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COMMENTARY

The protection of rights and advancement of GenderS: In conversation with Abigail Nappier Cherup, Kevin D. Thomas, Wendy Hein, and Jack Coffin

Laurel Steinfield¹  | Martina Hutton²  |
Mohammed Cheded³  | Abigail Nappier Cherup⁴  |
Kevin D. Thomas⁵  | Wendy Hein⁶  | Jack Coffin⁷ 

¹Ivey Business School, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

²Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey, UK

³Work, and Technology, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, UK

⁴Marketing in the College of Business Administration, California State University San Marcos, San Marcos, California, USA

⁵Division of Social Sciences, UC Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, California, USA

⁶Department of Marketing, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

⁷Department of Materials, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Correspondence

Laurel Steinfield, Ivey Business School, Western University, 1255 Western Rd, London, ON, Canada.
Email: lsteinfield@ivey.ca

Abstract

In this panel discussion, we explore various ways that academics can advance work related to GenderS, intersectionality and inequities so that it has impact within academia and in society. Panelists offer practical insights, relate challenges in doing this work, and suggest avenues for alternative yet impactful dissemination of work. The purpose is to demonstrate how those interested in supporting or working in this space might move from being allies to advocates and accomplices.

KEYWORDS

advocacy, allyship, GenderS, intersectionality, transformative research

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1 | INTRODUCTION

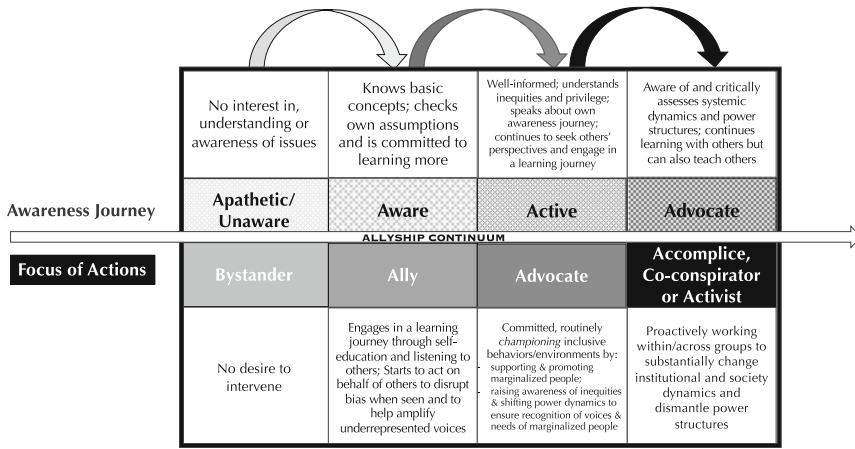
There is not a nation in the world where inequities related to gender have been eradicated (United Nations, 2023). Moreover, many nations are experiencing a reversal of progress as moral panic results in denial of inclusive measures and practices (ACLU, 2023; Barry-Hinton, 2022; Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022; Herdt, 2009; ILGA-Europe, 2023; Miles, 2022; Nagourney & Peters, 2023; Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022; Velasco, 2023), and laws or bans negate consumption choices related to reproductive rights and gender-affirming care (Bhatt et al., 2022; Costa, 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Steinfield et al., 2023; Wang & Cahill, 2018). These trends give us pause and call us to question what role academia can play in enriching the rights of GenderS and supporting the advancement of all gender/sex/ualities.

In a world where gender/sex/ual diversity is increasingly being recognized yet simultaneously denied, we acknowledge that academia has a role to play in providing knowledge that can aid in halting inequities and injustices and shifting the tide toward the achievement of equity for genders. This will not happen quickly. And it will require continuous effort from multiple constituents working in various ways. We need people that can work at the margins to keep projecting the voice of those who are marginalized and for advocacy groups to work together to build more robust insights and knowledge bases. But we also need to work on bringing the mainstream along.

As the panelists of this session make clear, there are challenges to doing this work. Yet we see it is possible based on the progress that has been achieved within our own field and the way the tide is slowly changing to be receptive to acknowledging GenderS and gender/sex/ual diversity (this special issue being a case in point), and to being critical of its own practices (e.g., Dobscha & Ostberg, 2021; Gurrieri et al., 2020; Peñalosa et al., 2023; Prothero & Tadjewski, 2021). However, to ensure this progress is inclusive means that the field also needs to move beyond the predominant White, hetero, cis, middle-class, urban perspectives of gender and misnomer of ‘gender’ to ‘women’. There is a need to incorporate a meaningful intersectionality or quare perspective (Johnson, 2001; Steinfield et al., 2019). It also calls for increasing accessibility and dissemination of our work to the wider public, which in some countries calls for a re-working of the academic system.

Change thus needs to come in many forms. To drive forward this change requires education that stems both from those in the margins relating their truths, as well as those in the mainstream taking the time to learn, listen and engage (hooks, 2000). We invite those from the dominant and mainstream groups to join in this work, and to challenge themselves to progress along the continuum from allies to advocates to accomplices and/or activists (see Figure 1). By allies we refer to those who undertake a journey of (lifelong) learning so that they can act with and on behalf of people from marginalized groups to disrupt biases and amplify underrepresented voices. Advocates build on this, referring to those who *routinely* champion inclusive environments and behaviors. Accomplices or activists go a step further. They are those who take positive, proactive actions that seek to substantially change inequities, injustices and power imbalances (Brown, 2022; Harden-Moore & Harden, 2019; Pulsely, 2023; Ragazzo, 2020).

To aid others in traversing the continuum, we drew together a panel of expert scholars who could provide insights into how we could progress conversations related to GenderS, intersectionality and inequities, the challenges faced in so doing, and theoretical perspectives that could aid in diversifying the way we think about GenderS, intersectionality, and inequities.ⁱ The insights are offered to help others understand what it feels like to be a scholar studying elements related to consumers’ gender/sex/ual identities, to comprehend the terrain and elements



Adapted from: Brown (2022), Harden-Moore & Harden (2019), Pulsely (2023), Ragazzo (2020)

FIGURE 1 Allyship-Advocate-Accomplice/Activist Continuum.

that need to change, and to recognize how scholars might ensure their research has impact, to traverse toward advocacy and activism, and to build supportive environments in organizations and academia.

The excerpts from the panel session, held on March 7, 2023 via Zoom, are based on questions we provided beforehand. The biographies of these extraordinary panelists are provided at the end of this article.

2 | ADVANCING CONVERSATIONS: A DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES

Laurel: Thank you all for coming today. Let's get started with the first question

How can we progress conversations in the mainstream of academia about the protection of rights and advancement of GenderS?

Abigail: I think engaging with people who are actually doing the work is really important. I would like to see more support at the institutional level for the dissemination to the mainstream of what we're doing—dissemination to the people who are actually doing the work. I have a personal goal that I would like to create something of value that managers could use. For example, best practices or gold standards for creating an inclusive space for different types of consumers. Something really practical people could take and put into practice. Because, at least in my research with sexual and gender minorities, people who identify as bi+, as well as consumers who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming and trans, what I'm seeing is a lot of managers are just trying to do their best and kind of going off their gut, and we don't have a lot of those best practices.

Kevin: When I saw this question, I just got stuck on that word 'mainstream.' And I have concerns around that. My experience, and why I'm now an independent scholar, is because I kept hitting my head against the very real wall of trying to expand either my institution or the field in some way and really coming up against people in positions of power where they didn't really want to change the status quo. They liked the status quo. It's working for them. And they would talk a good game, and it would seem like what they were really trying to figure out is,

how can we assimilate marginalized folks into the system that's already existing, versus how do we actually examine the system and make it more equitable for everyone.

So, my solution was to just start to build our own systems. That's where Race in the Marketplace (RIM, <https://www.rimnetwork.net/>) comes into play. I love things like GENMAC (Gender—Markets—Consumers, <https://genmac.co/>) where there is these kind of grassroots initiatives where folks are saying, well, maybe we just leave that alone and start to build things... a new vision of things that hopefully will develop more equitable places for different genders to exist.

I think there's certainly other folks that are doing a wonderful job of getting in there, and forcing the system to make changes. But it just broke me down to a space where I felt... 'I don't feel like I'm making enough change here, and so let me find a new way'. So I do think there has to be lots of approaches for this to work, but I don't think we just need to focus on 'What do we do with the mainstream?' The question is also how can we actually start to build other spaces as well?

Wendy: So, I had a really similar reaction when I read 'mainstream.' I think if our work becomes mainstream, then we've lost something.

There's a reason why we should be comfortable on the margins instead of comfortable in the center, because we want to represent, to speak, and to raise those marginalized voices. If we're in the mainstream, then we are at risk of losing sight of those who sit on the margins.

I remember, for example, a conversation I had with Pauline Maclaren, and she was extremely worried about journals like *Marketing Theory* that were featuring gender research going up in the rankings because now more mainstream marketing research is going to go into that journal. And I think that journal is a great example of how they've managed to make it more into the mainstream while still keeping that foot within the margins by representing marketing on a broader level, having balanced voices and transdisciplinary research.

But, I also get terribly frustrated when it comes to mainstream. Over the years I've been the co-chair of the marketing subject discipline for the UN Principles of Responsible Management for Education (PRME) and its gender equity working group. And whenever I'm in a sustainability global forum and we do a panel, everybody wants to talk about sustainability but nobody wants to talk about gender and sustainability. At the start of the forum there's thousands of people. And then we have our gender session, the number just goes down. I remember the last time we had it online there were 300 people left over from the previous session, and by the time we did our session there were 80 left. And every Women's Day, people start talking about how important it is to link sustainability and gender equity. But this is 1 day of the year that people want to talk about these issues, and then every other day of the year it kind of falls to the way-side. So I think there is something here of how gender needs to be much more prominent. And not just gender, but equity and issues around inclusion, exclusion... there's various different discourses and languages and terms that you can use here. But there is something much more vital that we need to bring this to much bigger discussion tables. So, there is important work to do within that mainstream.

Jack: I'm going to add to this diversity of approach. I approach this from another direction. When I did my PhD, I was heavily influenced by feminist theorists like Donna Haraway, for example, and the feminist takes on flat ontologies like actor network theory and assemblage theory, because in our field they've been dominated by the male voice. That taught me that feminist theory doesn't need to just be about women issues, just like queer theory doesn't have to just pertain to LGBTQIA+ people. Obviously, it comes from that place, and it's a situated epistemology, and it can speak very powerfully to those issues, but those theories could go anywhere.

And I think, for me, how we advanced conversations in academia is to speak that language a little bit and to highlight how theories from these spaces and from these voices can help us speak to everyone's issues. For example, like Wendy was saying, gender can add a new perspective to sustainability. Sustainability isn't a kind of neutral issue. It's a gender issue, and it's a colonial issue, and it's an ableist issue, and so on. So we need these voices to really develop our theories and to avoid this idea that there's kind of these specific groups that have issues. Because issues like sustainability, which is universal, are premised on the dominant group's perspective. Whenever we talk about universality, it's male, able bodies, White Western, urban perspectives. So, I do agree that we should avoid that mainstream metaphor in a way. We should stay at the margins and kind of spin the wheel from the margins rather than end up in the center. But I do think the center has a lot to gain from those theories at the edges, and we need to learn how to negotiate that.

And to what Kevin was saying about changing the institutions from the inside versus working outside, a question we should always ask ourselves is:

What is gained and what is lost? Is it worth getting into these forums if we lose too much along the way? Maybe sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. But I think that's a conversation we need to keep having really.

Martina: I just wanted to say that although it's important to stay in the margin and work from there, we do have to deal with the center mainstream because otherwise they will become ill equipped to deal the issues. Ignorance is the new excellence

'Let's pretend we don't know, and you can stay over there and shout all you want and be critical.' So as Abigail said, when we do need to give advice to people for consultancy projects, or for recommendations, we do have to translate it in a particular way, even though it's very frustrating and as Kevin has said, it's soul destroying.

Laurel: In sum, it seems to be like a balancing act of pushing into the mainstream, providing guidelines or insights and knowledge, while keeping a foot in the margins. We need to ensure we do not lose the centering of the voices that need to be heard by allowing the mainstream to dictate what can or cannot be said or who can and cannot speak.

There's a need to help the mainstream, as Abby and Martina say, but to also recognize that sometimes we need to build something that is outside of the mainstream like Kevin and Jack note.

It's diversity in approach, with people crossing over where needed and as appropriate.

But another consideration, which Wendy hinted at, is getting our insights to be shared more consistently. Not just getting the nod to talk about gender during Women's Month in March or to talk about race in Black History Month in February, which tends to be the case. Finding allies and advocates that can get the research profiled is really important.

3 | EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY IDENTITIES

Martina: Focusing on centering voices, can we talk about what intersections do you think need to matter more in this moment, and why?

Kevin: I would just simply say, it is context specific. But I would say the caveat to that would be that visual markers of identity seem to be very urgent—one's race or gender, their class position, for example. My research is really understanding how people are being read. And how are they reading themselves?

Abigail: I agree with that and emphasize that because we're in marketing and consumption, we should look at an intersection that includes class or socioeconomic status because of how it

affects consumption choices and behaviors. Unfortunately, that's one that I think gets overlooked a lot, or there's just sort of an assumption as to what class consumers belong.

I also think we need to look at folk who identify outside the binary or identify as trans. Unfortunately, I think this is an area that is very overlooked. I'm not sure if that's because journals aren't publishing this kind of work or people don't know how to do this kind of work. But we're doing a disservice the longer we do not engage with these folks or let them tell their story or understand their lived experiences.

Jack: For me the answer to that question seems based on what intersections matter to you. The ones that matter to me might differ from Kevin or Abigail, or from any of you. And it's from a position of privilege that I get to be able to dictate and define what matters. So, with that mind, it might not surprise you as a kind of posthumanism scholar that I think a good starting point is actually animals, which sounds very odd, because all the other intersections we talk about are humans. But this issue around hierarchies in species we see play out in colonial racist discourses have been with us for hundreds of years. The associations of women with nature or basic instincts, while men are associated with transcendence. There is an animal metaphor even in this division. We can learn a lot from analyzing that. But I also want to point out the most vulnerable group in society is often those billions and billions of animals that are eaten every year, or put through experiments. Opening ourselves up to that extra axes of intersectionality, we can learn a lot about a very voiceless group but also a lot about ourselves and how we frame each other through this species hierarchy on which we place each other to reinforce differences between groups.

Wendy: For me, I take a more macro level. It's the mechanisms that underlie the intersectional social identities and experiences of oppressions. The question is around power. Where and how does power play out in these contexts? Who has power? Who claims power? Who exerts power? Who subordinates, who marginalizes, and how do they do this? I think those are questions that we're not answering enough right now.

And it's not simply power between opposite people with different social identities. You can get power between women. You can get power across and within races, across and within classes. Even within feminisms. I feel like we're not advancing feminist agendas because we are in a power play, fighting with each other. Some of these struggles though are completely legitimate and push us to question the status quo that can come about in every movement where dominant voices dominate and some voices and agendas become marginalized.

And then I think one of the big, massive questions is around how power is destroying our planet. The capitalist patriarchy is perfectly happy to completely bust our planet and take it apart. Knowledge about how diesel and petrol are toxic and polluting has been discarded or manipulated for the sake of manufacturing and wealthy men. We need to address these issues more—the power struggles and who is benefiting and who is suffering from all of this.

4 | ENCOURAGING TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH

Mohammed: Let's continue to explore a similar idea. How can we, as consumer researchers, use our work to question political and ideological arrangements that structure gender rights?

Jack: One thing we can do is ask '*how can we broaden conversations?*' Style is substance. We should not just do all this heavy thinking, and afterwards think about style. The style question should be built in from the beginning rather than bolted on. We might do a traditional article and get it into a very prestigious journal. But let's be honest, most people don't read even the

best journals. The average person looks at Tiktok and Youtube videos. They like to engage in games. Is there a way we can engage in all these different media? Something that I've learned from a podcast that I've created with Finoal Kerrigan, called Acast (<https://shows.acast.com/marketing-stories/episodes>), is that when doing this work, which may be outside of our skillset, we should pay other people and be collaborative and engage with these other people and their skills and their networks. We got professions actors and producers involved. They made the quality better, but also their perspectives, knowledge and critique of what we were doing, from a non-academic perspective, made it more accessible.

Kevin: I'm in complete agreement with Jack.

There's also *The Conversation* as another outlet. I've worked with folks where we started blogs to help it make sense to a general audience. In a lot of my work, we partner with grassroot organizations and try to find mutually beneficial ways that our projects can help their efforts and then help our scholarly efforts.

But all this work is additional labor. And that additional labor is not gonna help you get tenure or promotion. If anything they're gonna say, 'Why are you doing this?' And so there is that pressure for you to wait to do that type of work until you have tenure. And so you're miserable until you supposedly are able to do it. It goes back to power dynamics that are at play here. Because it can become exhausting in trying to do all the things in your career you need to do to make sure that you keep your job while trying to make a difference with your work. There is extra emotional labor and time needed to just gather resources and the effort to make this stuff work. It can be really hard.

Martina: It's important though to look at the geographic context in which scholars are located. In the UK, we're measured on work having an impact and going beyond academia.

Abigail: Trying to get all this stuff done is really challenging. I am a fairly new mom. So also, just like trying to sleep and do right by my kid. It's hard.

I'm also struggling with how to disseminate that work and feel like, 'Does anybody really want to hear what I have to say?' As an academic I might want to try to publish in these journals and make it more accessible, and I believe I have something to add, but do the popular press or different outlets want to hear that?

Wendy: I completely empathize with you, Abigail. I found that community was critical for me. When I started off, I was very lucky to be in a college where gender featured outside of business. And I was part of a network, Birkbeck Institute of Social Research and the Birkbeck Institute of Gender and Sexuality, so I got to work with people like Lynne Segal and Sasha Roseneil. And they're all from different disciplines. So, I had a good tour around how gender is discussed in geography and sociology, and psychoanalysis, in all of these fields.

I think the lesson I took away is to look outside of your school. Take advantage of the resources that are, you know, outside of or within your institution. Create those networks to speak to other people. What I found is that marketing really doesn't feature in these conversations. And that can be a good thing because you can bring in something new and you bring in a new lens, and then you also get to realize, actually, what we do contribute. Correspondingly, it allows you to consider how their research can also enrich our field. I think it's often worth making this trip outside our field, having conversations with others, which can often lead to much bigger impacts and broadening that conversation.

And maybe, by doing so, we won't necessarily see ourselves as sort of marketing scholars or gender scholars, but maybe just social researchers.

Laurel: Social researchers is what we should aim to be. I've come to realize that working with systematically marginalized groups, when we think about our role in this work, it might

be to be a bridge—being a person that supports their voices, disseminating what they want to say in a way that others can hear. But that type of advocacy work does require a balancing act to meet academic expectations but also, and more importantly, the request of those we work with. And that's where forming teams is really important to help support all of this work.

Kevin: Researchers also need to make sure that they're taking their positionality into account when they're doing this work. How their position in the world and the assumptions that they bring with that positionality is impacting the work that they're doing, and how they may be impacting the types of responses that they're getting from the people that they're doing the work with.

A lot of times, when we talk about mainstream, there's a sense of neutrality and objectivity that just doesn't exist in the real world. When we're doing these types of research projects, it's really important to understand

"Even though I may see myself in a certain way, I may not be read that way, and that may not be how people are receiving me". We need to consider how that might be impacting the research we're doing.

Wendy: In terms of positionality, it's also important to not shy away from our vulnerabilities. We need to speak about these. Being a new mom shouldn't be something that you have to hide or need to disguise. It's a privilege to be able to undertake the motherhood journey. And it's a great strength to have a sleepless night and then to get up and tackle work. But it's also okay to not do it all. We need to share our experiences to normalize them. But these moments can also be a source of connection with others who are undergoing the journey of motherhood in and outside of academia, like the poem I wrote with other, mainly female, academics on adopting an ethics of care (CRIS Collective, 2023). The process was so cathartic, but it was also extremely vulnerable since we opened up to each other. It made me realize that research does not always have to come from a position of strength. We should be able to embrace our emotions, and to open up spaces for others to do the same.

Jack: Building on that, we've talked about being authors and being researchers and publishing, but we also play a role as gatekeepers and reviewers. And sometimes I see special issues and I think, *"I have something to say about this."* But then I also think there's an important role in holding back and not taking up the space of someone else that doesn't usually get a voice. Because as a White, able-bodied, English speaking guy I get a lot of voice even though I probably don't deserve it all the time. I can publish in certain spaces, but that doesn't necessarily mean I always should. My advocacy might also be accomplished by giving other people space. So what I've done a couple of times is I've written some special issue editors, and said, I'm not going to submit but I would really like to be a reviewer and to kind of help some other people. And obviously, that's invisible work. But we have that role to play as well.

Laurel: I would add to these great insights that we also play a critical role as educators, and that role has transformative potential. If we're thinking about changing academia or even organizations and society, there is a call for us to make sure that our students see the world in a more varied way, and to be aware of their privileges and systematically marginalized groups' experiences, and to note how marketing and consumer behavior can replicate inequitable power dynamics. Having those frank conversations in classrooms is very important. It can lead to awkward conversations, but it can be so meaningful and fairly easy to connect with marketing concepts. For example, if we talk about topics like market segmentation and using demographic variables, we need to teach them to not adopt stereotypes, to think more broadly about gender/sex/ualities and cross overs with other intersectional identities, and to not use segmentation to engage in unethical behaviors, like the pink tax of charging more for a feminine

looking product than a masculine looking product. If we're going to continue to teach segmentation, there's a need to do so in a way that does not perpetuate inequities or build biases into products, but rather raises awareness of the existence of marginalized and often invisible groups, such as gender-diverse consumers. Kevin has also written a great article on how to talk about race in advertising classrooms (Thomas & Jones, 2019). There are resources out there and I think we just need to encourage more people to access those resources. We can be accomplices by adopting practices within our own classrooms to bring about systemic change.

I just want to conclude by thanking you all for taking the time today to share your thoughts on how we can advance conversations about genders and the important work that needs to be done. The diversity in approaches is encouraging because it means scholars can find what works best for them, while your shared experiences give scholars an idea as to how to approach this important work. So thank you again.

Suggested reads

Want to explore more? Check out the authors on the panelists' bookshelves. They may give you a new way to think about genderS and intersectionality.

Wendy Hein

Sara Ahmed
Jeff Hern (with/without Charlotta Niemistö)
Sasha Roseneil
Sylvia Walby

Jack Coffin

Carol J. Adams
Karen Barad
Rosi Braidotti
Donna Haraway

Kevin Thomas

Combahee River Collective
E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson
Frantz Fanon
Octavia Butler

Abigail Nappier Cherup

Combahee River Collective
Patricia Hill Collins
Kimberlé Crenshaw
bell hooks

Laurel Steinfield

Siobhan Somerville
Patrick E. Johnson
Linda Tuhiwai Smith
Joan Tronto

Jasbir K. Puar
José Esteban Muñoz

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Laurel Steinfield: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Martina Hutton:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Mohammed Cheded:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Abigail Nappier Cherup:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Kevin D. Thomas:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Wendy Hein:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Jack Coffin:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing.

ORCID

Laurel Steinfield  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4981-2881>

Martina Hutton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8668-6706>

Mohammed Cheded  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3891-8402>

Abigail Nappier Cherup  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0786-5854>

Kevin D. Thomas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3613-8098>

Wendy Hein  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7830-259X>

Jack Coffin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5647-6911>

ENDNOTE

ⁱ In 2023, Jack Coffin got married. He was cognizant of the feminist argument that married names tend to reproduce the patrilineal ownership model, because one person (traditionally a woman) is symbolically gifted from father to husband via a name change. Double-barreled surnames or the retention of one's birth name do not wholly break the patrilineal logic because these names are typically inherited from fathers. A new name, chosen by the couple of equal terms, is proposed as an alternative. In 2023, Jack Coffin became Jack Waverley, as this was significant to both parties. However, here the original name Coffin is retained so that the reader can make an easier link between this conversation and Jack's earlier work in the area.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Abigail Nappier Cherup (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the College of Business Administration, California State University San Marcos. Her research interests include gender and sexuality, consumer diversity, marketplace inclusion, and socially responsible marketing.



Kevin D. Thomas (he/him) received his Ph.D. from University of Texas at Austin. He is an educator and activist scholar. Dr. Thomas critically examines how race, gender, class, (dis)ability, and sexuality are represented in marketing and experienced in the marketplace. He is co-founder of the Race in the Marketplace Research Network and co-editor of the award-winning book, *Race in the Marketplace* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).



Wendy Hein (she/her) is Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, where she researches and teaches consumption and marketing, focusing on gender and sustainability. Her work has been published in various books and articles including *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *European Journal of Marketing*.



Jack Coffin aka Jack Waverley (he/him) works at the University of Manchester. His work began by focusing on LGBTQ+ consumers and the complex dynamics of stigmatization, marginalization, empowerment, in/visibility, and more. These themes then inspired a much broader, intersectional interest, most recently including animals as a speciesist intersection.

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