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which the protagonist and her boss/love interest, Daniel, are making out. When Daniel spots Bridget's big beige shapewear-like underwear, he seems very impressed by her “absolutely enormous panties,” yet she becomes embarrassed. The article goes on to address the issue of what one should do if one is wearing shapewear on a date but does not plan to go home alone. “Take it off in the bathroom,” the article says (Rao, 2015). Shapewear should be kept away from the male gaze and virtually everyone else.

The Bridget Jones conundrum evidences that shapewear is

materially shameful. It embodies deception and the failure to accomplish the “right” body shape. It materializes the inappropriateness of a body that is imperfect to the male gaze. When a romantic or sexual partner is put into the equation, a contradiction appears: the physical appearance of the body *in* clothes that is achieved with shapewear is empowering, yet the embarrassment of deceiving a partner turns the body into a subject of shame. The pressure of sculpting a slim body through discipline for the male gaze, which is aligned with the logic of constricted femininity, clashes with wearing shapewear to simulate that achievement, a tactic accepted and promoted by flexible feminism. As such, the design of the shapewear, including its color, form, and size, produces in consumers a sense of body shame characterized by the inadequacy of being compressed by an object that helps them emulate the bodies they feel they should have without the object.

#### 4.2.3. Dissociation

Finally, the third way through which the extended materiality of the object triggers identity conflict is by how marketing efforts amplify the contradictions of shapewear. The cues of the commercial messages of shapewear inevitably merge aspects that evidence one or another contradictory logic, as discussed in the previous section.

As an exemplary situation of the reflexivity such marketing efforts may enact, a consumer reflects upon a particular marketing communication from the online plus-size fashion retailer Torrid to advertise Spanx products:

Good afternoon ladies, I just received an email from Torrid inviting me to “Improve my rear view” by purchasing Spanx foundation garments. I was wondering if I should be intrigued or insulted by this advertisement. It got me to thinking how the ladies here feel about the 2007 version of a girdle. Is it yay? Nay? Only on special occasions?

(Rosette, comment on “Spanx, but not Spanx,” April 26, 2007, *Fatshionista LiveJournal* community)

Rosette's comment is particularly interesting because it not only evidences her reflexivity around the marketing efforts of Spanx but also prompts collective reflexivity about the role of the body for contemporary womanhood. Contemporary discussions of femininity revolve considerably around body shape. The quote reflects the discourses of fat activism and compares them with market discourses targeting plus-size bodies. The invitation to improve her rear view seems contradictory to Rosette because it prompts her to improve her body (rather than fix it), thereby making a statement that could be ambiguously read as empowering or constrictive, for it is not clear whether it promotes body ownership or objectification. As another consumer on the same thread adds, “I don't like the ‘improve your rear-view’ message for the same reason I didn't like Igigi's ‘get whistled at’ message—it strikes me as being about being a sexual object, rather than being a sexual subject, sexy in and for yourself.”

As such, when interacting with the marketing efforts of shapewear, which are infused with contradictory logics, consumers may engage in reflections that extend to their identities and lead to consumers questioning whether wearing shapewear to hide flaws is congruent with the empowerment shapewear promises. In doing so, they compare their efforts in acquiring confidence with the euphemisms of body modification promoted by the marketing efforts of shapewear.

Another consumer, discussing the advertisement for another shapewear brand on the same *Fatshionista* forum, reflects on the feeling that “flattering means ‘hide your fat’ and sorry, still fat when wearing that black wrap dress” (Nikari, comment on “B-shape (no, not baby) Stomach help,” September 17, 2013, *Fatshionista LiveJournal* community). Certainly, this is an online community dedicated to the intersection between fashion and fat and body acceptance (Bordo, 2003; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013), a movement that has been advanced by consumers to promote female liberation from body stigma. But evidence from other sources of data suggest that interacting with the

marketing efforts objectified in shapewear may trigger identity conflict in any consumer, not only consumer activists. For example, several consumers we interviewed also discussed the understanding that they are “still fat,” even when wearing shapewear. Faith, for example, stated, “I do not have the illusion that shapewear will make my stomach flat,” which refers directly to the “flat gut, great butt” message promoted by Spanx. And Ruby reflected, “From 33 onwards I started wearing [shapewear]. Because [my stomach] bothers me. But I would love to have a liposuction, if I could. Because I have this fat here, so I am kind of false thin [sic].” As the body is acknowledged as an entity that cannot be permanently transformed by shapewear, any consumer may perceive the contradictory messages promoting transformation or “improvement” as body-shaming and, therefore, as impediments to their identity projects.

As such, the marketing efforts of shapewear amplify the contradictions between body acceptance—self-acceptance—and body modification, which leads to a constant debate of whether or not the mere “improvement” of the body is a reminder of oppression. In an additional example of such reflexivity, fashion blogger [Nicole \(2016\)](#) asks, “Am I body positive if I don't always love what I see in the mirror? Am I body positive if I dress to accentuate my favorite parts rather than my less-than-favorites? Am I body positive if I sometimes slip into shapewear before I put on the rest of my clothes? ... Can I be body positive and wear targeted smoothing technology?”

Nicole concludes that, yes, it is possible to be body positive and wear Spanx, thus adhering to the logic of flexible feminism (“I'm body positive, I wear Spanx, and I'm a happier me since deciding on both”) while discounting the constricted femininity logic (“I'm not wearing them to look a different size, or to take up less space”). Conversely, another blogger engages in the same reflexive process and concludes the contrary: “for me, wearing Spanx would be inauthentic to me, my body, and my philosophy in life. I thought to myself, ‘so what if I have a tummy!’” ([Zehner, 2015](#)). Hence, the marketing efforts objectified in shapewear inform consumers about the object's intended effects on the body, thereby also saying something about how consumers should perceive their bodies and themselves (confident, comfortable, free, empowered). When consumers fail to feel exactly that way upon interacting with the object, such interactions evidence the contradiction between the two logics carried by shapewear and trigger identity conflict for consumers.

On a final note, although we presented different aspects of materiality that trigger identity conflicts separately in our analysis, they tend to be combined in consumers' interactions. As [Cora \(2018\)](#), blogging on *Vintage or Tacky*, explains:

I used to be a die-hard Spanx obsessive... Smooth. No wiggle. No Jiggle. This wasn't easy for me, but a couple of years ago, I just said fuck this: I want to be able to breathe. I saw other fat people eschewing shapewear. I saw bodies like mine being represented in media for the first time. I realized, shapewear was a tool, not a necessity. I didn't have to wear shapewear. I could if I wanted to, but it wasn't a requirement. What freedom!

Cora notes how her experience with the extended materiality of shapewear (materials and meanings), through her interactions with the object and the marketing efforts objectified in it, has led her to reflect on the role of the object in helping her achieve her identity goals. She no longer feels she must wear shapewear—she feels “free.”

## 5. Discussion

This study has explored the way in which objects that carry contradictory institutional logics trigger identity conflict for consumers. As summarized in [Table 3](#), the elements of the extended materiality of shapewear, which come together to constitute the object during its pre-objectification phase ([Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2016](#)), provoke reactions in consumers by manifesting the contradictory logics—constricted

femininity and flexible feminism—with which shapewear is infused and of which it becomes an institutional carrier ([Scott, 2003](#)).

Examining the interactions between consumers and such a consumption object, this study indicates that the extended materiality of shapewear triggers identity conflicts on three grounds: (1) *discomfort*, as material relations between consumers' bodies and constricting garments lead consumers to acknowledge discomfort and reflect upon the contradiction between the materials that adapt to the body (logics of flexible feminism) and materials that constrict the body (logics of constricted femininity); (2) *discredibility*, as shaping undergarments are evidence of contradictions between the “ready for anything” identity of flexible feminism and the pressure to have a perfect and feminine body for the male gaze; and (3) *dissociation*, as shapewear's marketing efforts amplify the contradictions between body transformation (logics of constricted femininity) and body acceptance and positiveness (logics of flexible feminism), thus leading consumers to reflect upon the possibility to achieve the perfect balance between empowerment and femininity that shapewear promotes.

Our findings, therefore, support previous studies in institutional theory showing that contradictory logics prompt identity work ([Creed et al., 2010](#); [Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017](#); [Lok, 2010](#)) but detail a process that precedes identity work itself—the triggering of identity conflict ([Croft et al., 2015](#)). Particularly, we have shown how a historically controversial object imbues contradictory institutional logics through its extended material elements: materials, design, and market efforts, all infused in the object by marketers and designers during the pre-objectification phase. We have further shown how, through the object's contact with consumers' bodies, as well as the locations and situation on which these bodies transition, identity conflict is triggered. We specifically connect each element of the object's extended materiality with a type of provocation that leads consumers to experience identity conflict. In sum, we show how the extended materiality of an object can be an important factor in triggering identity conflict, as it is responsible for materializing the contradictory logics and evidencing them for consumers as they interact with objects.

In addition, we have extended understanding of the relatively unexplored role of objects in institutional theory research ([Friedland, 2018](#); [Jones et al., 2017](#); [Monteiro & Nicolini, 2014](#); [Scott, 2003](#)) by showing how, through their extended materiality, objects are de facto agents; by carrying contradictory logics in these elements, objects provoke identity conflicts for consumers. In the case of shapewear, these provocations happen as the body and its constitution interact with the materialized institutional logics ([Courpasson & Monties, 2017](#)) at an intimate level. As such, this study shows how “identity is evoked and invoked” ([Jones et al., 2017](#), p. 626) when in contact with contradictory logics that are carried by a consumption object, even for those actors such as consumers, who differ from institutional entrepreneurs ([Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013](#)), employees ([Courpasson & Monties, 2017](#)), and insiders ([Creed et al., 2010](#)) in that the former are not particularly committed to an institution or invested in institutional work. By considering the extended materiality of consumption objects, we account for both artifacts and symbolic systems and, thereby, complement [Scott's \(2003\)](#) categorization of institutional carriers. As institutional logics operate through consumption objects, these objects' extended materiality manifests such logics for individual consumers.

Finally, this study calls attention to the body as a place where institutional contradictions are manifested. Previous studies in consumer research have produced extensive work discussing how marketplace forces interact, particularly, with the female body and female identity (e.g., [Gurrieri, Previte, & Brace-Govan, 2013](#); [Jantzen et al., 2006](#); [Thompson & Üstüner, 2015](#)). By exploring the effect of interactions between the female body and the extended materiality of consumption objects, we contribute to this stream of research. We demonstrate how objects themselves partake in creating and reproducing marketplace ideologies, and we start to uncover how different perspectives on the female subject, which affect the female body (e.g., femininity, choice

feminism), get incorporated into consumption objects by marketers, in the pre-objectification phase. As such, we show the role of materiality in enacting marketplace ideologies in intimate consumer conflicts, thereby contributing, as such, to the growing body of literature in consumer research that deals both with materiality, identity, and the body. By doing so, our findings also extend the literature on how objects that enact controversy in the marketplace (Bettany & Kerrane, 2011) can interfere with consumers' identity projects (Luedicke et al., 2009). They do so through acting as carriers of contradictory institutional logics in their interaction with the body.

## 6. Conclusion

Past research in institutional theory has shown how individuals' identity work has ambivalent effects on contradictory institutional logics, either by acting as a force of institutional change and/or merely ameliorating the identity conflict for those individuals who experience it (Creed et al., 2010; Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017; Lok, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). In contrast, consumer research tends to look at identity work as a tool for market change by exploring how stigmatized consumers both make their identities visible and legitimate and mobilize market resources for their causes (Thompson, 2014). This study's findings indicate that identity conflicts may interfere with consumers' individual identity projects yet not result in resistance to or entrepreneurial engagements with the market (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Despite their evident discontent with shapewear, consumers in our dataset mostly engage in several attempts of reconciliation between their own identity projects and the contradictory logics carried by the object.

It is important to acknowledge that, following the reasoning of works such as that by Luedicke et al. (2009), the focus of our study was not on the short-term effects on sales of a company or even an industry as a whole but in the understanding of how consumers experience institutional contradictions. However, previous literature suggests that consumer experiences of contradictory logics may eventually trigger substantial changes in a market as consumers coalesce in collective identities and institutional entrepreneurs emerge who attempt to address institutional contradictions (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). What our data suggest, along with previous studies of shapewear (Steele, 2001; Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018), is that it is unlikely that consumers will attempt to address the contradictions that are manifest in shapewear, precisely for this particular object's ability to continuously camouflage contradictions under new materials and designs and through enriched marketing efforts. As shapewear companies work with more comfortable materials and designs, recruit celebrities and influencers to confidently praise their shaping undergarments, and develop “sexy shapewear”, these companies actively work to ameliorate contradictions that may provoke identity conflicts for consumers.

This discussion opens an avenue for future research on the role of objects and their effects beyond consumers' lives. Considering Borgeson's (2013) affirmation that objects are *agents provocateurs* in networks that encompass consumers, institutions, and material life, our study prompts the question of how objects enable or affect consumer engagement in institutional fields. It is by wearing these garments, and reflecting upon the different logics they carry through their material elements, that consumers indeed access all the efforts made by a company to materialize their strategy in a certain product.

Finally, our findings may be toned by our choice to study consumer's interactions with a historically controversial object. Although the controversial nature of shapewear proved helpful in accessing rich data regarding the conundrums experienced by consumers, mundane objects could provide new insights. Nevertheless, our study of shapewear may inspire discussion regarding the relation between the contradictory logics sustaining consumption practices and the body. As the symbolic and material networks surrounding shapewear are centered on body sensations and body discourses, shapewear is part of a body-

centered market assemblage (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2018). Hence, identity conflicts regarding the practice of shapewear are also body-related, including the effect of materials on the body, the struggle to achieve a slim body (Bordo, 2003), and certain consumers' commitment to body positive ideologies (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). The question remains whether identity conflicts can be triggered by other objects that are not part of body-centered market assemblages.

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