

Thought leadership in marketing theory and method

As we write this editorial, we are sitting in our respective homes, during a period when we would usually attend annual academic conferences. These conferences provide the opportunity to share research, to have conversations with colleagues regarding what we are working on, hear about new areas of research, new approaches and new methods. Often, we return home tired, but refreshed and inspired. At the same time, such conferences can result in group think, we sometimes recycle old ideas and structures; as pressures of work increase, time and space to think about new approaches or areas of research may decrease. We can often work in isolation in our home institutions as the sheer breath of the field of marketing and consumer research means that departments house colleagues with widely divergent research interests and philosophical and methodological approaches. The tried and tested conference format of short presentations where we distil the highlights of our studies, followed by a few questions from the audience, is often insufficient for the thoughtful dialogue needed when wishing to move our research forward. If we are lucky, we end up in a session with similar papers, likeminded authors and an engaged audience and our discussion can spill out into the coffee or lunch break. But, all too often, such conversations are rushed and end abruptly in an attempt to get to the next session, grab some fresh air, drink bad coffee or go off in search of better coffee, review the publisher stands or check in at home. For this reason, we proposed a new format for the annual Academy of Marketing Conference starting from 2018. With the introduction of conference workshops aimed at “cutting edge theory, methods or pedagogy”, we aimed to bring together a critical mass of colleagues already working on specific theoretical, methodological or pedagogical approaches or interested in finding out more about what we hoped would be rewarding engagement.

The first iteration of these workshops saw colleagues present their work on 12 diverse, cutting-edge themes, namely, Artificial Intelligence in Marketing: the field, research directions and methodological issues; Consumer Research with Societal Impact; Drawing Robust Conclusions from Quantitative Research in Marketing: facts, fads and faiths; Full Immersion: unpacking consumer phenomena through ethnographic research; Gender, Marketing and Consumer Research; Seeking Sustainable Futures in Marketing and Consumer Research; Social Media for Pedagogy and Developing Cohort Identity: experiences, challenges and future directions; Sounding Out Marketing and Consumption; Space and Place in Marketing and Consumer Research; Student Engagement and the Marketing Curriculum: a dilemma for all; Understanding the Visual in Marketing and Consumer Research; and, finally, Who Will be the Retailers of Tomorrow?

The open format allowed the experienced, the interested and the curious to gather and engage with contributions from a range of authors. The contributions featured were eligible for submission to this special issue. The motivation behind the special issue was to provide a way to showcase these areas and to acknowledge the challenge involved in publishing work which is aimed at moving the discipline on and providing a critical mass of interested researchers. We are delighted to present the resulting set of papers which fall within the scope of the above themes. Although each paper was associated with one of the themes mentioned previously, they also cross over with other workshop themes to provide a coherent account of cutting-edge work in the discipline. The theme of the conference, held in the shadow of Stirling Castle, was *Marketing the Brave*. The collection of papers in this



special issue remind us of the need for researchers in the field to be brave, to try new things, to ask hard questions, to provide critical analysis and to push forward with research that can inspire others. As a collection of papers, the underlying message is to be brave and collectively they should provide both inspiration and practical tool kits for those wishing to follow on in their own research journeys.

The importance of representing the authentic consumer journey is key to Hilary Downey's paper which demonstrates the value of poetry within the ethnographer's tool kit. Through demonstrating the possibility of the poetic method in enabling transformative consumer research, Downey illustrates the value of poetry to "capture the fragility of disruptive and vulnerable experiences". She demonstrates the suitability of the poetic method in allowing researcher reflexivity, providing a tool for empathetic research and consideration of the physical and the emotional in contexts of vulnerability. Through reviewing the state of the art in terms of poetic ethnography across the social sciences and demonstrating the utility of this approach for transformative consumer research, Downey offers a way forward for others keen to adopt this method.

Leighanne Higgins examines barriers to marketplace settings experienced by consumers living with impairments. Through adopting a psycho-emotional model of disability, Higgins demonstrates the shortcomings of the marketplace in facilitating participation of those living with impairments. Like Downey, Higgins's research approach centred the participants in the research and a multi-sensory approach overcame the pervading shortcoming of reliance on verbal accounts of consumption experiences. Higgins' paper moves beyond concern with physical barriers to participation experienced by those living with impairments, bringing in a psycho-emotional model that articulates the psychological oppression which disempowers those living with impairments.

Continuing the theme of consumer research with social impact, Martina Hutton and Teresa Heath focus on identifying "a set of methodological troubles and challenges that may disrupt the boundaries of knowledge-making" in social justice research. They propose an emancipatory praxis to tackle these troubles and challenges. They argue for the need to take equality as a starting point in research design, rather than just a research aim. Through providing a set of responses to the struggles faced by those consciously aiming for social impact and "action" through their work, Hutton and Heath, present a powerful argument for "researching on the edge".

This perspective is a useful segue into the next paper from Francesca Sobande, who is concerned with woke-washing and the "intersectional" approaches to feminism and Black activism within the context of contemporary advertising. Sobande examines how brands have drawn upon "commercialised notions of Black social justice activism and intersectional understandings of oppression, feminism and equality" in her analysis of ten marketing campaigns by global brands. In examining how courage and bravery, leading to challenging structural injustice are portrayed by brands, Sobande illustrates how the intersection of consumerism, capitalism and racism reinforces racialised, gendered and heteronormative social tropes. Sobande's paper aims to inspire further consideration and action among academic scholars of advertising and industry around the interplay among representation, stereotype, activism, race and gender in the marketplace. It is also timely in light of the global Black Lives Matter movement.

The complexity of identity and the need to move beyond normative presentations of ethnic identity are the concern of Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock's paper, which introduces the "mapping of identity (MOI) protocol", a collaborative visual methodology aimed at revealing the complexities of consumer identity. Their study is located in understanding of identity as fluid and fractured rather than static and constrained. They note the importance of visual

methods, capable of capturing complexity and which allow research participants and researchers to explore the complexity of consumer self-identity constructions which occur in the contemporary marketplace. Such a marketplace is recognised as reliant on visual representation and one within which there is a “perpetual process of negotiation, affirmation and change of multiple consumer identities”. Their paper acknowledges the rich potential of visual approaches in consumer research while considering ethical and practical challenges faced by those applying such methods. In doing so, they outline a collaborative methodological approach that overcomes these challenges.

The rich potential of the visual within marketing and consumer research, coupled with the challenge of developing and applying visual analysis is the focus of Lynch, Patterson and Ní Bheactáin’s paper. In common with Sobande and Dekel-Dachs and Moorlock, Lynch *et al.* highlight the centrality of the visual in shaping and expressing identity. The focus of this paper is on the development of a visual literacy, grounded in the sensibility of art and design which facilitates the consumer researcher to “examine the self-conscious management of a visually-curated self”. Centring the idea of visual literacy moves considerations of the visual within consumer research beyond questions of interpretation to recognise the consumer as a “creative agent who mobilises the branded outputs of commercial enterprises to present a visually-curated self”. Through examining how consumers engage with the Orla Kiely brand, the authors unpack visual literacy, highlighting that this is “fundamental proficiency in a consumer culture awash with images”.

The visual is also central to Shenaz Rangwala, Chanaka Jayawardhena and Gunjan Saxena’s research on consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women. The authors invited participants, who were new middle-class Indian women in Udiapur, to share three photographs they had taken of consumer objects that they had purchased during their working lives. Discussion of these objects, which ranged from perfume, laptops, cars and scooters, to the provision of education or home improvements to benefit the family, revealed an undoing of gender roles that came from their newfound economic agency. Rangwala *et al.*’s intersectional post-feminist approach demonstrates the need for more fine-grained analysis of the lived realities of consumers to understand the range of social and cultural structures which may influence their behaviour.

Gender is also the focus of O’Sullivan and Richardson’s work examining consumption communities and their potential to overcome loneliness. They highlight some of the confusion that exists within the literature in terms of conceptualising and applying notions of community and in doing so, specifically articulate the lack of focus on consumption collectives that are largely female-led spaces. While the focus of the group at the core of the data collection was on knitting, this was found to be secondary to the provision of a support system. That said, while the group’s primary purpose was not to act as a “self-help” collective, they shared many practices associated with the amelioration of loneliness. The support obtained included emotional support, as well as reciprocity. Their study reveals many similar traits associated with self-help groups which were focussed around pathological consumption; however, the lack of a need for a confessional mode meant that testimonial and storytelling within this community was more focussed on entertaining, reassuring and building community. Within this context, specific brands aid in different community practices. Insider status is communicated through the use of specific branded tools, further aiding a sense of inclusion in the community. Not having an association with a stigmatised practice, such activity-based consumption groups can mimic the forms of self-help found in other groups while being accessible to a wider community. O’Sullivan and Richardson’s paper moves beyond implications relevant to brands and identifies the public

policy implications coming from the identification of such consumption-focussed groups in mitigating the effect of loneliness.

Similarly, Helen Bruce and Emma Banister demonstrate the importance of community in providing both emotional and practical support. While O'Sullivan and Richardson's community was centred around leisure activities, some participants sought out their group because they lived away from their former networks. Bruce and Banister's participants were army wives. They were found to focus on coping mechanisms deployed from a position of consumer vulnerability: "a lack of control within the marketplace that is detrimental to individuals' wellbeing". Rather than adopting more prevalent individualistic approaches to examining coping, Bruce and Banister approached the study through the lens of communities of practice. They conceptualise consumer vulnerability as existing owing to a set of external realities experienced by these consumers. In doing so, they present consumer vulnerability as a state experienced collectively, rather than identifying specific consumers themselves as vulnerable. Through examining this community of coping, the authors reveal how the context within which the army wives exist results in their entering a state of vulnerability in terms of access to various goods and services. Bruce and Banister found varied individual responses to positions of vulnerability, ranging from deliberate avoidance of such communities of coping to relying on the communities, but also having to develop more individual strategies, as such communities themselves were comprised of transient members. Access to communities are not guaranteed. Individual coping methods can also mean that giving and receiving support to those in a similar position comes with the price of following membership norms. The findings enrich theoretical consideration of consumer vulnerability through highlighting the shared nature of this vulnerability in addition to the possible individual responses that emerge. This underpins the concept of communities of coping.

The final two papers share the theme of sustainability. Mukendi, Davies, Glozer and McDonagh provide a very timely systematic review of the sustainable fashion (SF) literature, setting out by asking the question "What do we know about SF in management research and where do we go from here?". Following Denyer and Tranfield (2006), they take a meta-narrative systematic literature review approach to the sustainable fashion domain across the time span 2000–2019 and review 465 papers. Their study provides an exemplary account of the process for carrying out a systematic literature review, one that will be helpful to fellow marketing researchers regardless of their research topic. Their meticulous process leads to a review of the definitions and conceptualisations of sustainable fashion, viewing these conceptualisations through the lens of both pragmatic and radical change. They offer a working definition of sustainable fashion before providing a conceptual framework organised along radical-pragmatic change and production-consumption continua. Within their framework, they place the seven themed clusters that emerged from their review of the literature: supply chains, social retail marketing, consumer behaviour, consumer practices and communities, social marketing interventions, future leaders and sustainable business models. The authors also offer six broad areas for future research drawn from their review: appealing to a wider demographic, changing shopping habits, influencing production, shaping social practices, upskilling the future and developing a fit-for-purpose labelling scheme. In doing so, they provide recommendations to practitioners, policymakers, consumers and producers for how a sustainable fashion future can be advanced.

Finally, Davies, Oates, Tynan, Carrigan, Casey, Heath, Henninger, Lichrou, McDonagh, McDonald, McKechnie, McLeay, O'Malley and Wells offer an ambitious, and, in their own words, "intentionally provocative", conceptual paper calling for the marketing discipline to

play a greater role in a sustainable future. Their conceptual paper adopts MacInnis' (2011) framework to review extant research and puts forward a new research agenda for sustainability and marketing. MacInnis's goals allow for an exploration of the dominant theoretical and methodological perspectives of the marketing sustainability field. Through the themes of sustainable people, models of alternative consumption and sustainable marketplaces they review existing literature, putting forward a fresh perspective on how to take the area forward. They argue that sustainability in marketing as a domain has been frustrated by "interlocked and self-perpetuating constraints". As such, they advocate that future research should use interdisciplinary phenomenological/socio-anthropological approaches to advance conceptual development. The use of MacInnis's (2011) framework provides an interesting way to approach a field review, revealing particular fresh insights that may not be uncovered by other more traditional means. This paper certainly embodies the bravery needed in marketing scholarship to help push our discipline forward and challenge the status quo.

No special issue is complete without acknowledging all the contributors who make it happen. Firstly, we would like to thank all contributors to the initial Academy of Marketing workshops from which this excellent set of papers emerged. We would like to thank all of the authors included here for their contributions; we think these papers will help set important research agendas for the future. We would of course like to thank all the reviewers who contributed constructive reviews, which helped craft this special issue. Finally, we would like to thank Greg Marshall, Debbie Keeling and Richard Whitfield for their support in bringing this project to fruition.

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