

Beautiful Minds: Marketing in the Age of Neurodiversity

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Neurodiversity refers to natural variation in human cognitive functioning. Just as *biodiversity* is essential for a robust and resilient ecological system, *neurodiversity* enriches societal systems by contributing a range of perspectives, skills, and ways of thinking. When individuals diverge from dominant societal standards of 'normal' neurocognitive functioning, they're neurodivergent, which in itself is neither automatically disabling nor a superpower, but value neutral. Differences in cognitive function do not discriminate by age, gender or race but arise from the combination of genetics and the environment. Cognitive function is affected by many things including stress, drugs and alcohol, the sequelae of diseases like stroke, cancer, diabetes, COVID-19, or conditions like grief and menopause – although neurodiversity diagnoses are mostly associated with neurodevelopmental disorders, e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia (American Psychiatric Association, 2023). However, the strengths-based neurodiversity paradigm challenges the idea that neurological differences are mental disorders to be treated or cured (Walker, 2021). Given that at least 15% of the population are estimated to be neurodivergent (Gidziela *et al.*, 2023), differences in how brains process information should instead be valued and celebrated.

Recognizing and supporting consumers with different neurotypes can bring about unique marketplace solutions that benefit everyone. Consider, for example, sensory-friendly clothing (McKinney and Eike, 2023), stimulation toys (Roche, Back and Van Herwegen, 2024) and adaptive built environments (Maslin, 2022), all designed for neurodivergent minds but advantageous for neurotypicals as well. Facilitating the well-being of neurodivergent consumers (Go Jefferies and Ahmed, 2022) and employees (Austin and Pisano, 2017) can help companies gain competitive advantage. Unfortunately, neurodivergent consumers are systematically marginalized in the marketplace because interactions can be more difficult compared to neurotypical consumers (Go Jefferies, 2023). Differences in communication styles can lead to stigmatization (Milton, Gurbuz and López, 2022; Turnock, Langley and Jones, 2022), while the billion-dollar industry built around 'treating' neurodivergent consumers has been accused of commodifying neurodiversity for profit (Timimi, 2010; Broderick, 2022; Chapman, 2023).

Drawing on the broader diversity discourse in marketing (DeBerry-Spence *et al.*, 2013), which calls for the recognition, inclusion, and celebration of all differences among people, in this track we propose a radical reexamination of neurodiversity within the marketplace to develop a model that respects neurological differences as a social identity similar to ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Our goals are twofold: (1) to develop essays for potential inclusion in a proposed Routledge book, *Neurodiversity and the Marketplace*; and (2) to produce practical guidelines for marketing researchers and practitioners on how to ethically design for neurodiversity. The latter may take the form of a handbook, website or journal article. The marketing literature on neurodiversity is scant; as such there are many potential directions that could be explored. Some examples are provided in Appendix 1.

Who should apply? Anyone interested in mental health, cognitive functioning, biopsychosocial models of disease, stigma, disability, diversity or inclusive marketing practices will find this session valuable. We seek a wide variety of track applicants, including academics from different disciplines (e.g., public policy, marketing, psychology, and education) and non-academics (e.g., neurodiversity activists, industry professionals, advocacy groups). We welcome applications from doctoral students and experienced professionals alike. Experience studying, supporting, or representing suspected or diagnosed neurodivergent people is welcomed but not required. Neurodiverse applicants are especially welcome.

How to apply? Please include (1) a copy of your CV and (2) a 500-word statement outlining what neurodiversity might mean for marketing and/or consumer well-being *within your area of expertise* and identify key research priorities (see Appendix 1; additional ideas are welcome) and (3) a brief description of your experience (if any) with neurodiversity (for example, you may yourself be neurodivergent or have a child with ADHD).

Appendix 1: Marketing in the Age of Neurodiversity Potential Research Areas

Exclusion of neurodiverse consumers

By dint of occupying the extremes of a normal distribution of cognitive function, the experiences and behaviors of neurodivergent consumers have been systematically ignored (Javor *et al.*, 2023). What are the ethical and epistemic implications of this exclusion? What does it mean for the validity of statistical models of consumer behavior? How can researchers better include the experiences of neurodiverse consumers?

Consumption behavior of neurodiverse consumers

Marketing research into neurodivergent consumption behavior is limited but suggests important differences compared to neurotypicals. For example, neurodivergent consumers have a lower tendency to try new products or services (Baas and van Raaij, 2010), and find it harder to quit smoking (Mitchell *et al.*, 2019). Given that differences in cognitive functioning exist on a continuum, understanding extreme consumption experiences can help improve the marketplace for all. What consumption-related areas are important to investigate (e.g., foods, medications (stimulants, alcohol, drugs), addiction, gambling, financial services, housing, health care, social platforms, transportation).

Designing neurodiversity-inclusive services

In the social model of disability, functional impairment emerges as a result of barriers in society, rather than a person's impairment or difference. For example, communication within similar neurotypes is more effective than between neurotypes (Williams, Wharton and Jagoe, 2021). Called the double empathy problem (Milton, Gurbuz and López, 2022), this suggests service encounters may experience unforeseen challenges if they are not designed to appeal to different neurotypes. Neurodivergent consumers may benefit from different information design (Wilkinson and Madel, 2019). How can marketing design to better accommodate neurodiverse consumers, both online and offline? How can the service environment be more enabling, rather than disabling (e.g., store atmospherics, lighting, smell, touch, noise, space, signage & way-finding)? How can brands be more inclusive in their language and vocabulary (verbal, non-verbal, visual image, intonation, frequency, clarity, etc.)?

Exploitation of neurodiverse consumers

Critical neurodiversity research frequently demonizes the exploitative role of marketing that commodifies neurodivergence rather than respecting human rights (Broderick, 2022; Chapman, 2023). Marketers may be accused of engaging in “neurodiversity light,” using neurodiversity as a buzzword to expand a commercial market. For example, innovations such as fidget spinners are marketed as interventions with insufficient testing (Cihon *et al.*, 2020). How can marketing avoid taking advantage of neurodivergent consumers? What are the philosophical and ethical considerations when designing neuro-inclusive experiences? Neurodivergent consumers are not a homogenous group (Go Jefferies and Ahmed, 2022). How do marketers account for segments with different communication and learning styles, educational needs, sensory perception and processing differences, distractibility?

Consequences for neurodiverse consumers

How is the neurodiversity paradigm affecting stigma, culture, shaming, normalization, bullying, trolling, isolation, intimate, familial and social relationships, comorbidities, and opportunities for well-being?

Innovation in neurodiversity treatment

How are businesses marketing products and services for and designed/produced/run by neurodivergent people engaging in alternative market formation? What effects do Universal Design (products, communications, servicescapes, customer journeys), Assistive technology: AI, companions, chatbots, LLM lexicons, automated companions, Enhancement and Computer-Brain-Interface device/implant development, Biohacking (LSD, adaptogens), Stim toys, Focus/Concentration, Spatial computing, Masking, Social media, (De)Medicalization, complex conditions, application of APA DSM treatment, cure, classification and coverage have on consumer well-being?

Appendix 2: Track Activity Outline

Pre Conference	
Nov 15, 2024	Deadline for participant applications
Dec 31, 2024	Track chair submit participant application reviews to conference chairs
Jan 15, 2025	Notification to conference applicants
Jan 30, 2025	Introductory Zoom meeting. Personal experience with neurodiversity. Key readings shared.
Feb - May 2025	Establish a digital collaboration board and monthly Zoom meetings. Review insights from readings and outline relationships to own research. Identify potential avenues for research. Prepare literature review.
During Conference	
Jun 12, 2025	Participant arrival.
Jun 13, 2025	9-12 Dialogical working session: review proposed avenues of research. 12-2 Lunch. 2-5 Dialogical working session: develop integrated framework/model. 7-9 Team Dinner.
Jun 14, 2025	9-12 Dialogical working session: refine integrated framework/model. 2-5 Museum visit 7-9 Conference Dinner (on campus).
Jun 15, 2025	9-12 Dialogical working session: develop post conference plan.
Post Conference	
Aug 2025	Propose chapter titles for Routledge book on <i>Neurodiversity and Marketing</i>
Dec 2025	Produce guide (handbook/website) for marketing researchers and practitioners on how to design ethically for neurodiversity.
Apr 2026	Finished book chapters / journal articles.

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Appendix 2: Track Co-Chair Biographies & Relevant Publications

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Josephine's research focuses on service innovation and social change. Her work has been published in top journals including *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, and *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. A regular participant in TCR Conferences since 2015 (Transforming Patient Experience, 2015; 2017; Digital technology and eTCR, 2019; Consumer Mental Well-being, 2023, she served as a Chair on the Family Caregiver Well-being track in 2021. Recently she co-Lead the interdisciplinary Neurodiversity Think Tank at MPPC 2024, which included representatives from government, advocacy groups, and nonprofits, activists as well as consumer behavior researchers.

Relevant publications

- Novakovic, K; Thumbarathy, D; Peeters, M; Geoghegan, M; **Go Jefferies, J**; Hicks, C; Manika, D; Dai, S (2023), 'Zero-waste circular economy of plastic packaging: The bottlenecks and a way forward.' *Sustainable Materials and Technologies*. 38, e00735. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.susmat.2023.e00735>
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- Bowyer, Holt, **Go Jefferies**, Wilson, Kirk & Smeddinck (2022), 'Human-GDPR Interaction: Practical Experiences of Accessing Personal Data'. CHI'22, April 29-May 05, 2022. New Orleans, LA. — Best Paper Honorable Mention. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3501947>
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Jane Machin, MFA, Ph.D. earned her doctorate in Marketing at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Her award winning research examines the intersection of marketing, mental health and consumer behavior. A regular participant in TCR conferences since 2009, Jane has successfully co-chaired three prior TCR conference sessions on mental health and marketing (2017, 2021, 2023) and has published on the subject in top journals including *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *Psychology and Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Consumer Affairs*. She has served as co-guest editor for a special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Marketing* on mental illness and marketing.

Relevant Publications

- **Machin, Jane E.**, and Rutelione A., (forthcoming) “Social Innovation, Mental Health and the Metaverse,” in L. Steinfeld, D. Littlewood, I. Garnelo-Gomez, and G. Ciambotti (eds), *The Elgar Companion to Social Innovation and the UN Sustainable Development Goals*.
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