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# **Toward (and Beyond) LGBTQ+ Studies in Marketing and Consumer Research**

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*“For this field of research to progress, it is essential for scholars to better address the needs of the entire LGBT community.”*

Ginder and Byun (2015, p. 839)

This chapter provides a critical review of research concerning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Queer, and other non-heterosexual people (LGBTQ+)<sup>1</sup> in the field of marketing and

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<sup>1</sup> While many phenomena are complex, dynamic, and contingent, sexual identities are a particularly contested discursive terrain (see Ghaziani, 2017; Weeks, 2007, 2017). We understand sexuality as a fluid entanglement of desires, practices, and identity propositions that are continually negotiated by individuals and collectives. These characteristics pose a challenge to researchers seeking a parsimonious but accurate label that encompasses all non-heterosexual sexualities. The acronym LGBTQ+ refers to the five main identity categories within this collective - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, and Queer. Trans\* is the umbrella term used by those who do not identify with the gender identity that they were assigned at birth (known as cis people; ‘trans-’ stems from the Latin word for ‘across’, while its antonym ‘cis-’ refers to ‘this side of’). Words like transgender, transsexual, and transvestite are also used, but each has a different (and often controversial) meaning (Devor & Dominic, 2015). The asterisk (\*) is borrowed from computer sciences where it represents a wildcard placeholder, meaning that trans\* encompasses everyone who does not identify as ‘cis’. The ‘+’ is used to appreciate that even these five broad labels do not encompass the full variety of sexual and gender subjectivities, and can refer to asexual or questioning people, heterosexual allies, and intersexuals, amongst others. As discussed in the “Future Frontiers” section below,

consumer research (hereafter consumer research) and suggests trajectories for future inquiry. It is intended to inspire researchers and stimulate classroom discussion. Our analysis is written from a perspective that is sympathetic to Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2007, 2015), insofar as we seek to understand LGBTQ+ consumers and markets within their historical and cultural contexts. However, we hope this text is also useful to a broader church of researchers (Cova & Elliott, 2008).

From the mid 1990s consumer researchers have engaged with non-heterosexual consumers, their consumption, and the markets coalescent around them (e.g. Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008). Such research has, for example, argued for the existence of a distinct market segment for non-heterosexual consumers (e.g. Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996), studied media and advertising representations of non-heterosexual consumers (e.g. Oakenfull, McCarthy, & Greenlee, 2008; Tsai, 2004), and explored attitudes towards representations of non-heterosexual identities (e.g. Oakenfull, 2013; Tuten, 2006). Researchers have also studied the identity work and consumer behavior of non-heterosexual consumers, mostly from a subculture theory-enabled perspective (e.g. Kates, 2002; Visconti, 2008).

Ginder and Byun (2015) have provided a thorough and detailed review of the research to date. However, their objective was not to identify or address the underlying assumptions and outlying limitations of this research area as a whole. In contrast, our critical reading set out to acknowledge that while consumer researchers have provided many valuable insights, five areas of knowledge remain underdeveloped avenues for future research:

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acknowledging this open-endedness is particularly important when writing about sexuality and gender in contemporary consumer cultures.

- 1) Most existing research was conducted in urban Western contexts and is grounded in Anglo-American readings of LGBTQ+ history, in which the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York feature as *the* watershed event in ‘gay’ history. Studies based on the histories of other countries and regions are lacking in consumer research.
- 2) Consumer researchers have focused on middle-class, cis-gendered gay men, largely ignoring lesbian, bisexual, trans\*, queer, questioning, and other non-heterosexual people.
- 3) Previous consumer research has not sufficiently explored how sexuality intersects with race, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, and other markers of difference. Instead, sexual orientation and identity has been treated as an isolated variable that sufficiently explains LGBTQ+ consumer behaviour, rather than as intersectional phenomena (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015).
- 4) Consumer researchers have assumed that non-heterosexuals are stigmatized and marginalized, and that this drives their consumption as subcultural ‘identity work’. Yet, given the social progress and legal protections achieved in many Western societies over the last two decades, it becomes an open empirical question to what extent such assumptions still hold.
- 5) Important insights into LGBTQ+ consumers’ life-worlds, and into contemporary sexualities more broadly, have emerged in adjacent academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and geography. Notwithstanding some promising work in

progress (which we will discuss in the final section of this chapter), consumer researchers have yet to engage with these important findings and explore their relevance for markets and consumption.

Our objectives in this chapter are to unpack these areas of potential development in more detail, and then to provide suggestions for how future research might address these. We have organized this chapter into three main sections.

First, we offer an alternative historical perspective on the emergence of LGBTQ+ subjectivities as market-mediated identities originating in Weimar Berlin (Beachy, 2010, 2014). This socio-historical vantage point remains unexplored in consumer research, but facilitates re-interpretations of existing consumer research. Second, building on this alternative historical perspective, we offer a critical overview of the epistemic-discursive status quo in consumer research as it relates to LGBTQ+ people. In this second section we also explicate the five areas of development outlined above in more detail. Third, in response to these outlined areas of development we suggest a five-fold agenda for future research, one which we hope will advance academic and practitioner understandings of sexualities, genders, markets, and consumption.

## **A (European) History of LGBTQ+ Identities**

Same-sex desires and sexual practices are timeless across human history, but identity categories like lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer are arguably modern phenomena (Foucault, 1978; Katz, 1995; Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 2017). Sociologists of sexuality have argued that desire, intimacy, and sexuality are historically-shaped concepts, and that cultural understandings, practices, and norms have varied substantially across time and space (see Weeks, 2017 for an introduction).

The historian Robert Beachy (2010, 2014) traces the genesis of ‘the homosexual’ as a distinct subject position back to late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany, where sexology as a scientific discipline emerged. It was during this time that early sexologists first studied same-sex desires, drawing primarily on medical and scientific terminology, and outlined accounts of homosexuality and bisexuality as innate and biologically grounded, albeit pathologized, phenomena (Krafft-Ebing, 1886). The legitimacy of science, and the ‘expert knowledge’ it produced, laid the discursive foundations for later understandings of non-heterosexual sexualities as innate and natural attributes of individuals, rather than as products of a failed upbringing, weak character, or moral despicableness (Weeks, 1985). Thus, early sexologists contributed to the social construction of the modern sexual subject through the discursive demarcation of categories such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ by means of scientific and medical expert language; categories which later became the foundation for LGBTQ+ identity politics (D’Emilio, 1998; Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 2002).

The first attempts to depathologize and decriminalize homosexuality in Germany, where sexual acts between men had been punishable by law since 1872, date back to early sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868 – 1935) and his fellows at the progressive Berlin ‘Institute of Sexual

Sciences' ("Institut für Sexualwissenschaft"). In 1897, Hirschfeld founded the world's first gay rights organization, the 'Scientific-Humanitarian Committee' ("Wissenschaftlich-Humanitäres Komitee"). Although this first wave gay liberation movement ultimately failed to succeed in its endeavour, by the end of the First World War Berlin was widely considered the most sexually liberal city in the Western world (Beachy, 2014).

The flourishing bohemian Weimar Berlin - with its cabarets, theatres, bars, cinemas, nightclubs, and expressionist art scene - spawned a vibrant liberal culture that attracted people with same-sex desires from across the world (Beachy, 2010, 2014). Within this progressive spirit a diverse range of marketplace offers emerged for those with non-normative tastes, shrouded by the anonymity of the big city. The co-evolution of this commercial environment with a new subjectivity of the "sexual citizen" (Weeks, 1998, p. 35) facilitated the creation of an early consumer culture in which sexual diversity could flourish.

While underground marketplace offerings structured around same-sex desires also existed in other European metropolises before World War II (Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Tamagne, 2006), interwar Berlin is arguably the birthplace of what consumer researchers would later refer to as the market-mediated construction of LGBTQ+ consumer identities (e.g. Kates & Belk, 2001). Tragically, during the Third Reich much of this early market infrastructure was destroyed, as the Nazis raided and destroyed Hirschfeld's institute, tightened laws on male homosexuality, and systematically persecuted gay men (von Wahl, 2011).

Homosexuality was gradually decriminalized in North America and most European countries during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Non-heterosexual life in North American cities such as New York, as urban sociologist Amin Ghaziani (Ghaziani, 2015, p. 305) notes,

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<sup>2</sup> For a full list of decriminalization dates, and a comprehensive review of the legal status of non-heterosexual sexualities by countries and territories, see the ilga (2016) report on state-sponsored homophobia.

predominantly existed in secret and scattered urban spaces during the “closeted era” (see also D’Emilio, 1993). During much of the twentieth century, non-commercial places such as parks and public toilets were also appropriated for clandestine same-sex meetings (Taylor, 2010). These places allowed for anonymous sexual encounters without imposing the need to affiliate oneself with an LGBTQ+ identity and the widespread stigma attached to it.

Formal decriminalization, increasing urbanization, and the individualization of lifestyles after World War II were important prerequisites for the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, which are widely considered the key event that ignited the post-war LGBTQ+ civil rights movement<sup>3</sup> (Carter, 2004; Edsall, 2003; Halperin, 2002). It is worth noting that several bar riots occurred in the USA at the same time, but none attained “the mythic stature of Stonewall” (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, p. 725). This suggests that researchers might benefit from looking beyond Stonewall as the sole defining moment of LGBTQ+ history, as we discuss in the final section of this chapter. This coordinated and public resistance of LGBTQ+ citizens against oppression and discrimination at Stonewall inspired post-war political activism on both sides of the Atlantic, and paved the road for the sexual identity politics of the following decades (Adam, Duyvendak, & Koruwel, 1999; D’Emilio, 1993; Warner, 1993; Weeks, 2007).

Organized political resistance against oppression from heteronormative mainstream culture gained momentum in North America and Western Europe throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Faderman, 2015; Flynn, 2017; Pretzel & Weiß, 2013). At the same time, commercial ecosystems structured around non-heterosexual identities formed. These comprised of bars, clubs, bathhouses, community centres, porn theatres, professional service providers, and

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<sup>3</sup> At the time, and in the decades following Stonewall, this civil rights movement was typically referred to as the ‘gay’ civil rights movement, later adapted to the ‘gay and lesbian’ civil rights movement (Peñaloza, 1996). Looking back from our historical vantage point, and with the benefit of present-day discourses, we prefer the term LGBTQ+ because drag queens, bisexuals, and trans\* people also protested alongside their gay male and lesbian allies.



residential neighbourhoods (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Branchik, 2002; Ghaziani, 2014; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005).

The spatial concentration of these marketplaces created self-contained districts that served as the material epicenters for fledgling non-heterosexual subcultures (Branchik, 2002; Ghaziani, 2014, 2015; Nash, 2006, 2013). Some of the most (in)famous districts include London's Soho, San Francisco's Castro, New York's Greenwich Village, or Berlin's Schöneberg. Surrounded by pervasive stigma, discrimination, and legal inequalities, these urban 'ghettos' provided members of sexual minorities with a safe space for coping with minority stress, but also for the refinement and celebration of distinct subcultural modes of symbolic expression (Ghaziani, 2015; Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001).

Since the 1990s, many countries have moved forward on the issues of anti-discrimination legislation for LGBTQ+ citizens, including the legal recognition of same-sex couples through civil unions or full marriage rights (ilga, 2016). Representations of non-heterosexual identities in popular culture (such as literature, media, film, and television) also became considerably more diverse and balanced during this time (see for example GLAAD, 2016; Peele, 2011). It was arguably no coincidence that from the 1990s onward marketing practitioners and consumer researchers started to show interest in non-heterosexuals as 'consumers'. This led to a surge in publications and an attendant proliferation of scholarly discourses, both of which we will discuss in the next section.

## **LGBTQ+ Consumer Research**

In their systematic review Ginder and Byun (2015, p. 823) identified four main research streams related to non-heterosexual consumers: (1) “the viability of the gay and lesbian market”, (2) “the nature of gay/lesbian-targeted media and advertising”, (3) “consumer responses to gay/lesbian-targeted advertising”, and (4) “consumer behaviour and attitudes among gays and lesbians”. We will briefly recap these streams before identifying the five undeveloped areas that emerged from our own critical review.

First, studies that investigate whether the gay and lesbian market is “viable” have done so by describing the main features of gay and lesbian consumers, as well as assessing whether they constitute a distinct market segment (Ginder & Byun, 2015, p. 823). While our historical perspective on Weimar Berlin (above) suggests that such markets already existed almost a century earlier, consumer researchers first described the gay and lesbian market as a “dream market” (Peñaloza, 1996, p. 10) in the mid 1990s, spurring a proliferation of homosexual advertising images in gay-targeted media (Branchik, 2007; Chasin, 2000).

Grounded in an understanding of lesbian and gay consumers as a stigmatized and politicized minority (Holt, 1997), Keating and McLoughlin (2005, p. 131) postulated that markets for non-heterosexual consumers were “market[s] based on identity”, particularly identity-as-difference from heterosexual consumers. Urban, middle-class gay males were described as highly-educated ‘double-income-no-kids’ consumers (or DINKS) with an elevated inclination to spend their above-average disposable income (Kates, 1999; Lukenbill, 1995). Notably lesbians were not framed as DINKS because women typically earned less than men in many economies (Gudelunas, 2011). However, not everyone was convinced by the notion of the dream market.

Several scholars suggested that such accounts of lesbian and gay consumers were severely oversimplified, overstated, and exclusionary (Gudelunas, 2011; Kates, 1999; Peñaloza, 1996).

The second stream of research explores how gay and lesbian-targeted advertising and media portrayals have changed over time, and how these representations affected the evolution of the gay and lesbian market (Ginder & Byun, 2015). This literature differentiates between implicit ‘*gay-vague*’ and explicit ‘*out-of-closet*’ advertising (Tsai, 2004). Gay-vague ads are suggestive of marketers’ wariness to alienate heterosexual consumers (DeLozier & Rodrigue, 1996), targeting gay and lesbian consumers via ambiguous imagery that may not be readily identified by heterosexual readers (Borgerson, Schroeder, Blomberg, & Thorssén, 2006; Oakenfull et al., 2008). This strategy is also described as ‘purposeful polysemy’ (Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson, 2010; Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2012).

Out-of-closet advertising clearly depicts LGBTQ+ themes or iconography (Tsai, 2012). However, regardless of which form of advertising media organizations chose to use they generally adhered to heterosexual gender norms (Branchik, 2007; Kates, 1999); male images draw on the archetype of the young, bare-chested, muscular Caucasian (Marshall, 2011), whereas female imagery depict women as ‘lipstick lesbians’ (i.e., hyper-feminine). Masculine lesbians and those identifying as bisexual or trans\* were virtually non-existent in commercial representations (Tsai, 2004), at least until very recently.

The third body of research investigates how consumers “interpret and respond to gay/lesbian-oriented advertising” (Ginder & Byun, 2015, p. 825). Studies that fall under this third category describe gay and lesbian consumers as an interpretative community (Fish, 1980; Hall, 1980), in which members use consumption and advertising texts to negotiate their dual identities as

members of the community but also as members of mainstream (heterosexual) society (Hooten, Noeva, & Hammonds, 2009; Oakenfull et al., 2008; Visconti, 2008).

Drawing on reader-response theory (Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Scott, 1994), these studies also explore the concept of ‘gay-friendliness’ in adverts (Kates, 2000; Oakenfull, 2013; Tuten, 2006). Scholars assume that gays and lesbians are motivated by a strong desire for acceptance, and argue that ads fulfil a social and political function for these disenfranchised groups (Kates, 2000; Tsai, 2004). In return, such groups offer durable brand loyalty (Hooten et al., 2009; Kates, 2004; Tuten, 2006). Research suggests that while LGBTQ+ consumers are becoming more cynical of ‘gay-friendly’ adverts (Gudelunas, 2011), the emotional legacy of homophobia encourages these consumers to welcome even highly stereotypical portrayals in their quest for social acceptance (Oakenfull et al., 2008; Tuten, 2006). This literature also explores the mixed reactions of heterosexual consumers to various forms of gay/lesbian advertising (e.g. Borgerson et al., 2006; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2004).

The fourth research stream considers gay/lesbian consumer behaviors and attitudes (Ginder & Byun, 2015). An impactful body of research has conceptualized LGBTQ+ consumers as subcultural consumers.<sup>4</sup> First proposed by Peñaloza (1996), it was Steven Kates (2000, 2002, 2003, 2004) who contributed substantially to understanding gay men as subcultural consumers. This work inspired others to draw on the subculture concept either implicitly or explicitly (e.g. Hsieh & Wu, 2011; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Rinallo, 2007; Visconti, 2008).

Through the concept of subculture, Kates (2002) refines and extends Holt’s (1997, p. 341) notion of gay men as a “highly stigmatised and politicized” community, one which has

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<sup>4</sup> In consumer research, subcultures of consumption are understood as clearly distinguishable subgroups of society which share (i) particular consumption practices or brand commitments; (ii) values and beliefs which are different from outside mainstream culture; (iii) unique language, codes, rituals, and means of symbolic expression; (iv) a common social identity; and (v) hierarchical social structures that distinguish between novices and experts, central and peripheral members (e.g. Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

historically suffered from criminalization and pathologization (see above). However, Kates (2002, p. 383) contrasts with Holt by acknowledging the “protean quality” of gay consumption practices and meanings. Consumption, according to Kates (2002), enables gay consumers to express individuality, while upholding the symbolic boundaries that demarcate gay subculture from outside mainstream culture, hereby creating a safe subcultural space, free from stigma and discrimination.

As Rinallo (2007) and Visconti (2008) observed several years later, some consumption practices coded as ‘gay’ had become appropriated by (heterosexual) mainstream culture. Interestingly, gay men “seem to enjoy the diffusion of the ‘gay vagueness’ trend in society and appreciate it [...] as a mechanism through which they can gain standing in society” (Rinallo, 2007, p. 89), rather than feeling their subcultures threatened by mainstream co-optation. Both Rinallo (2007) and Visconti (2008) suggest that non-heterosexual communities and cultures are fragmenting and de-homogenizing. It remains the objective of future research to theorize the implications of these blurring symbolic boundaries and increasing ‘internal’ fragmentation for LGBTQ+ consumer collectives, identities, and subcultures.

Looking across these four research streams, we identify five underdeveloped areas for future conceptual and empirical research.

*First*, most of the studies mentioned above were conducted in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or in other Western(ized) countries (e.g. Borgerson et al., 2006; Kates, 2003). Where historical evidence is presented to provide cultural context it almost always focuses on the post-Stonewall Anglo-American LGBTQ+ movement. Our Germanic history provides a rare exception, but more studies adopting alternative historicizations are needed to deconstruct the implicit Anglo-American ethnocentrism of LGBTQ+ research. We also note that this body of

consumer research is largely urban-centric, focusing on consumers in Gay Villages and other inner-city environments.

*Second*, consumer researchers have focused largely on middle-class, cis-gendered gay men, despite early warnings against such a bias (e.g. Kates, 1999). Other members of the LGBTQ+ designation have remained largely absent from scholarly discourses.

*Third*, and related to the second point, consumer researchers have focused on sexuality and gender largely in isolation from other socio-cultural categories such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, and disability, amongst others (e.g. middle-classed, cis-gendered, *white* men). How consumers negotiate subject positions at the intersections of such categories has become increasingly important to consumer researchers (e.g. Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015), but has only recently been introduced to those studying LGBTQ+ consumers (e.g. Nölke, 2017).

*Fourth*, consumer researchers have treated non-heterosexuals as a socially marginalized collective that has few spaces for, or moments of, respite from stigma (e.g. Kates, 2002; Kates & Belk, 2001). This is asynchronous with other disciplines where it has been recognised that the sociocultural landscape has become much more fluid and nuanced.

*Fifth*, sociologists and geographers (amongst others) have begun to address the fragmentation of sexual identities and their cultural disentanglement from sexual practices. Consumer researchers need to engage with the implications of such findings for markets and consumption. Creating interdisciplinary connections is of paramount and topical importance. The following section will explore some possible ways that consumer researchers could begin to develop these promising areas for future LGBTQ+ research.

## Future Frontiers for LGBTQ+ Consumer Research

### *Beyond Urban Anglo-American Cultures*

Visser (2013, p. 273) argues that most geographical theories were “derived from a small number of Anglo-American scholars describing a very limited geographical reality.” Similar geographical centring can be identified in LGBTQ+ consumer research. Rinallo (2007), Visconti (2008) and Hsieh and Wu (2011) are trailblazers in reaching beyond North America and the UK, with their examination of Italy’s and Taiwan’s local gay cultures, respectively. Yet their contributions alone are not enough to counterbalance the Anglo-American dominance in the literature; more studies, especially those with a postcolonial or ‘global south’ agenda (Thompson, Arnould, & Giesler, 2013), would be beneficial. In the spirit of Karababa and Ger (2010) we have tried to offer a glimpse of an alternative historicization of LGBTQ+ consumer subjectivities as an example of what future inquiries could achieve.

Another source of inspiration is Cardoso’s (2009) comparative study of same-sex behaviour in Brazil, Thailand, and Turkey, which breaks beyond familiar European archetypes. As Cardoso leaves the market and consumption implications of these cultural differences unexplored, consumer researchers could address this knowledge gap through comparative studies of their own. However, such comparative studies may wish to follow Chelekis and Figueiredo (2015) in treating countries and regions as emergent socio-historical phenomena rather than taken-for-granted geo-cultural entities to compare. This theorization would sensitize scholarly attention to the questions of *why* cultural differences regarding sexuality, gender, markets, and consumption emerge and *how* they endure or evolve.

Consumer research in Anglo-American contexts could benefit from looking beyond the spatial contexts of urban centres (Coffin, Banister, & Goatman, 2016). For instance, Vandecasteele and Geuens (2009) provide evidence that many ‘characteristics’ of gay men, such as a preference for innovative consumption, are actually shaped by their urban lifestyles but erroneously attributed to their sexuality by researchers and other commentators. Geographers have studied rural and suburban sexualities for a number of years (Binnie & Valentine, 1999; Smith & Holt, 2005; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2007). Such research demonstrates that while urbanisation contributed to the historical evolution of sexuality, gender, markets, and consumption (Branchik, 2002; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005), LGBTQ+ life exists in suburbs and villages too. The urban-centricity of existing consumer research may delimit and bias our understanding of sexuality and gender, especially if LGBTQ+ lifestyles in suburban or rural spaces differ significantly from their urban counterparts. We therefore call to expand the geographical scope of consumer research to broaden the list of sexual identities included in our academic discourses.

### *Beyond Gay Men*

Our review has also highlighted how the existing research has focused predominantly on middle-class, cisgender, white gay men, with only cursory nods to the rest of the LGBTQ+ acronym (e.g. Kates, 1999). Our alternative historical perspective suggests to us this could be partly explained by gay men’s perceived economic power in the 1990s, but also their criminalization and pathologization in the preceding decades as a particularly vital threat to hegemonic heterosexist masculinities. Therefore, an obvious area for future research would be to focus attention on lesbian, bisexual, trans\*, and queer consumers through detailed ethnographies like Kates’s (2002) work on gay male subcultures. For example, Bettany and Rowe (2016) argue



in their auto-ethnographic work on Pride festivals that bisexual consumers experience themselves as *in/appropriate/d others* who are either invisible or vilified as actors who do not fit within the cultural binary of gay/straight.

### *Beyond Sexual Identity*

Exploring each letter in the LGBTQ+ acronym is limiting, however, because it focuses exclusively on one identity category (sexuality or gender) without appreciating how these intersect with other categories of difference such as race, class, ethnicity, and age. The notion of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) has been introduced to consumer research in recent years (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2012), but its own intersection with LGBTQ+ research has yet to occur.

Earlier research has considered how sexuality is often expressed through deviance from heterosexual gender norms (e.g. Kates, 2003; Kates & Belk, 2001; Rinallo, 2007). However, it remains to be discovered how consumption-enabled performances of sexual or gender identities differ for consumers across a variety of intersectional configurations. Such research would substantiate claims that LGBTQ+ consumers cannot be reached by highly stereotypical advertising portrayals that are tailored to one all-encompassing market segment (Borgerson et al., 2006; Tsai, 2004). Marketers today need to cater to a market of staggering diversity and scholars must re-evaluate the notion of the interpretative community for those who regard sexual identity as a less salient aspect of their self-concept and social identity (Nölke, 2017; Visconti, 2008). More recent consumer research echoes these ideas, describing the fragmentation, fluidity, and flexibility of sexual identities (Bettany, 2016; Coffin et al., 2016; Ng, 2013; Visconti, 2008).

## *Beyond Universal Stigma*

Existing subcultural approaches assume an outright stigmatized and marginalized social positionality of non-heterosexual consumers (e.g. Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008), and we have hinted at the historical origins of such positionalities above. Interestingly, in the mid 1990s the journalist Paul Burston coined the term ‘post-gay’ to describe his experiences as a relatively un-stigmatised gay man in an era of increased social acceptance and legal equality (Collard, 1998). The psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams (2005; 2016) and urban geographer Amin Ghaziani (2011, p. 99) have made similar arguments, the latter writing of “post-gay collective identity construction” as a project of inclusion within mainstream culture (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2015, 2017).

A number of factors are likely contributing towards these changes: Western governments passing comprehensive non-discrimination policies and/or marriage equality laws is one; the observation that representations of non-heterosexuals in popular culture have become more frequent and more nuanced is another (GLAAD, 2016; ilga, 2016). Consumer researchers have yet to explore the impact of these changing macro-configurations of stigma and acceptance on non-heterosexual identities, community formation, and consumption practices.

Some academics have been critical of the ‘post-gay’ sensibility, identifying it as a sociocultural position of privilege that only some people can occupy (Ghaziani, 2014; Nash, 2013; see also 'intersectionality' above). Our view is that post-gay narratives tend to obfuscate the daily struggles that many LGBTQ+ people still face. Progress is rarely linear and uniform, and legal equality does not necessarily equal everyday socio-symbolic equality. Moreover, the reactionary social policy positions of emergent right-wing political movements in Europe and the United States hint at the fragility of existing achievements. Events like the attack on the Pulse

nightclub in Orlando in June 2016 are also a reminder that (self-)acceptance of sexual and gender diversity cannot be presumed. We therefore urge extreme caution when using the term ‘post-gay’, which could be misinterpreted (or maliciously mobilised) to suggest that ‘we are now beyond the struggles of the past’.

Another criticism is that post-gay narratives may be vehicles for the subversion of identity politics through mass-market commodification of sexual identities and depoliticized consumerism (Duggan, 2002). Such accounts see the radical and progressive potential of anti-normative sexualities endangered by societal pseudo-acceptance which is conditional to subordination under heteronormative rules (Duggan, 2002; Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). Here, consumer researchers may find an excellent opportunity to study how consumption acts as a symbolic resource consumers use to negotiate tensions within a community that strives for integration and opposition at the same time.

While we are deeply intellectually indebted to the pioneering research on LGBTQ+ consumers in the subculture tradition, promising new ideas and research agendas have recently entered our field. For instance, Bettany and Rowe’s (2016) work on bisexual consumers shows how transposing either/or logics with both/and ones provides a more nuanced understanding of consumers who defy binary categorization. Another example is Coffin et al. (2016), who identified two countervailing narratives about LGBTQ+ districts as *either* safe havens from stigmatizing heterosexuals ('gay ghettos'; Kates, 2002) *or* leisure districts visited by all ('gay villages'; Haslop, Hill, & Schmidt, 1998). They replaced this either/or theorization with a relational perspective where the identities of LGBTQ+ districts are defined (and redefined) by their position(s) within wider networks of meanings and materiality. Both papers avoid replacing

an outmoded account of universal stigma with a ‘post-gay’ alternative of universal acceptance, instead seeing stigmatisation and acceptance as locally contingent negotiations.

### *Beyond Consumer Research*

LGBTQ+ consumer research could benefit from interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Sociologists, psychologists, and geographers have argued that desire, sexual practices, and sexual identities are disentangling. For instance, the sociologist Jane Ward (2015, p. 9) studied “heteroflexibility”, namely straight-identifying men who engage in sexual practices with one another. Ward notes that while many cultures grant female sexuality more freedom for fluidity and experimentation, straight-identifying men framed their sexual encounters with other men as utilitarian (e.g. the emic “brojob”) and their relationships as “bromances”. Her research suggests the emergence of hazier heterosexualities where same-sex desires or practices do not necessitate gay or bisexual identities (see also Ritch Savin-Williams, 2017).

Geographers have also explored similar phenomena. Brown (2006) identified Bangladeshi ‘non-heterosexuals’ in London’s Spitalfields, who used public toilets to engage in same-sexual acts without having to re-identify as gay or bisexual. He also noted ‘queer’ and ‘post-gay’ consumers who were open about their same-sex desires but were ambivalent about frequenting ‘gay bars’ and other places that foregrounded sexuality. They preferred symbolically neutral places with an above-average number of LGBTQ+ customers where they could meet like-minded others without being publicly marked as such (Brown, 2006). Collectively, these studies from sociology and geography suggest that sexuality is becoming a more fluid phenomenon and that people are resisting categorization (see also Adams, Braun, & McCreanor, 2014).

Bettany (2016) has recently called for consumer research on sexualities to move beyond an analytical focus on identity labels to elevate our understanding of how fragmented and heterogeneous sexual(ized) markets and consumption operate. Some works-in-progress within consumer research have responded to Bettany's (2016) call. One example is Coffin and Eichert (2016), who drew on material-semiotics (e.g. Bettany, 2007; Canniford & Bajde, 2016; Latour, 2005), to document the fragmentation and dynamism of London's and Berlin's LGBTQ+ markets by looking for 'material traces' in the changing commercial places in the city. This methodology provided evidence of LGBTQ+ communitarian institutions giving way to markets of sexuality and gender, upending the careful balance between market and movement noted in previous studies (e.g. Peñaloza, 1996). Future research could build on material-semiotic approaches to consider how sexual(ized) markets co-evolve with the physical environment.

The body is another form of materiality that is curiously absent from existing consumer research regarding sexuality. Bodies are the primary object of sexual desire for most people (Langer, 2007), so it is somewhat ironic that consumer researchers have not focused on this topic more explicitly. In one of few exceptions, Eichert and Richardson (2017) have approached the sexualized consumer body and consumers' self-presentation strategies on geo-local smartphone 'hookup-apps' through the lens of sexual fields theory (Green, 2008, 2014). This Bourdieusian approach to sexuality enabled Eichert and Richardson (2017) to conceptualize the commodification of bodies within a sexual marketplace that follows socially constructed hierarchies of desirability.

This ongoing work reminds us that bodies are the media through which we experience desires (sexual or otherwise), and serve as the vehicle through which we try to fulfil them. Future research could develop this notion of the body as a material locus of (sexual) desires and

practices, but also as a hybrid subject/object whose own market value may be augmented (or otherwise altered) by other market offerings like gyms or designer clothing.

## **Conclusion**

Consumer researchers began to study non-heterosexuals later than other disciplines. Despite the emergence of a significant body of research in a relatively short time, much of this research has been based on theoretical perspectives borne of a time when non-heterosexuality was widely stigmatised and non-heterosexuals were socially, culturally, and often spatially segregated. Moreover, existing research has focused extensively on urban, middle-class, gay, cis-men in the West, does not explore how sexuality and gender intersect with other markers of difference, and is grounded in Anglo-American readings of LGBTQ+ history. We hint at an alternative birthplace of LGBTQ+ subjectivities as market-mediated phenomena in Weimar Berlin, and suggest five areas of inquiry that may inform future scholarship on LGBTQ+ markets and consumption, and sexualities more broadly.

Future research could engage with contemporary market phenomena and adopt theoretical frameworks from the rich body of interdisciplinary work that is already available. Scholars should also consider the marginalised voices and undocumented experiences of those non-heterosexual people who have not yet received the attention they deserve. Indeed, such research may be socially transformative by bringing unheard perspectives to the attention of academics, marketing practitioners, policy makers, and maybe even a wider public.

Relationships between gender, sexuality, and the marketplace are more fluid and ambiguous than ever. This creates opportunities to redefine this area of research and the actors and societies

affected by it. Accordingly, there has never been a more exciting time for consumer researchers to engage with the topics of desire, intimacy, and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For students and scholars who have been inspired by our call to arms, there is now a research group called *Sexuality Marketing and Consumer Research* (SMaCR). Presently, you can find us on Facebook.

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