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Crossing wires: short-circuiting marketing theory

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Jack Coffin 

Department of Materials, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Christian A Eichert

Institute of Management Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

Shona Bettany 

Huddersfield Business School, Huddersfield, UK

Andrew Lindridge

Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

Gillian Oakenfull

Farmer School of Business, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

Jacob Ostberg

Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Lisa Peñaloza

KEDGE Business School, Bordeaux, France

Diego Rinallo

Lifestyle Research Center, EMLYON Business School, Ecully, France

David Rowe

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Janssen Santana 

Lifestyle Research Center, EMLYON Business School, Ecully, France

Luca M. Visconti

Universita della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland

Luciana Walther

Federal University of São João Del Rei, São João Del Rei, Brazil

Corresponding author:

Jack Coffin, Department of Materials, University of Manchester. Sackville Street Building, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
Email: jack.coffin@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

In the popular imagination *sex sells*. Yet, marketing theory has relatively little to say about sexuality per se. Drawing on Žižek's metaphor of critical theory as 'short-circuiting' the dominant discourse, we conceptualise marketing as a field that theorises sexuality only in a series of 'closed circuits'. Knowledge becomes hierarchical when some topics, such as sexuality, are denied the theoretical freedom to roam in wider open circuits alongside other 'mainstream' marketing topics. We identify four ways in which certain topics are enclosed: theoretical, empirical, institutional and neo-colonial. We then seek to short-circuit this state of affairs by bringing together a heterogeneous group of scholars interested in sexuality. By crossing their critical insights like unexpected connections in a circuit, we create sparks of inspiration that challenge the contents, contexts and concepts that relate to marketing theories of sexuality. Our paper makes a specific theoretical contribution in arguing for sexuality to be treated as a phenomenon worth studying and theorising in its own right. However, it also makes a wider methodological and epistemological contribution in showing how various topics within marketing theory might be short-circuited to help flatten the hierarchies of knowledge created by closed and open circuits.

Keywords

Sexuality, short-circuiting, hierarchies, knowledge, subculture, gender, psychoanalysis, epistemology

Introduction

'A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network - faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch...?' (Žižek, in Schuster, 2016: ix)

Sex Sells – arguably the most recognised adage in advertising (Lanier and Rader, 2019). *Sexuality studies*? Relatively rare in academia (Bettany et al., 2016). Sexuality may be salient in certain consumption contexts, as shown by studies of sex toys (Piha et al., 2018; Wilner and Huff, 2017), and may be implicit in theorisations, such as consumer desire (Belk et al. 2003, 2020; Kozinets et al., 2017). However, sexuality per se is rarely considered worthy of study, let alone theorisation. Sexual phenomena are usually studied through theoretical proxies like subculture (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996) or gender (Goulding and Saren, 2009; Kates, 2003), not as theoretically substantive topics in their own right. Paraphrasing Žižek, marketing theory is a network of knowledge that seems to function smoothly, but only by creating 'closed-circuits' where subjects like sexuality can be enclosed. Meanwhile topics like 'ubiquitous music' (Oakes et al., 2014), 'market system dynamics' (Giesler and Fischer, 2017), or 'space and place' (Chatzidakis et al., 2018) circulate freely in the open circuits of academic discourse.

In this conceptual paper, we attempt to short-circuit the epistemic network of marketing theory by allowing wires to cross in unexpected ways. As detailed below, the first author assembled a heterogeneous group of scholars, asked them to critique a focal text (Coffin et al., 2019), then juxtaposed their views to identify places where intellectual wires might cross. While we focus on 'shocking' marketing theory into treating sexuality more equitably, we also make a broader conceptual-methodological contribution. We develop short-circuiting as an unconventional approach to thinking and writing, a means of creating and communicating knowledge that challenges and flattens hierarchies.

The closed-circuit of sexuality

Many marketing theorists have studied sexuality (see Coffin et al., 2019; Ginder and Byun, 2015; Walther, 2022). However, most studies treat sexuality as a situation-specific phenomenon, rather than as a theoretically transferrable contribution. Evoking Žižek, marketing theory might be described as a carefully designed circuit. While certain concepts flow freely, others circulate only in closed systems, constituting a two-tier network of knowledge. We identify four forms of epistemic enclosure: theoretical, empirical, institutional and neo-colonial.

Theoretical. Sexuality is often studied in relation to a more ‘theoretically substantive’ phenomenon like gender. For instance, the boundary between normative and non-normative gender identities are often signalled by the presence or absence of LGBTQ+ consumption symbols (Kates, 2003). Conversely, non-heterosexual identities are often assumed (sometimes incorrectly) from non-normative gender performances (Goulding and Saren, 2009). Although these assumptions are subject to change and contestation (Visconti, 2008), they are culturally entrenched and difficult to dismiss entirely (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015). Indeed, sexuality and gender are so intimately intertwined that they are often conflated, with ‘sexual orientation’ being synonymous with ‘gender orientation’ (Coffin et al., 2019). Although this means that sexuality can advance critical marketing theory through theoretical traditions like feminism (Rome and Lambert, 2020), it runs the risk of restricting the study of sexuality to a supplementary role. The same duality may also be seen when sexuality is related to other aspects of identity and the theoretical traditions that attend to them, like race and post-colonial theory (c.f. Stoler, 1995). These theoretical tandems develop both sides, but we discern an implicit hierarchy where sexuality gains less than the other partner. If sexuality can only be addressed when tethered to topics that are considered more ‘theoretical’, then it remains enclosed in a closed circuit of consideration.

Empirical. Sometimes sexuality is foregrounded, but only in a context that is socially and spatially circumscribed. For example, marketing theorists have studied the distinctive consumption of sexual ‘subcultures’ (Haslop et al., 1998; Keating and McLoughlin, 2005; Peñaloza, 1996). These sexualised subcultures of consumption are communities that interpret markets differently (Kates, 2004) and sometimes create ‘ghettoised’ marketplaces (Coffin et al., 2016: 291). In the gay ghettos of North America, “almost all of the necessities of life could be locally obtained” (Kates, 2002: 386). In Europe and Asia, subcultural spaces are more muted and mobile, but no less meaningful as sites of socio-symbolic segregation (Hsieh and Wu, 2011; Visconti, 2008). In sociology, ‘subculture’ denotes the “subordinated, subaltern, or subterranean” (Thornton, 1997: 4). Accordingly, even deterritorialised subcultures remain culturally demarcated from the majority, as in the case of fetish consumers who create temporary subcultural spaces but then erase any trace of their presence after the event (Langer, 2007). Sexuality is empirically enclosed because these are studies of specific spaces and ephemeral events, implying that sexual phenomena are only relevant in particular places and to particular people.

Institutional. Some marketing theorists have sought to break free from theoretical and empirical enclosures by investigating the consumption of sex toys (Walther and Schouten, 2016; Wilner and Huff, 2017) or pornography (Daskalopoulou and Zquette, 2020; Zquette and Daskalopoulou, 2020). Such studies circumvent theoretical and empirical enclosures by claiming that these consumer desires and consumption practices can provide insights for all. For instance, research on sexual taboos have shown how norms may be broken (Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018), negotiated (Hongsmark Knudsen, 2019), or even maintained to facilitate exciting but regulated violations (Piha et al., 2018). Insights like these might be transferred to other markets and consumption patterns, theorising taboos that are not explicitly sexual in form but may be analogous in function. Yet, theories drawing too close to sexuality often receive a cool reception in marketing theory, as shown

by [Brown and Patterson's \(2021\)](#) detailed recounting of [Gould's \(1991\)](#) infamous introspection. This is also evident in relation to psychoanalytic marketing theory. This tradition elides theoretical and empirical enclosure by conceptualising sexuality as the disavowed subtext of consumption ([Cluley, 2015](#)), marketing ([Albanese, 2015](#); [Campbell and Deane, 2019](#)), and even academia itself ([Cluley, 2014](#)). However, many continue to question the legitimacy of psychoanalytic thinking ([O'Shaughnessy, 2015](#)). We see these as manifestations of institutional enclosure. This describes how studies or schools of thought that seek to break free from theoretical and/or empirical enclosures are contained, usually by claims that they are of interest only to a delimited and delegitimated academic community (see also [Irvine, 2014](#)).¹

Neo-colonial. Marketing theory is largely based on data and canonical theories from the Global North ([Arnould et al., 2019](#); [Thompson et al., 2013](#)). As such, when marketing studies of sexuality draw on data from Brazil ([Walther and Schouten, 2016](#)), Turkey ([Yalkin and Veer, 2018](#)) and India ([Varman et al., 2018](#)), they make contributions that challenge the underlying Anglo–Euro–American circuitry of mainstream marketing theory. Yet, studies of sexuality from the Global South are often exoticised, treated as interesting but not necessarily given the intellectual gravitas as the ostensibly asexual canon of the Global North. As shown by [Stoler \(1995\)](#), how we educate ourselves and others about desire is deeply colonial, both in formal educational settings like universities and informal interactions that entrain us how to lust and love. We agree with [Coffin et al. \(2019\)](#) that marketing theories of sexuality should continue to look beyond the Global North. However, we recognise the risk that such developments might wrongly represent Southern subjects as overly sexualised in contrast to their Northern counterparts. Thus, marketing theorists must also sexualise the Global North and address the neo-colonial framings of sexuality per se. Here, disciplines like history provide significant inspiration, considering the historical (yet unfortunately persistant) role of colonialism in framing and policing human sexual practices (e.g. [Han and O'Mahoney, 2018](#); [Hinchy, 2019](#)).

Others forms of epistemic enclosure may exist. The list above is provided only to illustrate the contours of marketing's theoretical circuitry. To summarise thus far, we argue that sexuality is a closed-circuit of knowledge production; highly charged by stimulating ideas, titillating contexts and impassioned scholars, but largely closed-off from the mainstream. We add 'largely' because we acknowledge that sexuality does feature throughout marketing theory in various forms. However, sexuality is rarely at the centre of analysis and theory-building. In the vernacular of this special issue, marketing theory is modelled by implicit hierarchies of knowledge where sexuality is given a lower status than other areas of inquiry. This special issue calls for scholars to criticise and flatten such hierarchies. In the present context, this means opening the circuitry of marketing theory so that it is open-to-change and changed-by-openness. To achieve this, we propose developing Žižek's metaphor of short-circuiting into a method of critical conceptualisation.

Short circuiting hierarchies of knowledge

Žižek provides short-circuiting as a potent metaphor for critical thought. This paper goes further, providing a workbench model inspired by Žižek but based on our own experimental approach. What follows is a description but also guide for how marketing theory (or any other area of discourse) might be short-circuited to allow new forms of knowing to emerge and engage more equitably with established knowledge.

The first author used email and social media fora to contact marketing scholars studying sexuality. Particular care was taken to assemble a heterogeneous group in terms of age, gender, seniority, location and other factors that might affect one's experiences and epistemic perspective. Each member was asked to recommend further contacts with diversity in mind. Once assembled,

members were asked to read, and comment upon, Coffin et al. (2019). This text was chosen as a critical literature review that claimed to be more critical than an earlier review (Ginder and Byun, 2015), yet focused predominantly on white, cis, able-bodied gay men in the Global North. Each member wrote their own response, without reading other contributions. The first author then collated the responses into a single document and sent these out to the wider team for further comments. What followed it was an 'experiment in collective intelligence', to use the words of one of our team. The data were not 'coded' into a smooth network of theory-building (Belk et al., 2013). Instead, discussions sought to operationalise Žižek's call to 'cross wires that do not usually touch' (Schuster, 2016: ix), with each author making comments on the ideas of the others in their own version of the document. This generated multiple versions that the first author then assembled into a palimpsestic document, all the comments overlain. The first author then worked closely with the second author to craft an article that encapsulated the ecumenical experiences of the ensemble whilst remaining intelligible enough for a wider readership.

Sparks of inspiration flew from this frictive approach. We do not claim to have been so inspired to have sparked a paradigm-shifting or ground-breaking conceptualisation of global significance. Instead, we claim more modestly that many wires connected to a common insight – that marketing theory did not treat sexuality as a topic worthy of serious scholarship in its own right. This shock stimulated the formulation of a 'research problem' formed around Žižek's metaphor of circuitry. Our initial response was to suggest a 'solution' in the form of another metaphor – *hypertext* – which we believed encapsulated the context-spanning, multi-scalar and heterogeneous character of sexual phenomena in market systems by evoking the interconnectivity of internet protocols. The reviewers were not convinced, but kindly offered the chance to resubmit. Another round of short-circuiting occurred, with the authors providing many responses to the new problem of the hypertext. The first author realised that selecting a single solution would create a hierarchy of knowledge within the article, a micro-enclosure in a paper against enclosures. Instead of reinstating hypertext or instating an alternative, the text was rewritten to short-circuit the convention of a third-person author(ity) with a singular(ising) contribution to communicate. Rather than writing with oppressive oneness, in the sections that follow we quote our scholars verbatim. This unconventional approach to representation reflects our attempt to think unconventionally and encourage our readers to do the same (Hill et al., 2014). In the remainder of the paper, we spark conversations in terms of contents ('who or what gets studied?'), contexts ('where and when do they get studied?') and concepts ('how are they studied, and why?'), before concluding without closing down the conversation.

Content: Who and What to Include in Marketing Theories of Sexuality?

Existing studies of sexuality are skewed towards a particular (albeit pluralistic) category of humanity. Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer and otherwise non-heterosexual (LGBTQ+) consumers loom large in the literature on sexuality (Coffin et al., 2019). Heterosexuality, asexuality and sexuality per se are generally unmarked and unremarked upon (Bettany et al., 2016), bar a few exceptions (e.g. Dahl et al., 2009; Östberg, 2010; Tuncay and Otnes, 2008). Walther (2022) argues that sexuality is relevant to all consumers, regardless of their 'orientation', and we agree. For us, marketing theories of sexuality should not focus on any particular group, LGBTQ+ or otherwise, but instead seek to understand sexual phenomena in more abstract theoretical terms whose insights can be transferred, with some situational sensitivity, across multiple constituencies. Rather than the closed circuits of LGBTQ+ consumers (e.g. Kates, 2002) or heterosexuals with non-normative preferences (e.g. Langer, 2007), our first short-circuit is that marketing theories of sexuality should be able to consider anyone. Indeed, sexuality is significant even for those who are asexual or

aromantic (Bogaert, 2012). These consumers are forced to negotiate societies where sexuality is both salient, thanks to the ubiquity of eroticised advertising (Dahl et al., 2009), and disavowed, in formalised organisations like academia (Cluley, 2014). The ostensibly counter-factual case of asexuality shows how everyone is a sexualised subject, even if their subjective experience is not saturated with sexual desire. Yet, despite the ubiquity of sexualised subjectivity, some in our motley crew expressed concern that they did not have the legitimacy to write about sexual phenomena:

I suppose that I am invited to this project as kind of the cis-alibi, the straight, white guy so that you've made sure to be inclusive of all kinds of odd positions in society (and this is not intended as a snide remark, but just stating the obvious). This is a position that I am very happy to embody and I am glad to have been invited. Because of my interest in gender studies, I've assumed this position many times and I've learnt a lot from it. Unfortunately, I am not sure that the relationship has been reciprocal in the sense that I've helped anyone else understand much because of my presence. In both feminist studies and LGBTQ+ studies I am a representative of the big Other, of the patriarchy, of hegemonic masculinity, of straightness.

This reflexivity is insightful and commendable, but runs the risk of 'closing' the circuit to researchers who do not identify as sexually Other(ed). We can start to short-circuit this closure by highlighting how those in seemingly hegemonic positions still have much to contribute to theories of sexuality:

I am aware of my privileges as a white straight cisgender middle class literate able-bodied person [...but] I am a woman who has been harassed or belittled by white straight rich older men for decades [...] all my life I have struggled with my weight to conform to social norms of beauty in a country where the slim and toned body is one of the most important forms of capital (Goldenberg, 2006). All those characteristics are part of the place from which I speak (Ribeiro, 2019), not just the fact that I am white and enjoy having sex with men.

Rather than reserve sexuality as the study *of* others *by* others, let us shock the discipline by including more subjectivities in the list of who can *be* researched and who can *do* research. This more agnostic approach does not suggest a free-for-all as critical researchers should still recognise the limits of their experience. For instance, one of our team remarked that 'I cannot begin to imagine what it is like not to be able to publicly display affection for your loved one'. However, this does not justify (self-)exclusion from an entire epistemic arena. Wires should cross between people, first and foremost, to help dissolve hierarchies of legitimacy where some voices are taken more seriously than others just because of the bodies they emanate from. This also relates to the readers of research, the knowledge-consumers of today who may become the knowledge-producers of tomorrow:

If we include in the conversation some speakers but exclude listeners, the whole balance will not be positive.

Readers may be closed out by paywalls, language barriers and other practical issues. However, readers and researchers may also fail to cross wires because 'what' we study has little resonance to their everyday experience. Take religion, a topic that sparked much debate in our team. Organised religions are traditionally juxtaposed to sexual liberalism (Keating and McLoughlin, 2005), but we co-constructed a more heterodox sensibility to spirituality and sexuality (echoing Rinallo et al., 2013). Our authors' families, communities, and countries of origin flavoured their feelings, for worse but also for better. These antecedent affective ambivalences short-circuited the atheistic or 'laic' position often assumed (or presumed) in studies of sexuality:

As an Italian-born and Catholic-raised gay man, I remember how the social discussion of LGBTQ+ rights and roles in society unfolded in my country. And this still matters! Previous research like [Coffin et al. \(2019\)](#) seems to maintain a fairly laic approach.

Crossing wires between two topics that have previously been insulated from one another created intellectual currents that ran in different directions:

We have to take into account the structural impact of European culture and religiosity transferred throughout the colonization period across the world.

What about other societies which accepted homosexuality (etc.) only to be squashed by European colonists? We need to separate the European White Christian guilt and distortion of sexuality from other cultures, or we are in danger of repeating through the same mistakes.

Gay marriage, partner benefits, and other areas have curbed at least some of religion's medieval vestiges... sure some issues continue, I don't mean to downplay them, but we need to keep a balance...

The dialectic of religion and sexuality is underappreciated in marketing theory (excepting [Keating and McLoughlin, 2005](#)), despite a well-established tradition of considering sexuality alongside other identity markers (i.e. gender). Here, [Foucault's \(1978, 1985, 1988\)](#) histories of sexuality may be helpful, given his careful treatment of how religious (and scientific) discourses shape desire. Empirically speaking, omnivorous media consumption may aid new avenues of research:

I read a blog about the European porn industry and why Bel Ami [a gay pornography studio] was able to Hoover up every remotely buff young straight male in the Czech Republic to perform gay sex on film, compared to Poland where there is no notable gay porn industry, let alone performers. The answer given was the Czech Republic has the highest level of atheism in Europe, and Poland is the most devout Catholic country in Europe... go figure.

While our team took an interest in religion, the broader point is that we can short-circuit marketing theories of sexuality by connecting sexuality with other topics that are usually considered unrelated, even antithetical. Put simply, we should be agnostic about *what* can be studied under the heading of sexuality. Indeed, we follow [Coffin et al. \(2019, p.287\)](#) in defining sexuality as a 'fluid entanglement of desires, practices, and identity propositions that are continually negotiated by individuals and collectives'. Although marketing theorists typically treat sexuality as synonymous with gender orientation, sexual desire can be oriented by objects (e.g. shoes), materials (e.g. rubber), practices (e.g. whipping), places (e.g. car parks), body parts (e.g. feet), characteristics (e.g. intelligence), concepts (e.g. risk) and much more. [Langer's \(2007\)](#) study of fetish communities is an early exception to the sexuality-gender rule; a later exception is [Lanier and Rader's \(2019\)](#) study of Splash Mountain as a sexually-stimulating ride. To expand the list, we can infer insights from consumers' love of plastic ([Ferreira and Scaraboto, 2016](#)), assume that sex toys are not just sex tools ([Walther and Schouten, 2016](#)), or adopt a psychoanalytic stance where even the academic culture of 'publish or perish' can be a series of pleasures and pleasurable punishments ([Cluley, 2014](#)). Even still, there remains a case for more research that looks beyond the whole human body as the lonely libidinal loci of marketing theory.

Contexts: where and when should we study sexuality?

Such sensibilities suggest an assemblage approach (Canniford and Bajde, 2016). Many assemblage thinkers are inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, who treat desire as a universal flow of forces (Kozinets et al., 2017). As Deleuzoguattarian thought is also inspired by psychoanalysis (Coffin, 2021), it can easily cross wires with studies of sexuality. Like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) were attentive to the ways in which society and sexuality shaped each other. Foucault focused on specific spaces where sexuality was disciplined, like prisons or schools, sometimes overlooking broader structures like colonialism (Stoler, 1995). In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari saw capitalism as a neo-colonial network (Bignall, 2010), one that controls rather than disciplines across all manner of (market) spaces (Cluley and Brown, 2015). From a Deleuzoguattarian perspective, then, sexuality may be studied as something to be controlled but also a mechanism for control; two contrasting empirical examples worth re-examination include the aesthetic labour of retail workers (Hall and van Den Broek, 2011) and the disruptive aesthetics of social media users (Rokka and Canniford, 2016). Indeed, looking across these examples may be more appropriate, as Deleuzoguattarian thinking suggests a more 'rhizomatic' rhetoric that short-circuits the extant emphasis on specific spaces, such as gay subcultural ghettos (Kates, 2002), by sketching sexual connections *between* contexts (Coffin, 2020). However, we do not need to draw on Deleuze and Guattari to short-circuit in this way, as the stream of consciousness below suggests:

It was Queen Victoria who admonished her Prime Minister for even thinking that lesbianism could exist, hence its exclusion from British law. (Victoria loved sex...read her personal diary entries where she extols Albert's physical virtues and how often she liked it...no wonder she was depressed after he died.) Thanks to British Imperialism, we have countries laden with anti-homosexuality laws, sexual oppression in India from a country that gave us the Kama Sutra [...] and then of course, we have Victorian London both scandalised and titillated by Oscar Wilde's trial, when the defence started calling up hotel workers to comment on Oscar's bedsheets after a visit from his 'friends' [...] another 'monster' hated by the West - Lenin and his Bolshevik Russia. One of Lenin's first acts was to abolish anti-homosexuality laws in 1918. Lenin supposedly said 'it is of no interest to me or the Soviet State whatever one does in the privacy of their bedroom'. Liberation was not to come from just freeing the workers, but also freeing their sexuality.

This criss-cross of colonial history provides a brief example of how we might short-circuit sexuality, space and time by paying less attention to contextual boundaries (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). This also helps to connect sexuality to topics that are usually considered a world apart, as discussed in the previous section in relation to religion. Another example is romance:

As we are struggling for the right to love and be loved and to express our gender identities, it seems that strategically and historically societal structures are excluding us from the right to love. Now that we gained attention from companies and governments, and that they see us at least as niche markets and that love is a commodity, it's time to make sure that the images that they are sharing are real representations of our community, so we can guarantee they will not fall into the heteronormative queer fantasy, but instead shed light and subsequent support for the complex realities that we live in.

Although sexual desire and loving romance are distinct, they are far more entangled than extant research might suggest. Mäkelä et al. (2018) explore this by studying the carnal qualities of chocolate gifts, investigating how marketing and materiality may mobilise connections between embodied sexuality, romantic representations and a lust for love (or a love of lust). More research is

needed on the relationships between sexuality and love, romantic or otherwise. As Walther (2022) notes, sexual consumption may include contexts that are obviously erotic, like sex shops, but also romantic contexts that are eroticised, like a candlelit dinner with hope for more. Sexuality may be bubbling under the surface in unexpected places like universities (Cluley, 2014) or theme parks (Lanier and Rader, 2019), while romance may emerge unexpectedly in scenarios that are supposed to be purely sexual, no-strings-attached.

Connections between contexts raise epistemological questions (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), but also ideological ones (Bettany, 2016; Fitchett et al., 2014). Several of our scholars considered the *dis*-connections that are created by marketing theorists, but often not explicitly addressed for political reasons. What boundaries are (not) crossed, what lines are (not) drawn (Peñaloza 1994)? If we take the neo-colonial enclosure of marketing theory seriously, then the Global North is one boundary that we must cross, then criss-cross. Our authors came from a range of countries and many now lived outside their country of origin. Some were urbanites, others suburban, one edging towards rurality. Although we were missing perspectives from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, our diverse geographic spread helped to challenge the myopia of the marketing theory metropole (Arnould et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2013). Our crossed wires were sparked by the existing research from Brazil (e.g. Walther and Schouten, 2016), Turkey (Yalkin and Veer, 2018), and India (Varman et al., 2018), but we were struck by the paucity of possibilities beyond the Global North, not to mention studies honing in on neo-colonial sexuality as a theoretical focus. However, we also recognised that connections are not always desirable, and that some groups may prefer to remain anonymous in the relative obscurity of research disinterest. This puts us in mind of Žižek's (2012: 19) claim that 'since there is no sexuality without a relation of domination, any project of "sexual liberation" ends up generating new forms of domination'. Critical scholars should connect contexts carefully (Coffin, 2020), we agreed, and this led us to question *how* and *why* marketing theorists might theorise sexuality.

Concepts: how should we theorise sexuality, and why?

So far we have been using the term sexuality as though it were a common sense concept. Yet, if understandings of sexuality differ over time and across space (Foucault, 1978, 1985, 1988), critical scholars must stipulate what they mean by sexuality. Earlier we followed Coffin et al. (2019, p.287) in defining sexuality as an "entanglement" in order to lengthen the list of libidinal loci from gender to objects, body parts, practices and so forth. This working definition also allows us to add new aspects to our analysis. For instance, previous reviews purposefully excluded overly individualistic bio-reductionisms in favour of less widely-favoured socio-collective approaches (e.g. Walther, 2022). Inspired by Askegaard (2021), however, we argue that sexual phenomena must be understood as both biological and cultural, as complexes of interacting influences where none is deterministic but all contribute to determining how sexuality manifests and metamorphoses. This would form part of a 'flatter' approach (Bajde, 2013), one that also encompasses the collective, the individual and the dividual as units of analysis (Cluley and Brown, 2015), not to mention qualitative and quantitative approaches *to* analysis:

I'd love to see more quantitative work in the area. It's not uncommon for me to be the sole researcher presenting on LGBTQ+ consumers at conferences such as AMA, ACR, SCP, etc. I am used to that. However, the eeriest feeling I had was at an ACR gender conference, where I was the ONLY presenter using quantitative data at the entire conference. As I began to present, I somehow felt that my research was considered uncouth or less nuanced than the numerous ethnographies, subcultural deep-dives, and applications of grounded

theory to which I had listened for two days. We are no longer challenged to find representative samples [...] but there appears to be a bias against quantitative research among cultural researchers.

An agnostic definition of sexuality affords many different theorisations and formulations. It keeps the circuit open, promoting ‘the pursuit of knowledge pluralism in marketing’ (Bajde et al., 2021: 13). As noted above, in an earlier version of this article, we fell somewhat short of this pluralistic ambition, slipping into the trope of ‘the theoretical contribution’ by proposing a singular (and singularising) solution to the research problem that we had posed. This was the *hypertext* concept, outlined in more detail below by its chief proponent. Reflecting on this earlier decision raised the question of *why* we theorise. Is it to explain, comprehend, order, enact or provoke (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021), or to empower, connect, object, embolden and politicise? The ‘why’ of this article is to short-circuit the current hierarchies of knowledge, which suggests resisting the urge to provide a unique understanding and instead promote a plurality of possibilities for future research. The quotes that follow are our authors’ responses to the question of *how* we might theorise sexuality in marketing theory. We start with the second author, who proposed the hypertext concept, and finish with the first author, who is reluctant to close the circuit of conceptualisation at all:

The term hypertext was coined to describe ‘a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper’ (Nelson, 1965: 96). The metaphor of hypertext captures beautifully the complexity and ubiquity of sexuality in its manifold facets, but also sexuality’s ability to interlink between individuals, objects, practices, desires, identities, emotions, and affects in ever-changing ways, and across a multitude of contexts.

We like the idea of open-ended conceptualisation - it reminds me of Donna Haraway’s Derridian style of writing where the meaning of what she is saying is polymorphous and endlessly deferred. Sexuality, a concept whose meaning can only be endlessly deferred. She talks a lot about people not knowing what they are - from her own experience. She lived in a thuple with two men, her husband and his lover. They spent lots of time trying to work out what they were, and not really fitting into anything. I’m struggling with this myself at the moment - would guess right now I’m asexual but I really dislike that identification, I don’t want to be asexual! In my head I’m definitely not so there is something to be said for abject bodies denied the sexuality ascription.

For me the beauty of this paper is it fundamentally addresses an inequality in society that permeates through and against all of those who are not in the majority (whatever that is). This paper’s approach does just that...challenges and demands an equality where equality doesn’t exist (and I don’t buy the ‘but the laws have been changed’ argument). For instance, what we understand and present as homosexuality (etc.) has been redefined and presented via a lens of a heterosexual society, and then given back to us queers (etc.) to define ourselves through. Perhaps, then, we can only find the true LGBTQ+ spaces in those spaces that still shock and repel ‘straights’... such as sex clubs where the norms of the heteronormative cannot exist.

Other circuits to short: we can give a nod to transformative, participative research projects, which involve our subjective faculties to inform our work with those we study, to better understand our relations with these others, and to understand ourselves.

It is not so easy to understand how a notion from computer science [hypertext] can be used as a metaphor for what can be instead thought of as a universal/cosmic force, more archaic than computers or any other technology. Given my own religious and spiritual leanings, I would have instead proposed a notion from mythology: sexuality is divine, like the Greek god Eros, who in the old cosmogonies, before being

characterised as son of Aphrodite, was one of the primordial deities responsible for the birth of the Universe. This interconnection between all that exists has been a constant of mystical views on the universe, and one of the explanations for the attraction that we feel for all that is other than us.

I believe short-circuiting paves the way for more broad thinking instead of limiting our conceptualizations to a single concept. There are plenty of possible conceptualizations that can be used to move sexuality from a subordinate position of inquiry. Maybe we may focus instead on the institutional powers marginalizing sexuality as a concept worthy of theorization, or not. It could also provide ways to achieve 'emancipation' and 'equity' of the concept.

I wonder if we could argue that sexuality may in fact move from *theorising* to *representation*. I am not sure if we need to theorise sexuality. Rather, sexuality may be a matter of multiple, fragmented representations. Having studied marginal identities for some time now, I am left with the idea that the best way to change these personal and social conditions of vulnerability is to fragment their representations up to the point that these concepts explode and become meaningless. In our context, by multiplying the representation of sexuality we would take any normative meaning away from it. My understanding is that sexuality and social networks can be relevant in questioning the movement of the object of sexual desire from individuals to digital objects other than human beings. The widening of human sexuality is somehow intriguing in times where fluidity of gender/sexuality may be confronted with the fluidity of the object of said sexual desire/interest. We can conclude that the subject whose sexuality is questioned, the object of their desire, and the context wherein these interactions occur are all potentially becoming fluid. Again, what would be the point of theorising?

When I think of open circuits, I think of Art-Based Research (ABR) as a methodological framework that takes artistic practice into the research process (Seregina 2020). At the intersection of art and science, it potentializes the synergies between qualitative research and artistic inquiry (Leavy 2018). In ABR, the focus is shifted from the product of research to the process of research. This process-orientation creates new ways of knowing without zeroing-in on a claim or solution. Knowledge is found in opening up a topic for discussion and criticism (Seregina 2020). It is also a communal and dialogical method, embracing field participants and audience as active co-creators of meaning, forcing researchers to step outside their comfort zone and embrace media they are not used to (Seregina 2020). Artistic practice pushes us to step to the very edge of what we know, encouraging us to go further (Collingwood 1938). As a critical approach, it unsettles stereotypes, challenges dominant ideologies, and includes marginalised voices (Leavy 2018), holding up a mirror that reflects back (Modrak 2015) the problems of power structures within consumer culture and academia. It creates research gaps rather than closes them (Barone and Elliot 2012). Therefore, it is meant to keep circuits open. It is meant to short-circuit knowledge.

To my mind the process of short-circuiting is enough of a conceptualisation. Olsson (in Merriman et al. 2012: p.5) teaches us that the etymological roots of the word 'conceptualise' come from the Latin combination of "*con* and *capere*, literally 'grasping together'." For me, Žižek's metaphor allows us to grasp at the problem (closed-circuits) and work towards a solution (short-circuiting). I think marketing theories of sexuality (and much else) will be advanced by a series of short-circuits, of attempts to do things differently in our field (Hill et al. 2014), that resist the temptation to always replace a research problem with a neatly-packaged conceptual solution.

Concluding without closing

This paper seeks to challenge a tacit epistemic hierarchy in marketing theory. Some topics are deemed substantial enough to be studied in their own terms, circulating widely; others can only be studied in enclosed theoretical, empirical, institutional or neo-colonial circuits. We have thus reiterated calls for sexuality to be studied in its own right (Bettany et al., 2016; Coffin et al., 2019), providing a framework through which to make sense of the situation and work toward potential responses. Building on hitherto underappreciated precedents in our field (e.g. Gould, 1991), as well as recent critical contributions (e.g. Rome and Lambert, 2020), we seek to stimulate further research in this area. We hope such research produces a critical mass that tips the study of sexuality from its subordinated status into something that can be considered more equally alongside other theoretical topics. We have argued that such research may take many avenues, and indeed the purpose of our short-circuiting style of thinking and writing is to keep as many possibilities open as possible.

Despite our attempts to assemble a diverse team of scholars, many more viewpoints and voices can, and should, be brought into the conversation about sexuality. For instance, marketing theories of sexuality would be enriched by the experiences of consumers and researchers with different disabilities, using different languages and lexicons, and driven by different sexual preferences (or lack thereof). This is why we have resisted the tendency to provide a single theoretical contribution: our intent is not to provide a conceptualisation *of* sexuality, but rather make a compelling call *for* sexual conceptualisations. We hope that this conceptual paper is empowering for all those who wish to study sexuality, especially doctoral students and early career researchers whose position is usually more precarious:

To escape [from my conservative upbringing] to a liberal reality I decided to engage in a graduate program in São Paulo. Being the perfect student seems to be a path for a lot of queer people as a way to balance and justify for themselves and to others the fact that they are queer.

While this paper focuses on sexuality, it is worth noting at this juncture that similar logics could also be applied to other subordinated phenomena. Our argument about closed circuitry and our approach of short-circuiting could be help to make marketing theory less hierarchical – less patriarchal, less elitist, less colonial and more. It is certainly not a panacea, but perhaps it serves as another productive tool in the armoury of critical marketing theory. Collectively, a series of short-circuits could cause hierarchies of knowledge to flatten through the intellectual, but also emotional and embodied, shocks induced by wires not usually allowed to come into contact. We hope that others will be inspired to short-circuit specific areas of inquiry and, collectively, cause the more problematic aspects of academia to malfunction long enough to afford a radical rewiring. This time is one informed by #MeToo, the Black Lives Matter movement, and impeding ecological catastrophes, highlighting progress but also the plethora of pernicious problems that still need radical responses. *Now* is the time to make sparks fly.

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ORCID iDs

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

Shona Bettany  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9141-1005>

Jannsen Santana  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1928-8126>

Note

1. Anecdotally, some of our colleagues were advised that studying sexuality would damage their career prospects.

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Author Biographies

Jack Coffin is based in the Department of Materials at the University of Manchester. His scholarly USP? Theorising phenomena that are Unconscious, Spatial, and Posthuman. He teaches fashion marketing modules but often learns more about style from his students. His email address is jack.coffin@manchester.ac.uk and he welcomes comments, constructive critique, and opportunities to conceptualise.

Christian A. Eichert is a Lecturer in Marketing at Goldsmiths, University of London. Drawing on his background in Sociology, Social Psychology, and Management Studies, Christian seeks to theorise

intersections of sexualities, markets, and consumption phenomena embedded in contemporary consumer cultures. His broader research interests include technology and innovation, collective forms of consumption, and the consumer behaviour of stigmatised and vulnerable social groups. Christian serves as a board member for the European Sociological Association's Research Network on Sociology of Sexuality.

Shona Bettany is a Professor of Marketing at Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield. She is a consumer ethnographer focusing on consumer culture in all its guises but more specifically on consumption and materiality, contemporary family consumption, and studies relating to gender and sexuality. She has published in *Sociology*, *Marketing Letters*, *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management* and the *European Journal of Marketing*.

Andrew Lindridge is a Reader in Marketing at Newcastle University Business School. Drawing upon CCT orientated themes, his research explores the tensions surrounding the deliberate exclusion of marginalised groups from the market based on their ethnicity, gender, religion, skin colour, or sexuality, and how this exclusion often leads to consumer resistance. In 2020 he was awarded the Shelby D. Hunt/Harold H. Maynard Award for Best Paper in *Journal of Marketing*. His research has been presented at numerous conferences and journals, including: *The Journal of Marketing*, *Annals of Tourism*, *Marketing Theory*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*.

David Rowe is a doctoral researcher at the University of Leeds undertaking a collaborative project with the History of Advertising Trust (HAT). His doctoral research explores sexual health advertising and promotion by analysing the use of language and images to reveal how advertisements have guided discourses of contagion and infection around sexual health. He has presented his research to a range of audiences (Macromarketing Conference, Chicago; Association for Consumer Research, Baltimore) and published in *Sociology*, and *Advances in Consumer Research*.

Jacob Östberg is Professor of Advertising and PR at Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden. He earned his PhD in 2003 at Lund University, Sweden. His research focuses on consumer culture and particularly on how meaning is created at the intersection of marketing, popular culture, and consumers' lived lives. In particular, Östberg has been interested in questions around gender and masculinity in a Nordic setting. His work has appeared in outlets such as *European Journal of Marketing*; *Journal of Consumer Culture*; *Consumption, Markets and Culture*; *Journal of Marketing Management*; and *Marketing Theory* as well as in several books and book chapters.

Gillian Oakenfull, PhD is a Professor of Marketing in the Farmer School of Business at Miami University. She earned her doctoral degree in marketing at the University of Houston. She is the Faculty Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the Farmer School of Business. She recently founded the Centre for KICKGLASS Change, dedicated to ensuring students and practitioners are beyond ready to succeed in increasingly diverse workplaces and marketplaces and to be agents of social change. Her scholarly work focuses on two areas of expertise (i) marketing to multicultural audiences, and (ii) measuring brand meaning and brand management.

Lisa Peñaloza is Professor of Marketing, KEDGE Business School, Bordeaux, France. There she teaches cultural branding strategy, qualitative research, and consumer culture in the marketing MS, the Executive DBA, and the PhD programs. Her ethnographic research explores how people collectively produce identity and community in consumption, navigate such collective identities and communities in brands, consumer cultures and marketplaces, and strive to organize consumption

and market activity, with attention to convergence and divergence along the intersectionalities of gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity and class.

Jannsen Santana is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Lifestyle Research Center at EMLYON business school, Écully, France. His research covers the role of cultural belief structures (e.g., religion, environmental beliefs) in shaping consumer culture and behaviour. Through ethnography and other qualitative research methods, his research investigates areas such as Consumer Experience, Sustainable Consumption and Production, and Queer Studies. His recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing Management* and *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption* second edition.

Diego Rinallo, PhD is associate professor of marketing at EMLYON business school (Écully, France) and a member of its Lifestyle Research Center. He studies how gender, sexuality, food, fashion, spirituality and religion are affected by market forces. His research has been published in leading academic outlets, including *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Business History*, *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, and *Consumption Markets and Culture*. He works with communities, NGOs, and governments to design and implement impactful sustainable development initiatives.

Luca M. Visconti is Professor of Marketing, USI, Lugano, Switzerland, where he has joined the Faculty of Communication, Culture, and Society. His teaching and research interests fall in the field of critical cultural marketing, with specific focus on consumer vulnerability, cultural branding, and narrative consumption. His work questions how markets, marketing, and consumption can act as mechanisms of social inclusion/exclusion, and the way they reinforce materialism and capitalism. He directs the Master in Marketing and Transformative Economy at USI, wherein the transformative potential of marketing is inspected through a variety of disciplinary and epistemological lenses.

Luciana Walther, D. Sc., is Associate Professor at the Federal University of São João Del Rei, Brazil. Her research examines the intersections of marketing, consumption, gender, sexuality, and sustainability, drawing on ethnography and art-based research. In 2017, she earned the honourable mention of the Sidney Levy Award. She is the Latin America Representative on the Board of the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium for the triennial 2020/2023. Her recent work can be found in the journal *Sustainability*, in the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Journal of Marketing Management*, the *Handbook of Research on Gender and Marketing*, and *The Routledge Companion to Marketing and Feminism*.