

**Ignored or invisible: challenges to recruiting and researching members of marginalised communities
[Editorial]**

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Ignored or Invisible: Challenges to recruiting and researching members of marginalised communities

Whilst working on a research project with a northern city council in the UK examining household food waste, there was a realisation that participants who were more enthusiastic to participate in the research on recycling food waste tended to come from middle class, white households. We found it increasingly challenging to recruit participants from the more marginalised groups who we *also* needed to talk to and wanted to understand their lived experiences and engagement, or lack thereof with a council food waste initiative (Singh, Jones and Dean, 2025). This dilemma of engaging vulnerable and marginalised consumers coincided with the drive for greater recognition and acceptance of those marginalised. The UN amongst others including Alm and Guttormsen (2023, p304), citing Bansa, (2002), have acknowledged that “there is an increasing international effort, echoed in the business world, to alleviate the disadvantages and discrimination faced by MGP (Marginalised groups of people).

The challenges, however, are complex due to the intersectional nature of marginalised groups and the methods used to characterise these groups. Marginalisation is often used as an umbrella term to capture any groups of consumers that are sidelined and ostracised in the marketplace based on ethnicity, religious beliefs, race, lifestyle choices, gender identity, marital status, political attitudes, education level, occupation, etc. There are what Pels and Sheth (2021) describe as the ‘invisible poor’ who are underestimated due to the reliance on income as the primary measure of poverty. The need to understand the diverse cultural and behavioural practices of ethnic groups that are embedded in their own contextual milieu due to geographic, cultural and economic differences is problematic to define due to the complex methodological issues. Gender and sexuality also add to the multidimensional characteristics of marginalised groups, while health insecurities which cut across all marginalised groups

need also to be addressed. In marketing, there is a growing interest in transformative consumer research (TCR) which seeks to learn about the challenges facing marginalised and vulnerable groups through their lived experiences. At the heart of TCR is the desire and opportunities to engage with a wide range of stakeholders to address complex social problems (Ozanne et al., 2017). However, Piacentini and colleagues (2019) reveal a number of barriers that impede collaboration between marketing scholars and social impact organisations. A key finding is that perceptions of marketing as a potentially harmful for-profit practice are still prevalent and this purports to Stoeckl and Luedicke's (2015) assertion that, "critics consequentially put most of the blame for societal problems on marketers' shoulders" (p.2460).

Smith's (1999/2021) seminal work with Indigenous peoples highlights limitations of merely retelling their stories to counteract the dominant Western Scholarship. Smith argues that "taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people improve their current conditions" (Smith, 1999/2021, p3). This challenge to Western knowledge hierarchies is exacerbated by issues of trust/mistrust when recruiting and interviewing participants and related to this is the insider/outsider positionality of the researcher. Therefore, the primary aim of this special issue is to focus on the practices and strategies used when researching marginalised groups. We respond to Coffin and Hill's (2022) critique of marketing where they say there has been a fetishisation of theory to the detriment of practice (Coffin and Hill, 2022) or even more importantly impact. In the following section, we review the literature on knowledge hierarchies, trust/mistrust and insider/outsider positionality, and institutional pressures facing researchers when conducting research.

Knowledge Hierarchies

Arguably, much of the research published in academic marketing journals fails to represent the more marginalised in our society. Researchers may be reluctant to work with marginalised consumers, because they feel ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of recruiting and exploring their concerns and needs (Melrose, 2002). Crosby, McKeage, Rittenburg and Adkins, (2023) highlight the problematic nature of exploring issues faced by marginalised consumers. Most notably, asking members of marginalised groups to participate in research can be distressing and re-traumatising for individuals, however, understanding the most in need should be of paramount importance (Crosby, et al., 2023). Moreover, too few academics receive any formal training on how to collaborate with diverse stakeholders and marginalised consumer groups (MacInnis, Morwitz, Botti, Hoffman, Kozinets and Lehmann, 2020) and may therefore be deterred.

A concerning point is raised by Hill and Martin (2014, p.18) who acknowledge that, “only 15% of more than seven billion people are of interest to marketers”. Moreover, recent work by Hutton and Cappelini (2022) and others continue to highlight how marginalised voices are ignored, disrespected, and subjugated by the privileged ‘knowers’ who dominate and protect knowledge hierarchies and are afforded credibility and authority. Indeed, this is evident in institutions such as academia, as Bell Hooks (1990) explained upon entering academia. “I often feel my class background. I struggle with the politics of location – pondering what it means for individuals for underclass and poor backgrounds to enter social terrains dominated by the ethos and value if of privileged class experience” (Bell Hooks, 1990, p 89). The wilfully forgetting of parts of society is supported by class and as recently suggested by Molesworth and Cluley (2024), “it is a class privilege to have the ability to ignore the influence of class” (p.336).

The extant literature also recognises that knowledge hierarchies occur when researching marginalised groups, particularly in post-colonial research, where “Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets” and this contributes little to help the community, while actually increasing marginalisation as “Indigenous voices have been overwhelmingly silenced. (Smith, 2021, p27 and p32). A classic text by Deloria (1969/1988, p79-80) is scathing about the ‘anthropologists’. He argues that researchers come to Indian reservations in the summer “and make ‘OBSERVATIONS’, and in winter books and articles are written about their observations, reports are made and presented to government and foundations order to gain funding for the next summer. He is caustic about these endeavours as he argues that “The massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today”. He concludes that “Abstract theories produce abstract actions” (p86). Clearly marginalisation is still widespread, and knowledge hierarchies have worked to perpetuate that exclusion. The failure to engage and listen to indigenous and other marginalised groups is only just starting to be addressed in research (Carnes, 2011, Crooks, Taylor, Law, Campbell, and Miller, 2022).

Indeed, Skeggs argues (1997, p.2) that “theory can be radically transformed when others are let in on the conversations”. In disciplines such as health, criminology, and sociology, voices of the silenced are encouraged to speak, and more importantly are listened to. For instance, MacDonald, Sheldrick, Webster and Simpson, (2005) focus on ‘socially excluded’ young adults; Beattie, Daker-White, Gifford and Means, (2005) reveal the gaps in dementia service provision for marginalised groups, including young people; and Skeggs, (1997) critically examines the notion of respectability amongst young working-class women. In education, Bhopal and Myers’ (2016) focus was on home education and the Romani and

traveller community. However, Bhopal (2010) has also highlighted the challenges of recruiting marginalised groups for participation, including how outsiders can gain access through trusted bodies providing support, or the different approaches used to recruit participants but eventually resorting to snowball sampling. This was apparent in our research where we were tasked to recruit both middle class consumers who were relatively easy to recruit, food waste disposal was enthusiastically embraced by our participants. They exhibited performative behaviours demonstrating their commitment to environmental issues. In contrast, the marginalised groups were extremely difficult to contact due to distrust of the researchers as outsiders and the project itself which was initiated by the local council (Singh et al., 2025). This lack of trust of unfamiliar researchers and concerns that data collected from the project could for instance, provide landlords with information that could potentially undermine their tenancy.

Merton (1972) argues that as researchers, their positionality as outsiders, unfamiliar with their participants lived experiences or insiders with shared experiences can affect the authenticity of knowledge production. Arguments that outsider positionality enhances analytical detachment enabling objective knowledge production while in contrast, insider privileges deep cultural understanding which builds an authentic picture of the phenomenon under study. Having supposed ‘insider’ status is also problematic, and Mirza (1998) acknowledges that being a black feminist doesn’t always give access to black communities.

For Berger (2013) positionality is not guaranteed to provide better research outcomes, he argues that reflexivity is crucial to recognise our own positionality and how these impacts upon our data interpretation and knowledge production. This tension between insider and outsider positionality has also been critiqued for being trapped in a simplistic binary as positionality is far more nuanced. Indeed, it is more fluid due to temporality, context and research project process (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

For early career researchers, these complexities are often hidden, as published journal articles frequently present their research “as a seamless, neat and linear process”, which obscures the “muddle, confusion, mistakes and obstacles and errors” (Boden et al., 2005, p70, cited in Ortlipp, 2008) and to be transparent about their positionality they need to be aware that they and the object of the study are entwined throughout the project duration (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Reflexivity is crucial during this process as the researcher must be aware of their experiences, values, beliefs, identities, and assumptions, this understanding is crucial for navigating their positionality (Berger, 2013; Jacobson and Musafa, 2019). These factors influence the research design, recruitment, data collection and analysis and presenting the findings (Piedra, 2023).

This special issue aims were to document marketing and consumer researchers’ experiences and practices and seek to understand how they address the challenges faced when designing, recruiting, interviewing, analysing and disseminating their research. In addition, we sought to broaden the study to include researchers’ experiences along the research process; to understand how knowledge hierarchies impact on research design and outcome; the impact of institutional requirements on choices, demands for funding and publications; and to examine the power relations between researcher and participant in an interview situation. Indeed, this power often extends during the analysis stage of research by researchers who privilege their knowledge over participants and does little to ameliorate marginalisation of the groups they are researching. Therefore, our special issue presents researchers’ strategies and tactics for recruiting marginalised groups; explain problematic issues when devising a research strategy; identify the challenges when meeting and engaging participants during the interview process; analysing data where power relations may be unbalanced and knowledge hierarchies are embedded; and highlighting how the less than

linear process of research is the actuality and how researchers can regain momentum (and their sanity) by adaptation and flexibility in their processes.

Our special issue starts with a commentary from Martina Hutton whose work focuses on transformative consumer research and sustainability. Her published work examines marginalized groups dealing for instance, with extreme poverty (Hutton, Corus, Dorsey, Minton, Roux and Blocker, 2020), researching social justice (Hutton and Heath, 2020), and epistemic in/justice, (Hutton and Cappellini, 2022). Her article ‘Method Interrupted’ discusses the research training provided for PhD marketing candidates, early career researchers in business schools which teaches objectivity and detachment. She argues that when working with marginalised groups this “Methodolatry, scholars are unable, unwilling (or perhaps feel that they are not permitted) to connect with the realities faced by their participants”. Hutton argues that this approach leaves the marginalized voiceless as the researchers fall back to their own perceptions of marginalisation, but they have no lived experience of this. This penetrates through the analysis and dissemination of the work, so existing knowledge hierarchies continue to maintain the status quo and also disrupt the relationship between researcher and participant. An alternative approach Hutton is advocating is that the participant engages in analysis which “halts and disrupts the flow of scientific logic underpinning conventional methods which rely on predictability”. Moreover, this partnership enables findings that resonate with the participants’ lived experiences. This type of research runs contra to traditional mainstream research which has an organisational logic to it, to understanding what Hutton describes as ‘disfluency’. To dare to question phenomena we are not familiar with and embrace the stories told and work with those to understand the complexity rather than the sanitized, oversimplification of marginalized lives. We would like to thank Martina for agreeing to write this excellent and thought provoking commentary.

The following section of this introduction briefly outlines the researchers' contributions and their experiences of working with various marginalized groups. The collection of articles explain how the authors addressed their difficulties while researching marginalised groups, including: creating an inclusive, supportive research environment; reducing tensions between researcher/institution/ participants; focusing on challenges facing researchers from an institutional perspective; and the issues facing researchers relating to positionality with contextually specific articles including Brazil, Nigeria and Romania.

Carlini, Milne, Kendall, Tobiano and Muir's article 'From Participants to Partners: Advancing Consumer Involvement in Transformative Research' focuses on placing the marginalised consumer deep within the research process working alongside the researchers, recognising the importance of their lived experiences. Indeed, their lived experiences can be seen as expertise. Research partnerships foreground the needs of the participants and are crucial to ensure engagement and achieving an optimal outcome for their community. In contrast, the traditional methods merely use the consumers lived experiences as data which limits their engagement with research design, discussion guide, analysis and dissemination. Thus, researchers retain their academic privilege. Using the LEGO Serious Play qualitative model they sought to ameliorate the tensions inherent within this consumer/researcher dynamic, particularly relating to emotional or sensitive research and then can facilitate collaboration amongst team members. This research collaboration produced the 'Research Partnership for Transformative Impact' addresses "the complexities of balancing interconnected demands and resources for researchers and consumers, aiming to foster more equitable and impactful research practices. This research highlights the challenges facing transformative researchers, which firstly are personal and collaborative, "recognising and valuing the diverse contribution of all consumers" and making space to collaborate, working together, built on trust, respect and mutual contribution to the research process. While this is

also the goal of the researcher, they are also vulnerable due to the institutional goals that they as academics are required to fulfil. Thus, collaboration is also an “organisational and instrumental necessity ... that serves the project’s goals”, not to mention the institutions.

Leading on from Carlini et al’s work, Lehtonen and Yang delve deeper into the issues facing researchers who seek to understand the lived experiences and practices of marginalised or stigmatized groups. They interviewed 26 researchers from marketing and management disciplines using practice theory as the theoretical framework. Their findings indicated tensions related to their own positionality, for instance, the challenge of remaining objective reduces the emotional connectedness which may have a detrimental effect on the participant; goal tensions emerge from the personal goals of the researcher which may not coincide with the goals of the institution who is funding the research and also how to maintain academic rigour in a situation where ‘goal tradeoffs’ need to be made as the maintenance between “broad inquiry, ethical responsibility and community expectations” needs to be managed. Moreover, the stress that comes from the interview itself as the participant becomes more vulnerable both before and after the research interview needs also needs to be managed. Institutional tension emerges from the researchers’ goals and institutional expectations and Carlini et al’s. work also references these tensions. Lehtonen & Yang also point to dissemination of research when working on marginalised topics where journals are largely only interested in mainstream or articles that focus on the interest at the time. The push from the institution to ‘fit’ marginalised research into the mainstream literature is challenging but “it is important to find ways to produce dialogue” that can reveal the voices of the marginalised. Nevertheless, tensions between how the institutional focus and publication formalities test the relationship between researcher and participant. Lehtonen & Yang’s conclusions are that business schools should consider how research can have impact and build trust among marginalised groups.

Da Rocha and do Nascimento's work focus on research conducted in an emerging economy using a meta-analysis of the methods used to research poverty in Brazil. Their work "Unveiling the Unheard Voices of Low-Income Consumers in an Emerging Market" examines the challenges to researchers when collecting data from marginalised groups namely low income consumers. This article is a must read for early career researchers as it documents the difficulties faced when designing research projects, particularly as in the case of poverty when there is no clear definition of what poverty actually is; selecting participants; determining research questions (and revising after piloting); the problems of accessing the participants due to issues of trust, the location of the interview, and importantly the safety of the researcher in that environment. Moreover, challenges during the interview, include understanding the context within the participants lived experience, and power relations. The extant research in Brazil focuses primarily on interpretive methods so verbatim transcription and careful analysis to reveal the participants' voices is crucial. Thus, during this analysis process researchers' need to be mindful of the embedded knowledge hierarchies and epistemic injustice. They conclude that poverty must be considered in context, particularly in emerging markets as a one size fits all research design will fail to reveal the complexities of poverty in consumption practices.

Lisandru and Galalae's contribution addresses the call to utilise affective research methodologies to reveal how emotions can shape knowledge production. Their work, "Researching with Discomfort: Using Affective Research Methodologies to Construct Knowledge about Marginalised groups" with the Romani people, a group marginalised who face exclusion in society and the marketplace. They discuss their discomfort when talking to Roma activists and Roma participants, their shame of their lack of understanding of the Roma condition, history and epistemic injustice. Their positionality as 'outsiders', someone without direct knowledge of Roma lived experiences caused anxiety and disrupted their study. This

positionality during fieldwork such when attending activist events etc. to talk to participants, and made them consider their approaches to potential participants, their questions and the importance of reflexivity.

Arangebi and Moorlock's cross-cultural research, "Finding Common Ground: Transcending the Insider-Outsider Position in Consumer Research", touches again on positionality as they conceptualise the Positionality Spectrum. This recognises that the Insider/Outsider dichotomy is more fluid with an 'inbetween' position. They argue that positionality in cross-cultural research especially, is dynamic during the research process. A multicultural research team is vital to ensure that interpretations of the data are elucidated and epistemically clarified through discussion with the team. Moreover, engagement with participants to confirm meanings follows the increasingly utilised co-creation of findings highlighted in Carlini et al. and Lisandru & Galalae. For Arangebi & Moorlock it is crucial to share a collective reflexivity among the research team which recognises their positionality. Their conclusion claims that each component in the model suggest that there are just moments of insiderness/betweenness and outsiderness determined by roles, engagement, context and most importantly sense-making.

Azikiwe and Hurst's contribution to the special issue also addresses the issues faced by researchers in a cross cultural and post-colonial context. Their focus addresses the issues related to recruitment and interviewing marginalised service sector workers. They recognise the fluidity of their position as researchers recruiting participants and in the way in which they develop their research design but also speak to the emotion that is inherent when researching marginalised groups. They faced similar challenges to recruiting as other authors in the special issue have outlined Azikiwi as an insider sharing language but outsiders due to socio economic status, thus building trust and using language was foremost in their strategy for recruitment. However, as Azikiwe was familiar with the research context some aspects

that emerged during discussions were not examined further, those quotidian aspects of life and culture were taken for granted rather than explored more deeply. This contrast highlights the insider's duality as a researcher. As trust was built this encouraged a more open dialogue and revealed the subaltern position of workers in the service sector, their mistreatment, their vulnerability and the shame of being poor was foregrounded in this relationship of serving the rich. Azikiwe and Hurst suggest a balance between empathy and analytical clarity. They conclude with a call to recognise the "multi-layered power dynamics that unfold during the research process" and the fluidity of the insider and outsider positionality.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the authors for their contribution to this special issue and also to the reviewers who gave their time to provide guidance and support for the articles. We hope the articles will add to the increasing body of literature on marginalised groups and believe we have addressed a range of challenges for researchers when conducting research amongst these groups. There were a number of issues that were raised in these articles, firstly the challenges faced by researchers by their institution who are increasingly compelled to adhere to the measures of quality, financial constraints, and demands for impactful research. We have seen the development of transformative consumer research and consumer culture theory consider impact and we hope that the challenges and reluctance to support these often more niche areas of research are helped by this special issue to support early career researchers who wish to engage in this area of research. Leading on from this the challenges facing researchers when attempting to disseminate their work is highlighted by Lehtonen et al. We also wish to emphasise the importance of understanding how positionality impacts on participant/researcher engagement. Finally, we hope that this special issue helps new researchers understand that research isn't just asking a few people some questions, or handing out a questionnaire, these articles illuminate the challenges and issues that emerge

when researching marginalised groups and hopefully provide some signposts that reduce/embrace the disruption inherent in the research process.

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