

**The Danger of Inclusion as Low-Hanging Fruit or Forbidden Fruit:  
Towards Structural Legitimacy in Marketing Scholarship**

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Aaron J. Barnes ([aaron.barnes@louisville.edu](mailto:aaron.barnes@louisville.edu), 502-438-8633) is the LaDonna and Charlie Johnson Assistant Professor of Marketing, College of Business, University of Louisville, USA. Esther Uduehi ([eouduehi@uw.edu](mailto:eouduehi@uw.edu)) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing and International Business, University of Washington–Seattle, USA. We would like to thank the *JPPM* Special Issue editorial team, including two anonymous reviewers, for their valuable comments during the review process. We would also like to thank Tonya Williams Bradford for her helpful comments on previous versions of this manuscript.

## **The Danger of Inclusion as Low-Hanging Fruit or Forbidden Fruit: Towards Structural Legitimacy in Marketing Scholarship**

### **ABSTRACT**

This commentary examines how marketing scholarship has come to treat inclusion research through a persistent binary: as either low-hanging fruit—perceived as visible, timely, and easily celebrated, yet often dismissed as conceptually thin while requiring comparable rigor to execute—or forbidden fruit—perceived as politically risky, professionally dangerous, or insufficiently “core” to the discipline. Drawing on our experience developing and disseminating inclusion research, we argue that this binary constrains theoretical development and limits the field's capacity to understand how markets function by positioning inclusion as a moral stance rather than a structural feature of market design, segmentation, and value creation. When marketing treats inclusion as low-hanging fruit, it incentivizes scholars toward reactive, moment-driven findings rather than enduring theory, marginalizing scholars within the very moments that render their work urgent. When treated as forbidden fruit, inclusion research becomes professionally dangerous to pursue, and its insights are preemptively discounted. We therefore reframe inclusion as a foundational domain of marketing scholarship essential to understanding markets, institutions, and systems of value. We outline key elements of structural legitimacy and their implications for policymakers, practitioners, marketing educators, journal editors, and doctoral programs, calling for sustained, structure-building inclusion research that the field cannot afford to treat as peripheral, reactive, or politically contingent.

*Keywords:* inclusion, structural legitimacy, forbidden fruit, low-hanging fruit

Inclusion research—scholarship that intentionally examines how diverse and marginalized identities shape and are shaped by marketplace processes—occupies an unstable position in marketing. When cultural and political conditions foreground diversity, the field celebrates and embraces the work as timely, relevant, and necessary. When those conditions shift, the field labels the same work as too political, too narrow, or professionally risky to pursue. Our experiences reflect this pattern: the same research that earns praise in one moment can become delicate in the next, not because the insights changed, but because the institutional and regulatory climates have. These shifts reveal a problem that inspires this commentary.

### **Low-Hanging Fruit and Forbidden Fruit**

Through our experience, we questioned whether the field evaluates inclusion research on its theoretical grounding or its context. We suggest that the field consistently funnels it into one of two persistent categories. The first is low-hanging fruit: work embraced when it affirms existing assumptions, produces encouraging results, or offers narratives that are easy to digest. Crucially, we use ‘low-hanging fruit’ to characterize how the work is *viewed*, not to describe ease of execution. In this frame, readers view inclusion as intellectual produce: sweet, seasonal, and quickly consumed. Praise comes easily, but the ease carries its own risk: readers may celebrate its familiarity rather than depth, unintentionally reducing the work to moral signaling instead of theory-building.

The second is forbidden fruit: work deemed too political, identity-driven, or professionally risky to take seriously on its own terms. Even when empirically strong, the work is treated with suspicion, as if the questions themselves signal ideological bias rather than theoretical curiosity. Attention to marginalized consumers, structural inequalities, and identity processes becomes grounds for questioning legitimacy rather than evaluating contribution.

Where low-hanging fruit is consumed too quickly, forbidden fruit is never fully tasted: the field preemptively discounts its insights and warns authors away from its pursuit.

Although diagnostic, these categories are not fixed. A topic's status may shift depending on framing, theory, or readers' interpretations. Consider scholarship on intersectionality and marketplace power. Readers who treat intersectionality as rigid or binary risk categorizing the work as forbidden and too ideological to be rigorous. Readers who flatten intersectionality into an additive logic, assuming more identities simply means more disadvantage, risk categorizing the work as low-hanging fruit or too obvious to engage with theoretically. These interpretive pressures shape the kinds of questions scholars feel permitted to ask and the answers the field becomes primed to accept (Grier et al. 2024).

### **Inclusion Research Need Not Always Point to Positives**

The binary shapes careers and distorts findings. Inclusion is not inherently uplifting; its effects can be ambiguous, contradictory, or even regressive (Leslie, Kim, and Emily 2025). Yet the field flattens this complexity when forcing inclusion work into categorical extremes. Low-hanging fruit demands encouraging results, and forbidden fruit invites suspicion of any result at all. Neither frame creates conditions for honest inquiry.

Findings from recent work illustrate what honest inquiry can reveal. On the surface, minority-ownership labels increased consumer support, a result easily framed as proof that inclusion "works," and celebrated as low-hanging fruit. But the deeper story was more complicated. Consumers supported minority-owned brands not solely because of equitable intentions but because doing so helped them regulate their own feelings of prejudice (Uduehi and Barnes 2025), preserving self-image rather than disrupting structural inequality. A positive behavior can coexist with a self-serving motivation. An inclusive gesture can soothe the very

systems it appears to challenge. The field needs more inclusion research that is free to follow the evidence, rather than confirm the expected narrative (Dover, Kaiser, and Major 2020; Kirby, Russell, and Hildebrand 2025).

### **Flattened Nuance Narrows the Field**

These structural framings shape not just interpretation but who enters the field and what they feel permitted to study. As doctoral students, we were cautioned against branding ourselves as race or culture scholars. The warnings from senior colleagues who care about our careers were delivered with good intentions and a consistent message: marketing views inclusion research as too obvious to be novel, too political to be safe, or too precarious to build a career on. Underneath was a deeper assumption: marketing already understood enough about inclusion, and further inquiry risked redundancy or controversy rather than theoretical advancement.

That assumption is wrong, and its consequences compound. A review system that rewards counterintuitive findings and penalizes work that appears ideologically predictable slows individual careers and narrows the questions the field is willing to ask. When the field steers away early-career scholars from structural inquiry, marketing loses not just their contributions but its own capacity to theorize how inequality is produced and maintained in marketplace systems. Inclusion framed as either simplistic, or suspect does not disappear from markets. It disappears from marketing.

### **Towards Structural Legitimacy**

Markets that ignore inclusion misread how markets work. When data ecosystems underrepresent marginalized communities or when segmentation treats minority consumers as edge cases, the resulting theories are not neutral but fundamentally incomplete. Structural legitimacy means treating inclusion as integral to market functioning, as central as pricing or

decision-making, not because it is the right thing to do, but because markets cannot be accurately understood without it. Table 1 maps the structural patterns that sustain this and the interventions each stakeholder group can enact to address it.

For practitioners, structural legitimacy reframes inclusion as part of how markets create and distribute value, not as reputational insurance. Embedding inclusion into product testing, research pipelines, and design teams improves firms' abilities to understand demand, identify unmet needs, and anticipate market shifts.

For marketing educators, structural legitimacy calls for more than adding a week on diversity. It requires integrating inclusion into the core analytic questions students are trained to ask: Who is represented in the data? What assumptions underlie our models? Who bears the costs when markets fail? These questions teach students that system-level inclusion is essential to theory-building and value creation while revealing how markets misrepresent or underserve entire groups.

For journal editors, structural legitimacy means building infrastructure that does not depend on the cultural moment. Editors should actively commission systematic reviews and special issues, recruit inclusion scholars to editorial boards, and develop review criteria that evaluate inclusion work on theoretical contribution rather than topical familiarity.

Treating inclusion as structurally legitimate enables marketing to build knowledge that outlasts attention cycles and simplistic binaries. It shifts the question from whether inclusion research is low-hanging or forbidden to examining the deeper systems that govern who is seen, who is served, and who bears the costs when markets fail (Uduehi, Saint Clair, and Crabbe 2025). When the field recognizes inclusion as fundamental to marketing, the discipline gains the theoretical footing to study how inequality is produced, reproduced, and sometimes disrupted,

not because the moment demands it, but because the questions cannot be avoided. This shift creates room for richer theory and a fuller understanding of how markets function. Elevating inclusion to its structurally legitimate place is not merely a correction in emphasis; it is a reckoning with what marketing is willing to see and become.

**Table 1.** The Expected Benefits of Enacting Structural Legitimacy Across Marketing's Institutions

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Current Gatekeeping Pattern</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Expected Benefit</b>
<b>Policymakers</b>	Inclusion treated as symbolic rather than a market design problem; marginalized communities underrepresented in data ecosystems, rendering their experiences invisible to policy	Require representative data collection; mandate algorithmic transparency and equity impact audits	Markets that accurately represent who is served and burdened; inequity treated as inefficiency rather than moral failure (Bone et al., 2014; Lambrecht and Tucker 2019; Scott et al., 2024)
<b>Practitioners</b>	Inclusion siloed into reputation management, structurally separated from product design, segmentation, and value creation	Build inclusion into product testing, research pipelines, and design teams as a core business practice (Shulman and Gu 2024)	Sharper demand intelligence; competitive advantage from underserved segments; reduced market uncertainty
<b>Marketing Educators</b>	Inclusion treated as elective; core models presented as universal when built on partial data, obscuring whose experiences count as the market	Restructure analytic training so questions of representation, assumption, and market cost are built into every course	Students who identify structural gaps; theory that reflects how markets actually function across diverse groups
<b>Journal Editors</b>	Inclusion scholarship evaluated reactively, legitimacy tied to cultural moment; editorial boards lack expertise to assess inclusion work on its own terms	Commission systematic reviews and special issues (e.g., Arsel et al. 2022); recruit inclusion scholars to editorial boards; develop review criteria based on theoretical contribution rather than topical familiarity	Cumulative inclusion knowledge that outlasts attention cycles; review culture that evaluates inclusion work on theoretical merit
<b>Doctoral Programs</b>	Early-career scholars steered away from inclusion research through warnings framed as pragmatic, reproducing the field's blind spots	Connect students to inclusion research communities (e.g., Race in the Marketplace); counter the self-fulfilling prophecy that inclusion research is too risky	Scholars who pursue structural questions without professional penalty; a field that builds inclusion knowledge rather than discouraging generative content

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