







**COMMENTARY**

# Moving gender across, between and beyond the binaries: In conversation with Shona Bettany, Olimpia Burchiellaro and Rohan Venkatraman

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**Abstract**

This panel discussion explores why marketing and consumer behavior has struggled to move beyond the binary, the importance of disrupting the conventional binaries to recognize gender/sex/ual diversity, and the challenges in so doing. It raises to the fore concerns about institutional pressures, sanitization of work, academic positionalities, everyday encounters of discrimination against gender/sex/ual diversity, and the emancipatory but oppressive dynamics of categories. Yet the panelists also reflect on ways to challenge binaristic thinking. Just being in the academy and doing (small but) meaningful acts of institutional activism can produce ripple effects and open pathways for a better articulation of lived experiences and realities.

**KEYWORDS**

discrimination, emancipation, gender(S), gender/sex/ual diversity, institutional activism, institutional pressures, oppression

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

As part of this issue of the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* on Troubling Genders, this article documents a panel conversation with three incredible scholars in the domain of gender/sex/uality in consumer research and beyond – Shona Bettany, Olimpia Burchiellaro and Rohan Venkatraman. The scholars have pushed the boundaries through which gender/sex/ual diversity is discussed in marketing and organization studies, challenging the confound of the binary systems that still dominate the discipline. Panelists were selected by the guest editors of this special issue. The panel conversation took place on March 7, 2023 via Zoom. In line with this special issue's focus on moving the discussions on gender(S) in marketing and consumer research forward, this panel discussion operated as a space to both celebrate the progress made so far as well as a continued call to move the agenda further—to explore what it means to go across, between and beyond the binaries.

## 2 | ON CHALLENGES IN GOING BEYOND EMBEDDED BINARIES

**Laurel:** We are excited to have this very illustrious panel and thank you for taking time. So let's delve into the first question. Why haven't we moved beyond the binary before now? And I'll start with Shona.

**Shona:** Well, I mean, as you know, myself and Susan Dobscha, Andrea Prothero and Lisa O'Malley wrote this paper ages ago about moving beyond the binary in consumer research (Bettany et al., 2010), and from that time, I think we have moved a little, a little. At that time, we were obviously involved in doing gender research and marketing, which was very, very niche. It is still actually very niche, to be honest and depressing, really. And we had a special issue of a journal, and we asked for papers that moved beyond the gender binary and we got so many papers that were, you know, “Men consume like this and women consume like that,” “Men think like this, but women think like that.” And we were just so depressed about it. It was, “We did this scale and that person is feminine, and that person's masculine.” That was sort of considered revolutionary at the time. And we were kind of saying, “Well, we're not really... that's not the angle we're coming from at all and we don't really want to go down that route or support that kind of work.” Have we got past that in marketing? I'm not 100% sure that we have. I think it is still very, “Women consume in a particular way and men consume in a particular way.” There's not much challenging of what's going on. And don't even let me get started on sexuality, because, you know, it is kind of well, I'm preaching to the converted here, aren't I? You know, “Gay people consume like this and lesbians consume like that.” It is OK, just very limited. And I think there is a very, small group of people who are trying to write beyond that kind of categorization but the dominant discourse is, women do this and men do that, you know, so I think we have moved on from 20 years ago, that but I don't think we've moved very far.

**Laurel:** And Rohan, I know that you're quite new to kind of academia as a Ph.D. Student, but probably in your studies, you had to embrace this literature and read through this literature. What did you pick up?

**Rohan:** So, one of the things I picked up I think that tessellates well with what Shona just ended on, which is the idea that there is sort of this hierarchy that marketing seems to reproduce that is, you know, there is this White male cis middle class consumer that we take as the

archetype for everything. So you know, a lot of studies in (*Journal of Consumer Research*) or (*Journal of Marketing*), which a lot of people consider the only valid marketing journals—which in and of itself is an entire question—but they, you know, they tend to create these hierarchies and I think people are: (a) maybe uncomfortable moving away from that and challenging what exists in the field; and (b) honestly, this comes from a point of the gender binary being a White hegemonic Western construct. I think so much of the gender research in marketing, you know, relies on the gender binary, which is tied to marketing's reliance on Whiteness and middle-class consumer subjectivities. So I think that's part of it. I think, to move away from the gender binary we also need to start thinking about: How do we move away from this one hegemonic understanding of who the stereotypical consumer is? And that's where I see the struggle being. I'm not going to say who, but I was talking to a very senior scholar who said that, you know, they submitted something to a top journal based on an intersectional analysis and they got serious amounts of pushback because [the journals] are not willing to confront these truths about power structures, so that's my take.

I got told that when I was starting my PhD, when I said I want to study drag, I got told, "You'll never find a job with this research." And that almost put me off doing it, but luckily, I had really good support. But there's also this pressure on like junior scholars to publish what's safe because there's so much pressure around, you know, wanting, needing to find a job and needing to, you know, be accepted by the academic community. You can't really do that if you're resisting and saying, you know, old categorical understandings of gender don't work anymore. You're going to get push back. And that brands you as somebody who's maybe a troublemaker and it is — yeah.

**Laurel:** I think it is really insightful to kind of think about how we not only have this hegemonic hierarchy that gets reproduced, but it gets reproduced in part because of these institutional forces that pressure academics to behave in certain ways as well. Olimpia, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

**Olimpia:** Yeah, no, totally. I mean as someone who was coming into the Business School from an anthropology background—I studied the anthropology of gender and sexuality—and I agree with Shona that I was sort of taken aback by people. Like the mainstream parts of gender research isn't really gender research because it is not interested in gender as an empirical question in its own right now. It is often synonymous with women. Just like doing sexuality research is also just about doing research on non-heterosexual people rather than being fascinated and interested and curious about gender and sexuality as empirical, messy concepts.

I guess if the question is like, "Why hasn't scholarship moved beyond the gender binary?," the first thing that came to my mind is, obviously... I'll come at it from a historical perspective. As Marxist feminists and queer Marxists have always told us, capitalism has actually been really, really invested in maintaining systems of power in general and gender binaries. The gender binary, in particular, is one of the ways to ensure the smooth operation of the economic system, and so forth. So maybe we haven't moved beyond the binary because of that.

But also, I think it is fascinating because so much of the research I've been doing in recent years is looking at how corporations have actually latched onto some forms of queerness and some kinds of non-binary transness, to market themselves as super friendly and super cool and super progressive. Obviously, I think these are massively polarizing trends because, on the one hand, we see the rise of an incredibly heinous kind of transphobia, whilst on the other hand, this super kind of cool marketization of certain kinds of transness or non-binary-ness. So, you know, I think it is interesting to reflect on how we haven't moved beyond the binary in some ways, but in some senses it does feel like some corporations or organizations have

managed to incorporate certain kinds of non-binaryness or certain kinds of queerness, as long as they don't like fundamentally threaten everything else. So I think it is also, I don't know, I think it is also important to ask: "What it is that we're doing when we are moving beyond the binary?" Is this a goal in and of itself, or is it tied to broader questions and genuinely emancipative projects about what it means to do kind of gender/sexuality consumer research so that it doesn't just become another LGBTQA+ kind of research, but that it actually becomes queer or disrupted in that sense. Yeah, so that's my thoughts.

**Rohan:** I agree with the entire point about, you know, capitalist systems finding it beneficial to reinforce this hierarchy and reinforce the binary. The one thing I did think about as Olimpia was speaking is that, I think one of the reasons why marketing and consumer research has stuck to the binary is because people find it easy. It is an easily understood form of historical categorization and we're only now... I mean, in the, you know, history of marketing academia, only in the last maybe 20 or 30 years have we even started to see a constructivist approach. We've always been such a positivist discipline. We're so used to these static categories as ways of classifying people that anything that's not easily broken down into an axis or a binary challenges people's assumptions, the way in which they think. And that's a fundamental challenge to people doing research.

**Shona:** And if you ask somebody what's one of the biggest, most key theories to come out of marketing, it's segmentation. And that's exactly where it all comes from.

**Laurel:** I'm so glad that you mention that because I think that there is a lot to say with market segmentation. Talking to companies, I find that they struggle to go beyond gender and one other identity variable. It's like the moment you add more nuances, it just becomes too hard for them to actually do their marketing.

### 3 | ON RETHINKING CATEGORIZATIONS OF GENDER, SEX AND SEXUALITY IN CONSUMER AND MARKETING RESEARCH

**Laurel:** The idea of segmentation gives us a nice segue to the next question about how we distinguish between gender and sexualities. We've noted that research tends to conflate them. I'd like to hear from you folks on how you differentiate, if at all, between these concepts. I'd like to open that up to you. So let's start with Rohan on this one and then we'll go to Olimpia and Shona.

**Rohan:** Okay. This was the question that I sort of struggled to think, like articulate, when I was doing my notes for this. And that's because I think the way sexuality is constructed, at least socially right now... I mean given, you know, we are seeing massive amounts of attacks on transgender individuals, and there's so much hatred and we are seeing almost like the resurgence of moral panic around queer identities, I think gender and sexuality are one of those things where it's a very — I'm not making a lot of sense but I think what it comes down to is gender is to me a very internal thing, it is how you relate to yourself and your body and the way you have been socialized and sexuality is your attachment to others. So it's almost about like the locusts of your focus. It's about, "What are you, prioritizing?" Are you prioritizing how you view yourself in relationships and society or are you looking at how you relate to other individuals? That more relational element is what I think sexuality is. Gender to me is very much an internal understanding of self, if that makes sense.

**Olimpia:** Yeah, sometimes my students ask me this question and they're like, "You do research on gender and sexuality, you're the perfect person to ask." And I'm like, I find this question so confusing to this day! But I think the reason I find this question confusing is because there's almost a tension between my kind of political and theoretical take on this question. So I think that politically it has been useful for certain things to separate them. For example, in saying that because men or someone who identifies as a man is feminine, doesn't mean he's gay or not. It's the same the other way around. It has been useful, I think, politically, in terms of advocating for trans rights as, like, a very specific kind of activism that's not necessarily related to sexuality and all these other things. So I think politically, it does make sense to separate them.

And they are clearly, they shouldn't be conflated. I think conflation is also a very specific word. I agree that some scholars tend to conflate them, but I also think that they are related in like some quite obvious and meaningful ways. So I often tend to think of sexuality as gendered and that gender also has something to do with desire. I mean, I guess the most obvious thing that comes to mind is the way that we define LGBTQ+ identities as also being gendered. So it clearly isn't only something that's got to do with only sexuality. I think the main problem is that... like the other problem I think is that if we do treat them as separate variables and especially in binary terms—like bodies are either kind of male or female, or gender and social roles are either masculine or feminine, these kinds of things—I think one of the consequences is that doing gender research basically just means talking about women and doing sexuality research ends up talking about LGBT people rather than treating these things as questions in their own rights. Again, kind of going back to that point, a very interesting question is not "are they separated," but "how do we explore the ways in which sex gender and sexuality are related to each other and interconnect... are in relationship with each other as separate concepts but are connected?" Treating that as a question of research, if you see what I mean, that's what kind of fascinates me about this question.

**Rohan:** Yeah, just to that point. As Olimpia was talking, I had this thought about the ways in which we construct sexual identities. Categories of sexuality are extraordinarily based on how we understand categories of gender. For example, like someone being gay is based on them being seen or identifying as a man. So, there are these sort of, you know, I hate the term 'causal relationships,' but they're very... I mean the way in which we categorize people's sexuality is very contingent. How we categorize them or how people categorize or understand their own gender and sexuality position. So there is this relational complexity that, like Olimpia says, we need to look at as a research question in itself rather than just treating these as sort of static categorical variables.

**Olimpia:** Yeah, and also that kind of, I have a bad example, but that really kind of makes me think of...that's why it is so infuriating that basically a bunch of like supposedly lesbian feminists have had this massive backlash against trans people, for example. I mean, I'm talking from the UK where it's kind of unbelievable, the levels of transphobia right now in this country. The kinds of queer phobias that queer people experience and trans people experience and women are obviously, at least to me, related to each other. You know, as a feminine man you get bullied not because you are a feminine man but because that attaches itself to other kinds of signifiers, like you're gay and all these kinds of things. Same with like, I guess, butch lesbians. So I mean, I just see, yeah there is some obvious kind of sort of similarities of experiences I think in certain cases between the ways in which queer people experience phobias that would lend themselves to [homophobia]. I basically understand these two things as related politically.

**Shona:** I think it's quite interesting drawing on what people have said. I think gender and sexuality are little boxes and life is easier, right, in the grand scheme of things—this is not my opinion—life is easier in the grand scheme of things if you can put people into a box. And, you know, there's all the identity politics as well, so it's a good thing as well. It's not just a bad thing. So boxes can actually be helpful, politically. But where they start to become problematic is where people don't fit into the boxes and then they start to link through from box to box and people don't know what to do with them anymore.

And one of the places that I've seen that happen, I mean from my experience, one of my best friends is gender fluid, and is fluid between, you know, presenting as a woman, presenting as a man. He was round at my house last night. He/she prefers to use he and she depending on what's happening. And I mean, we've been away on holiday, we have been friends for 20 years, and the place that we have seen the most vitriolic kind of transphobia has been in LGBT venues, which is quite scary, isn't it? And I think, you know, having to actually physically protect your friend, which is a bit weird, maybe I'm a bit more aggressive, I don't know, from a gang of gay men pushing him around in a bar, you know saying, "What you doing in here, you don't belong here!"

I've had the same. My husband identifies as bisexual and he was wearing a "some people are bisexual get over it" t-shirt at Pride. And our friends have a bar in Leeds and we were helping out because obviously Pride is their big event of the year. And he was rounded on by a group of gay men who said, "You're not bisexual, what you doing in here, you are telling a lie." And he said, "Why don't you ask my wife?" And they said, "Where is she?" And I came over and spoke to them and said, "Yeah, yeah. You know, why have you got this attitude in a space like this on a day like this, you know? Take a bloody look at yourselves, you're disgraceful."

We've been all over the place, you know, straight places, whatever. The only time I've ever seen really nasty, vitriolic transphobia has been in LGBT spaces. And I think that is because, this is my theory, that when you are an oppressed group and there's a historical oppression, those categories become really, really important to police and the stakes are so high. And what happens when you get that position of political activism and oppression over time—you know, the AIDS epidemic and all the history of oppression, all of those awful things that have happened—is that you end up getting people with privilege within that situation and the people with privilege are your White, cis, gold star gays basically. You know and don't they know it, you know? And don't they want to protect it. "This is our space, what are you doing here?" You know? I mean, I remember going to a venue, an LGBT venue, not a gay venue, an LGBT venue, and being asked, "What are you?" And I responded, "What do you mean what am I?" You know, being challenged. So, for me, I think this raises a really interesting point of, if you think of gender and sexuality as boxes that have both emancipatory and oppressive potential, then the issues come from where they start to leak into each other and what the people in those boxes do about it. And that's to me is where the interest is.

#### 4 | ON CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS OF GENDER/SEX/UALITY

**Martina:** We have probably touched on a lot of this in a very implicit way but I just want to bring us to a more explicit focus on these underlying assumptions. Do we need to challenge the conventional scholarship related to the binary and how can we use more inclusive language in



our work? I think the first one is, what are these kind of explicit underlying assumptions that we need to really interrogate from a research perspective?

**Rohan:** Okay. I think one of the things, one of the assumptions that I've been sort of pushing back on in my research at the moment, is the staticness of gender. I think there's this inherent opinion that, you know, once you identify as a man that sort of stays with you and you are not allowed to deviate from, you know, social, socially accepted notions of what a man is. And when those deviations do happen you are immediately categorize as "other". So, I think, rather than it being man, other, woman, other, we need to find a way to acknowledge that gender presentation and gender identity are not static categories. They have almost never been, historically speaking. And I don't see why we keep looking at them as binary categories. For example, I think around inclusive language. I think the one thing we need to do is—and I mean starting from people in this group—is publish work that uses things as simple as, you know, singular "they" pronouns. Like, I've got a manuscript under review at the moment where in my informants table, I've got a little note, you know, I explain at the bottom that a number of my informants are non-binary and trans and they use he/they, she/they, they/them pronouns. Something as simple as that which: (a) gives license to reviewers to be like, okay, this is, you know, there is a theoretical basis to accept this but then, (b) also shows other potential authors in that journal or in that space that this is an outlet that supports that kind of language. I think that's a good starting point. I know that might not seem like a lot. But at this point, small incursions will have ripple effects hopefully. And so, yeah, that's sort of where I'm at.

**Shona:** I think it is really interesting you say that because I have got my pronouns on my email signature and I also have an easy way to say my name because people tend to get my name wrong, which is not their fault, I've just got a complicated name. And quite a number of people in the School, the vast majority of people who have put an easy way to say their name have been the administrative staff, not the academic staff. And there was a study, it was on LinkedIn last week, that if you use pronouns on your signature, you're less likely to get offered a job or a promotion. So there you go, you know! And you wonder why people don't do it. It is kind of well, what harm does it do? You know? How is it harming anyone? Crikey, you know?

So, yeah, there are barriers still to doing things like that because it is seen as, I don't know, 'woke,' you know, this word that's become very hated in the sort of popular press and media. Woke comes from a really great space of understanding. As somebody ... like I was brought up in a working class background, and I understand what woke means. I understand that. When I left school with no qualifications, I was married very early, kids, divorced single mother and my mum died, unfortunately, because I absolutely adored her. And she left me some insurance money and I decided to use that money to go to university. And I remember the revelation of that women's studies module that I took with Beverley Skeggs, and Sara Ahmed. Can you believe? Those were my tutors! And I know what woke means. It happened to me, you know? So how is that such a disgusting term to people? It just amazes me.

Despite that, I think we need to get more fluid, we need to get more open and we need to create spaces, particularly in organizations where people can express that kind of, you know... Actually, no. The best thing to do is to have your pronouns on your signature, you know. How do you want to be addressed? Because often it is really difficult to have those conversations. Like one of my other friends is actually a drag queen, is gender fluid and kind of struggled with this all their lives. And again we go back to what happens in LGBT venues. When that person suggested that they might actually be bisexual, they were ostracized by two of their friends who have never spoken to them again. It is unbelievable, isn't it?

So in organizations, in places, public places, we need to open up those kinds of [conversations], and defend those kind of practices where people can speak about things, where people can be open and not close things down just because it seems safe... I think there's a hard wonness to it. It is all about knowledge and learning and opening up spaces where people can speak and talk and share their experiences. So if you want to, you know, if you meet somebody who it is not clear what their gender is— and let's face it, that could be anybody, like most people would look at me and go, "That's a woman," and they would probably say, "That's a straight woman," you know. I'm married, I'm married to a man and I look [straight], but that's not necessarily the case, is it. And having that knowledge there means people don't feel wrong footed or tripped up.... So for me, I'm all about just laying it all out and, you know!

**Martina:** That's really important what you're saying because it translates to the fact that... we need to see scholars brave enough...in their work to claim space in their publications and to also use particular language and educate around particular categories, so that other scholars can learn. Or, if they're thinking about interrogating this area that it is important to them that they don't seem afraid to do it. If somebody else has done it [it sets a precedence]. But how do we do it? This is the thing.... When we see publications or papers that don't use inclusive language, obviously we don't want to attract [attention to] them, [but we] need to be able to call it out.

**Olimpia:** Yeah, I agree, on the inclusive language point. Another thing that I would say, [and] I agree with everything that's been said, is that sometimes this thing about pronouns, for example, is only used for people who are visibly gender fluid and/or trans or non-binary, and that's really problematic because... I don't know, I mean, there's been, you know, situations in which everyone's...this is more like a classroom thing, but I have seen it also done in research where like people only put pronouns for people who are identified as they/them whereas no one else gets a pronoun because we assume that it is obvious. But that also works to out trans people, or to sort of like single them out as the ones who will need pronouns or to specify their pronouns. It is like especially important for cis people to do that, to sort of problematize the idea that it is kind of a taken for granted thing.

On the point about what assumptions need to be challenged to move beyond the gender binary, I think maybe a few years ago I would have agreed with Shona on this point of like, we need more education and learning more about the messiness and the intricacies of gender and sexuality as lived experiences that are fluid, that don't fit into boxes... But I mean there's also some obvious links between gender binaries or the violent resurgence of the gender binary... the ways that it is been kind of thrust [into societies]. I mean, I'm Italian. So in the past year, like Bolsonaro in Brazil, [in this country there are many] similar dynamics of really clinging onto the gender binary, like a whip with which to lash out against vulnerable communities. And I don't necessarily think that these are uneducated people. They know exactly what they are doing.

And so I think it is — so I don't know. I think, I'm in two minds about this. On the one hand, I do recognize the value of knowledge and sharing these experiences and moving beyond the gender binary in a way by educating or sort of making people aware of the complexity and the intricacies of lived experiences, and how this is all kind of fluid and messy, and people don't fit. But on the other hand, I question like the actual potential of this in a context in which gender binaries are so obviously politicized by... not by working class communities or people who haven't gone to university. Actually, no, not at all. It seems like these are particularly wielded by elites. And so I don't know what that means in terms, I mean, is it assumptions that need to be challenged in order to move beyond the gender body or is it fascism?



**Shona:** I don't know. I think that people become powerful because people put them there, you know? So I think if you do start to shift discourse on these things—and I think it has shifted— and it is hard, you've got to win hearts and minds with people. And it is a difficult thing to do. And I don't actually think it is working class communities any more than anybody else, you know? I think if you are a population vulnerable to populism in the way that population has become, then it is much easier for people like that to get into power and to feel that kind of hatred. If people understand more about it and are more educated, it is not necessarily meaning that they are not educated, it is meaning that they need to be unboxed a little bit in terms of the categories. I'm back to my box metaphor I'm afraid!...

I mean this row about drag queens in schools doing reading is a really interesting example of where people, the right wing kind of people, have tried to go, “Oh my god, you know, there's drag queens reading to children, and oh my god, [the children are] all going be warped and twisted and all the rest of it.” But actually, there's been a huge groundswell backlash on that because in the UK, particularly I think, we have a really, really strong history of drag queens entertaining children in pantomimes and the like. And so people have kind of gone, well hang on, that doesn't actually make a lot of intuitive sense. So it's articulations like that I think. I think maybe the word ‘education’ was the wrong word to use, but it's articulations like that which you can stand up in front of a room full of people and say, “This is wrong,” if they're all going, ‘Is it?’ It's that kind of a thing that you need to do. It's probably at the level of discourse but it's also at the level of lived experience and, you know, if more people are on — I don't know, I'm not really into RuPaul's Drag Race, I must admit. Rohan, don't judge me.

**Rohan:** Okay!

**Shona:** It is a bit too cleansed for me... But things like that shift discourse in a population because people love it and they're like, “Oh god, yeah!” And it is back to what you were saying, Rohan, about certain kinds of trans or certain kinds of sexuality or certain kinds of gender, but sometimes they're the actual articulation point. They're like the thin end of the wedge that starts to pull apart the ideas about men should do this, women should do that.

**Rohan:** But added to that I think Olimpia has a point about the gender binary increasingly being used as a weapon now. If you take the example of drag, you know how drag [has become] a major cultural flashpoint over the last couple of years. The people making the laws around trying to restrict drag, or, you know, leading the discourse around the harmfulness of drag are the same people who grew up with Robin Williams playing Mrs. Doubtfire. That wasn't seen as violence, right?

**Shona:** No.

**Rohan:** They're the same people who will bring clowns to birthday parties and clowns, you know...

**Shona:** The Pantomime Dame you went to see as a child [where] the principal boy is a girl, the older woman is a man, you know, this is sort of hardwired entertainment.

**Rohan:** Exactly! And I mean if you go back to even the seventies where you had David Bowie doing things that Harry Styles is trying to do and getting hammered for, or if you look at Freddie Mercury being one of the big stars of the eighties but being, you know, not presenting as a “masculine” man, these were the discourses that were there at the time. But I think with increasing awareness of these discourses, there's also been increasing politicization and increasing comfort in returning to the static categories because people are uncomfortable with anything that they don't necessarily understand. Olimpia's point about this becoming a political weapon is true. It is not necessarily an awareness thing... It is almost like it is a comfort place because they see their privilege being threatened by rising moves towards equality and moves

towards trying to legitimize different identities. They're now using this as a means of trying to put people back in their place. And I think that's a big danger of the binary categorizations of gender.

**Shona:** Yeah, I mean there was an interesting point [about feeling threatened]. I was giving a talk at the Stonewall Conference years ago, and it was about bisexuality in the workplace—because it doesn't exist, really, does it... I was talking to this group of transwomen and they were vehemently arguing the case that drag should be banned. It was a group of about 6 or 7 and they were saying, you know, they would walk out of anywhere that had a drag queen. They thought it was really transphobic. I must admit I was a bit mind blown by it. I don't know if you ever heard of that, Olimpia.

**Olimpia:** Yeah, and also coming from women who say that drag is bad for women, trans people [who] say that drag is bad... I mean I guess it goes back to that point you were saying about the ways in which people cling—people who have been attacked for being part of a category or for presenting in a certain way clinging on to that identity category for dear life and lashing out against all other things.

**Shona:** Yeah. It is complicated, isn't it?

**Olimpia:** Yeah.

## 5 | ON THE TENSIONS BETWEEN MAINSTREAMING AND SAFEGUARDING THE SCHOLARSHIP THAT DISRUPTS THE BINARY SYSTEM

**Mohammed:** What a rich conversation... We have spoken about the importance of disrupting categories, latching on to categories, and inclusive language. I'm going to take it a slightly different direction here. Do you think there might be any danger in mainstreaming theories that are related to marginalized categories such as mainstreaming queer theory, especially in this context of consumer and marketing research. Who wants to go first, Shona maybe?

**Shona:** I think it already is, in a way, in a lot of disciplines, not in marketing, you know. I mean, I don't know if any of you saw that paper that I did with Jack and Christian and David about PrEP that was in *Marketing Theory* (Bettany et al., 2022). What we wanted to do was open up the boxes because the classic consumer research study would have been: pick 20 cis White middle class men who are using PrEP and talk to them about their experiences of using PrEP and then theorize it. And we wanted to kind of say, well, we are not doing that. We are doing something completely different. [We are opening] it up to just PrEP and let's see what falls out. And that was a great methodology actually. You know, there is PrEP, let's just follow it as an important actor in the vista of sexual health and see what happens.

**Rohan:** [For one manuscript currently under review] we've had to sanitize a lot of these sort of complexities but we're still pushing like, you know, I was very clear about the fact that we are going to use inclusive pronouns. We are going to have, you know, discussions about the intersection of trans identities and drag queens. There are certain things we still had to sanitize to make it palatable to the marketing audience and I think that's something that gender and sexuality scholars and marketing have always had to do.

**Mohammed:** Yeah, I mean, it is really good to take up space but [let's talk] more about this sanitization process. When you use queer theory or gender studies and so on and you go into mainstream spaces, what happens? Are there any dangers? Should we actually go there? Should

we stay in more protected spaces, or should we go in mainstream work? And what happens there?

**Rohan:** I mean, there's a personal opinion and then there's an institutional survival opinion. Institutional survival would be: "No, do the safe thing. Keep it safe, get a career," especially if you're an untenured person. If you are still going through confirmation, "Don't push those buttons," because institutions have significant amount of power, and journals and publications dictate your success in this field, for better or for worse. My personal opinion? I think if you're open to having a fight, if you're ready to fight, then you need to do it, simply because I think expecting things to change without someone putting their feet to the fire and being willing to take that heat, it is not going to happen. I realize I don't think I'm going to change the world with my scholarship but, and my co-authors and I have talked about this, if my work on drag does get published, I'm likely going to get some hate. For example, I published a paper with another co-author on caste in India and we got a fair amount of hate for that because caste is a very contentious topic. But it is one of those things where I know that needed to be talked about. So I'm willing to fight. And I think that's the same for gender scholarship. If you are willing to fight and if you are willing to take the fight to the institutions that, you know, dictate success in the field, and if you are willing to do that and if you have the energy and importantly if you have the support system, then I think [you should].

**Shona:** I had this conversation today actually about pragmatism and being pragmatic in publications, which I think I have been throughout my whole career. But mainly that's been because, you know, I had to work all the way through my Ph.D. I was teaching 4 days a week the whole time. It took me 5 years. I had to support my kids with no other support. So I had to do as I was told in a lot of cases. And I've worked the limits of what is possible for me to do within that model. I haven't got 5 years to wait until I get one paper out, I can't do that because I'm not in that position and it is a position of privilege. I mean, I'm not having a go at you at all Rohan, but it is a position of privilege to be able to say, I can wait so many years without publishing. I wouldn't have been [able to]. I was told, actually in my first job, if you don't have at least one paper to put into the ref, a 3, at least, we are not putting you through probation. I had 2 kids at home I needed to support, so I didn't have the [choice].

I mean, [something like] the PrEP study (Bettany et al., 2022) would not have been published. And we were getting a lot of pressure [even today, with the PrEP article] to do the sort of classic consumer research approach, you know, "Where's your table detailing respondents?" And I did an ethnographic study. I talked to people in the dark corners of very dark rooms about, you know, they didn't want to take PrEP because they wanted to get HIV. They saw that as an intimacy with their partner who had HIV. These difficult subjects to talk about are difficult. And the more mainstream the journal... I actually think we were lucky to get it out. I don't think it would have flown anywhere else because it wasn't [sanitized enough]. But it is saying things that are important to say about sexuality, sexual health [still] in this kind of very sanitized way... Some of the practitioners that we had as part of our study, they can't see beyond these boxes themselves. And the people who are getting HIV are older people, people whose sexuality is not clearly defined, people who are homeless, people who are gay for pay, people who are really, really at the sharp end of having to do things that most people have a choice over, you know? So, these are difficult conversations you have to get out, and you have to start having them. But they're difficult conversations, even with the practitioners. You know, how do you give advice to somebody who is having unprotected sex on PrEP and he's getting syphilis? How do you give them advice? So, there is all sorts of complications there.

And I think in terms of knowledge, in terms of this question, you just have to do your best, I would say, within the constraints that you are actually facing because we are all humans and we're all in particular situations. I tend to tell people things about myself and, you know, I've written all about my breast cancer (Bettany, 2022) and all the other things that happened to me because I think it is really important to write things like that. It is important to write about yourself and to bring your body into the game because we are all these disembodied heads who sit in, you know, universities, and we filter this knowledge and this product comes out. And, you know, there's got to be more to it than that I think.

**Olimpia:** Oh, when you were talking, I was thinking of Chat GPT... I don't know if any of you have used it. It is like this robot that just writes things, but it writes in such a way that it is just pre-packaged knowledge. But to me, what was striking is how many academic articles actually sound like ChatGPT. So I mean, I think that in terms of sanitization... I think it is like when I first started my PhD with you, Shona, the first 6 months of my academic career, I think I was maybe a lot more hopeful, perhaps and naive about the potential to transform institutions through good critical work and fighting and stuff like that. But, I don't know, I mean, I think over the past, especially this year, with everything that's been going on in the UK and the Tories and everything, it is like, I don't know. I think I've stopped pretending that institutions, universities, journals, and academic disciplines are interested in anything but their survival at the cost of everyone else. So... I'm skeptical of the possibility of queering the university or X discipline. I guess [I think bringing] in queer theory into a specific discipline or into the academy... it ends up gentrifying it.

I use this concept of gentrification quite a lot. It captures that it is a process. It captures all of the things that are going on when institutions of power, or when, marginalized groups or theories or research or whatever perspectives become incorporated into the mainstream... there's a process of sanitization. For example, disciplines making, in my case, making queer theory into something that is actually less disruptive, that is clean, that is useful and that tells us something important about, in my case, international relations, or in another case, organizational theory or whatever. But this is precisely what I think queer theory was supposed to disrupt, no? So, I never ask what we should do about anything because I never have any answers on that point. I'm really, really good at the critical, of telling you what's wrong, but not necessarily about the solution. But, like, the solution might just be to stop. To sort of be pragmatic in that sense of like, you know—and this is the question I've been grappling with also—maybe academia can just be a 9–5. That is probably better than a lot of other 9–5's but it can also just be a job, yeah.

**Shona:** I don't think you should stop being, I think, you know, oh god, I really want to say the “personal is political.” I'm being really an old-fashioned feminist! But just I know you, Olimpia. And just by being in the Academy you are making a difference.

**Olimpia:** Thanks. I don't agree with it but thank you.

**Shona:** I think, yeah... I think maybe 20 years ago, would I have been sat here as a Professor? Probably not. I'm the wrong class, I'm the wrong, you know, whatever.

**Olimpia:** Wrong!

**Shona:** Yeah, just wrong. But you know, I think just by being places, being a subject in the world—these are really, really old-fashioned feminist concepts—just by being a subject in a particular world and doing what you can in terms of, you know, you're not going to transform the whole world. You know? Although I did think that when I came into academia. I was like you, Olimpia. I was, you know, “What is this? Why can't I do this? Why can't I say this?” But you can do what you can. That's all you can do. And just by being there, you know, just by having this conversation. Look at this conversation.

**Laurel:** This has been quite the conversation. Real. Genuine. Grappling with so many complexities and challenges. And an honest contemplation of the institutional activism that we can all do just by being in academia and doing small but meaningful practices. I want to thank you all for making the time to talk with us, and for being so open to share about your thoughts and experiences. As Shona said, just by having this conversation, perhaps we can make a difference in the way people perceive, think about, or work with concepts of gender(S), sex and sexuality. Thank you all!

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**Dr. Rohan Venkatraman** (he/him) is a consumer culture researcher who studies how consumer identities challenge and are challenged by marketplaces. His primary stream of research examines the interplay between bodies and emotions within marketplaces; as well, as how marketplaces structure inclusion and exclusion of consumers through power hierarchies, such as stigma.

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