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International Journal of Research in Marketing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar



Full length article

Cycles of inequality in the marketplace: Insights from macro, marketer, and consumer perspectives[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

"First received on 28 May 2024 and was under review for 7½ months.

Area Editor: Nailya Ordabayeva

Accepting Editor: Martin Schreier

Keywords:

Inequality

Status

Discrimination

Power

Social class

Income distribution

ABSTRACT

Seeking inequality via differentiation is a fundamental theme in the marketing literature: consumers derive utility from products that convey socially valued attributes, and marketers target consumers by giving them opportunities to differentiate on socially valued attributes. However, as a large body of evidence shows, inequality can reduce consumer well-being and limit economic growth. In this paper, we take a systemic view of marketplace inequality, examining the interdependence among consumers, marketers, and macro forces in shaping inequality in markets for goods and services. Our broad review of the marketing literature across ten marketing journals and a variety of subdomains within the field (e.g., macromarketing, consumer behavior, marketing strategy, quantitative marketing) suggests that macro forces, marketers, and consumers are all part of a dynamic system in which each contributes to creating, perpetuating, and disrupting cycles of marketplace inequality. By highlighting the process by which inequality can be created, perpetuated, and reduced, we hope to give marketing researchers and practitioners insight into interventions that have the potential to increase consumer well-being and marketer profitability.

[☆] This article is part of a special issue entitled: 'Choice' published in International Journal of Research in Marketing.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2025.09.004>

Available online 9 September 2025

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1. Introduction

Seeking inequality via differentiation is a fundamental theme in the marketing literature: consumers derive utility from products that convey socially valued attributes, and marketers target consumers by giving them opportunities to differentiate on socially valued attributes. Inequality affects not only the consumption patterns of consumers, but also the profitability of products and services offered by marketers. However, inequality can have negative effects on consumer well-being and economic growth, and inequality has been increasing over the last few decades, particularly in countries such as the United States, China, and Russia (Qureshi 2023), becoming a top priority for organizations like the United Nations¹ and World Bank.² In this paper, we examine the interdependence among consumers, marketers, and macro forces in creating, perpetuating, and reducing inequality in markets for goods and services. By highlighting the process by which inequality can be created, perpetuated, and reduced, we hope to give marketing researchers and practitioners insight into interventions that have the potential to increase consumer well-being and marketer profitability.

We define marketplace inequality as the uneven distribution of socially valued “positional” attributes among consumers, which creates disparities in consumers’ abilities to fulfill their needs in market exchange. Positional attributes include resources, demographic characteristics, social identities, and other socially desirable attributes that give consumers an advantage in fulfilling their needs (Heffetz, 2011; Heffetz & Frank, 2011). Consumers may create inequality by recognizing new differentiating attributes (e.g., as social media followers or influencers), perpetuate inequality by buying products and services that reflect existing macro-level hierarchies (e.g., based on race, gender, or income), or disrupt inequality by refusing to buy products differentiated on these attributes. In turn, consumers’ actions create incentives for marketers and contribute to macro-level hierarchies and systems. Marketers can create inequality by designing goods and services that can be used to convey new positional attributes (e.g., tiers of a loyalty program) and perpetuate inequality by using macro-level hierarchies (e.g., race, gender, income) as inputs to price, product, and communication decisions, which may reduce product access and utility for certain segments. Marketers also have the potential to disrupt inequality cycles by enhancing access to products and services among consumers who have low levels of positional attributes. Macro forces shape the environments of consumers and marketers, and are, in turn, strengthened and weakened by their actions.

We propose that these interactions among macro forces, marketers, and consumers create cycles of inequality in the marketplace (see Fig. 1). Cycles of inequality are reinforcing processes driven by macro forces, marketers’ strategies, and consumer behavior that create and perpetuate disparities in individuals’ ability to fulfill their needs within the marketplace. For instance, reflecting macro level social hierarchies related to gender, a power tool company might offer “standard” tools that are a better fit for men’s larger hands at most of their retail partner’s outlets, while offering higher-priced “specialty” tools designed for women only at some outlets. Female consumers, who do not find tools available in sizes to fit them or who find the prices of these specialty tools too high, become less likely to buy, reducing incentives for the company to offer power tools that are a better fit for women and reinforcing gender-based stereotypes about the use of these products in the macro system.

Our framework is informed by a broad review of the marketing literature between 2013 and 2024 across ten marketing journals and across a variety of subdomains within the field (e.g., macromarketing, consumer behavior, marketing strategy, quantitative marketing). We build on prior work examining the effects of experiencing inequality on consumers (Goya-Tocchetto & Payne, 2022; Ordabayeva & Lisjak, 2022), the macro aspects of inequality (Crockett, 2022), and the marketer’s role in creating, perpetuating, or reducing inequality (Ashik et al., 2025). While prior research on inequality has largely focused on a single level of analysis (see Crockett [2022] for an exception in the context of race), we focus on the interactions among consumers, marketers, and macro forces, answering calls for a more systemic approach (Mende et al., 2024; Ordabayeva & Lisjak, 2022; Uduehi et al., 2024). We think of marketplace inequality as a system in which the actions of consumers, marketers, and macro systems affect each other in creating, perpetuating, or reducing inequality, and we go beyond the focus on any single dimension of inequality (e.g., financial inequality or racial inequality) by examining multiple socially valued positional attributes. We hope that our focus on inequality in the marketplace provides a useful perspective for researchers to understand how both consumers and marketers can create new dimensions of inequality or reinforce existing dimensions of inequality and which actions they can take to disrupt inequality cycles.

In the following sections, we examine how macro forces, marketers, and consumers each contribute to the creation, perpetuation, and disruption of inequality cycles. We conclude by proposing a research agenda aimed at enhancing our understanding of marketplace inequality as a system.

2. What is marketplace inequality?

We view marketplace inequality as a *systemic*, *dynamic*, and *multidimensional* phenomenon: the result of macro-level forces, marketers’ actions, and consumers’ preferences that intersect over time, resulting in disparities in consumers’ abilities to fulfill their needs in the marketplace. We follow an emerging perspective that views inequality as the outcome of a value hierarchy: a structure in which individuals are ranked based on socially valued dimensions that become positional attributes (Trujillo-Torres et al., 2024). Positional attributes are attributes for which utility depends on consumers’ relative standing compared to others (i.e., how much of a given attribute I have relative to others), while non-positional attributes provide utility independent of others’ consumption (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). This distinction is important because consumers often sacrifice absolute welfare for relative position. Positional attributes include resources (e.g., financial, social), demographic and psychographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, “busyness”,

¹ UN Sustainable Development Goal 10; <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal10>.

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/isp>.

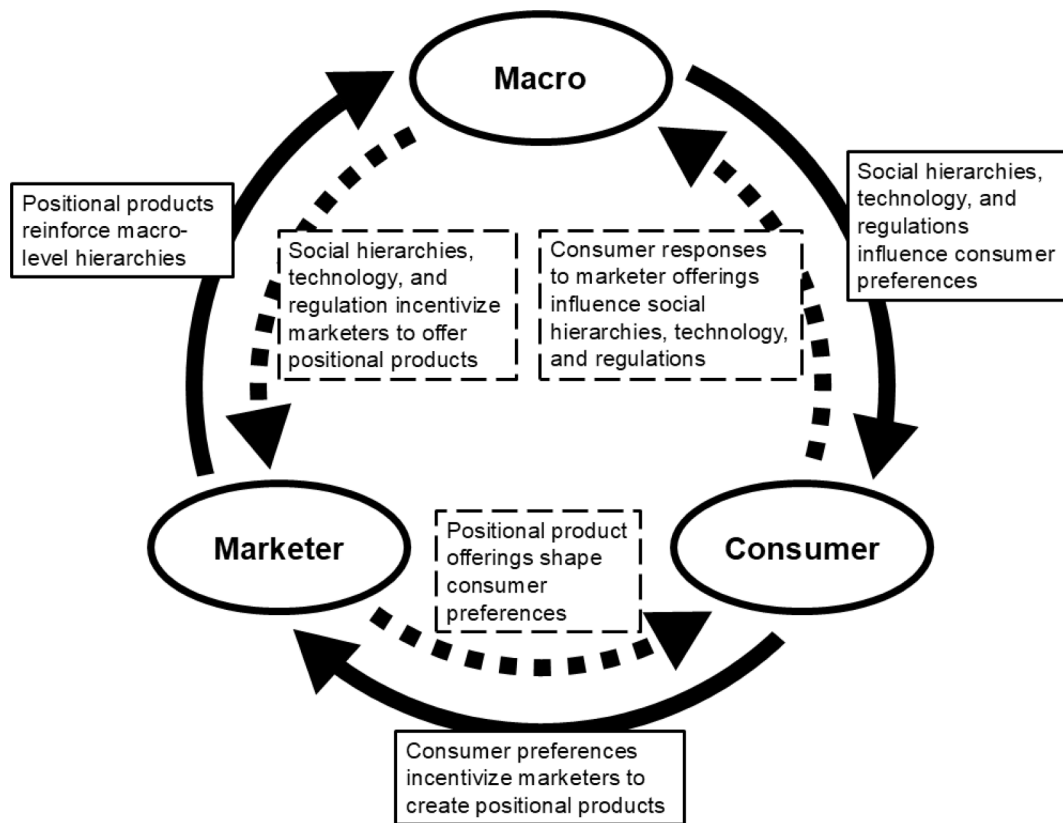


Fig. 1. Cycles of marketplace inequality.

environmental consciousness), social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation), or any other attribute that is perceived as valuable or desirable in society, and for which social comparison is salient (i.e., visible to others) and relative standing matters (Heffetz, 2011; Heffetz & Frank, 2011). As we will discuss throughout this article, access to positional attributes gives consumers an advantage in fulfilling their needs.

In many cases, macro forces, through historical and cultural contexts, shape which dimensions are perceived to be positional attributes, but consumers and marketers also play a role in determining these dimensions. Consider the following example: suppose there is variation among consumers on an attribute A (e.g., hair texture), where levels of the attribute are A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n (e.g., curly, wavy, straight). Hair texture (curly, wavy, straight) initially represents non-positional variation—individual preferences with no inherent ranking. To reflect variation among consumers on A, marketers may create horizontally differentiated options for consumers (e.g., shampoo designed to enhance curl or shampoo designed to enhance smoothness). However, as we highlight in this article, when macro forces (e.g., beauty standards within a culture), marketers (e.g., advertising straight hair as “professional”), or consumers (e.g., influencers promoting certain hair textures) emphasize relative desirability, hair texture becomes a positional attribute. When an attribute transitions from being non-positional to positional (a shift from being a differentiator linked to subjective preferences with no inherent ranking to a differentiator that reflects a value hierarchy), it becomes a precursor of marketplace inequality (e.g., consumers who have more desirable hair texture earn more as influencers than consumers with less desirable hair textures, allowing them to invest in other positional attributes to further differentiate themselves).

Table 1 compares marketplace inequality with other, related concepts, such as power (Rucker et al., 2018), resource scarcity (Hamilton et al., 2019; Roux et al., 2023), financial vulnerability (Blocker et al., 2023; Hill & Sharma, 2020; Mende et al., 2024; Salisbury et al., 2023), and intersectionality (Uduehi et al., 2024). Marketplace inequality is broader than these other constructs because it encompasses all types of positional attributes, not just those related to resources, such as power or income, or social identities. These constructs also differ in whether they are relative (e.g., marketplace inequality, power, intersectionality) or absolute (e.g., resource scarcity, financial vulnerability).

Notably, although negative outcomes of inequality are typically emphasized, marketplace inequality can produce both positive and negative effects for consumers and marketers (Deaton, 2003; Bao et al., 2024). As our review illustrates, the marketing literature provides innumerable examples of consumers deriving utility from buying products and services that allow them to highlight their status using positional attributes, as well as examples of marketers more effectively targeting consumers by giving them opportunities to differentiate on positional attributes. Although other literatures have acknowledged positive effects of inequality (e.g., in economics, classical and neoclassical theories suggest that a certain degree of inequality is welfare-enhancing under conditions where it

Table 1
Definition of marketplace inequality and related constructs.

Construct	Definition	Attributes Implicated	Relative vs. Absolute Nature	Consumer Example in the Context of Grocery Shopping
Marketplace Inequality	Unequal distribution of positional attributes that leaves some consumers better able than others to satisfy their needs in the marketplace	Any socially valued attributes that can be used to rank individuals in society. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources (e.g., financial, social) • Demographic and psychographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, “busyness”, environmental consciousness) • Social identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation) • Physical and personality traits (e.g., body mass index, extraversion) 	Relative: refer to disparities in attribute levels between consumers	A shopper arrives at the store in business attire, phone to ear, glancing repeatedly at her watch. Her “busyness” prompts the store manager to summon an idle register just for her, allowing her to check out quickly.
Power	Ability to control resources in social relations (Rucker et al., 2018)	Any type of valued resource (e.g., financial, social, cultural, human capital)	Relative: power exists <i>over</i> someone else	Seeing the mayor of a small town walking into the grocery store, the manager instantly waves her past the line, rolling out a cart pre-stocked with the mayor’s preferred local produce.
Resource Scarcity	Lack of access to sufficient resources to achieve consumption goals (Hamilton et al., 2019; Roux et al., 2023)	Resources needed for market exchanges (e.g., money, information, time, space)	Absolute: focuses on <i>how much</i> one has, not on others	Working a double shift, a consumer has only 15 min to shop, grabbing pre-packaged ultra-processed meals instead of healthier raw ingredients she wanted to buy.
Financial Vulnerability	Exposure to future harm stemming from limited current financial resources (Blocker et al., 2023; Hill & Sharma, 2020; Mende et al., 2024; Salisbury et al., 2023)	Financial resources (e.g., income, savings, creditworthiness)	Absolute: probability of harm rather than relative standing	Having little money left after paying for food and rent, a consumer covers a car repair with a high-interest payday loan. If her next paycheck is slightly lower, the rollover fees will snowball, threatening her ability to pay rent the following month.
Intersectionality	Overlapping social identities that compound disadvantage in the marketplace (Uduehi et al., 2024)	Intersecting social identity categories (e.g., race, gender, social class, disability, sexual orientation)	Relative and compounding: disparities intensify at identity intersections	A black woman in a wheelchair finds store aisles too narrow and store associates unwilling to help, which limits her access to fresh foods.

incentivizes productivity, innovation, and investment [Kaldor, 1955]; in sociology, functionalist theories [Anderson & Brown, 2010; Bunderson et al., 2016; Halevy et al., 2011] posit that social hierarchies can offer benefits such as enhancing group decision-making and performance, decreasing group conflict, and increasing group member satisfaction), seeking differentiation is a fundamental theme of the marketing literature. This article takes an explanatory, as opposed to a prescriptive, stance; we focus on describing the interdependent roles of consumers, marketers, and macro forces in creating, perpetuating, and disrupting cycles of inequality in the marketplace.

3. Three forces shaping cycles of marketplace inequality

Macro, marketer, and consumer forces are three different forces of the market ecosystem, representing different levels of analysis. Macro forces are contextual factors that influence the behaviors of decision-makers, including political, economic, cultural, social, technological, and legal factors (Aguilar, 1967). Political factors include the political system and ideology; economic factors include interest rates, inflation, and employment levels; cultural factors include cultural norms and values; social factors include systems such as social class, race, and gender; technological factors include advances in knowledge and its applications; legal factors include government regulations. When these macro factors influence consumers' access to positional attributes, they set the stage for marketplace inequality.

Marketers are for-profit firms and not-for-profit organizations motivated to maximize the effectiveness of their activities, whether the ultimate goal is maximizing profits or achieving another objective, such as a social mission. Segmentation, targeting, and positioning, which are basic tools of marketers, identify and leverage differences across consumers. When these differences across consumers are positional attributes (e.g., race, gender, income), marketers may perpetuate marketplace inequality by amplifying vertical differentiation among consumers.

Consumers are individuals or groups who purchase, use, and consume goods and services to satisfy their needs. Several psychological mechanisms, such as social comparison and desire for status, lead consumers to behave in ways that perpetuate marketplace inequality, focusing attention on attributes that may become positional and creating demand for positional goods or services, which incentivizes firms to create offerings that reinforce social hierarchies (e.g., Bryant & Hill, 2019; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014).

3.1. Cycles of marketplace inequality

As shown in Fig. 1, we propose that macro forces, marketers, and consumers interact to create cycles of marketplace inequality. Cycles reflect the notion of an ongoing, dynamic process that is constantly evolving, and where the starting point may be unclear. As in Fig. 1, cycles can move clockwise or counter-clockwise, and movement may even be contained within a force, such as one macro force (e.g., technology) affecting another (e.g., social systems).

The dashed and solid lines in Fig. 1 provide two different illustrations of inequality cycles. For example, looking at the dashed arrows in Fig. 1, which move from macro forces to marketers' actions to consumer behavior, and back to macro forces, we can consider how macro forces shape marketers' behavior in ways that can perpetuate inequality. A social factor, such as gender, can become a positional attribute when a social hierarchy is formed around gender. Gender may become positional due to differences in average strength between men and women; according to evolutionary psychology, higher status is awarded to more physically dominant entities (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). Once gender becomes a positional attribute, marketers are incentivized to segment and target consumers based on gender. Marketers may differentiate product characteristics, distribution channels, pricing, and marketing communications for men and women. This differentiation creates systematic differences in consumers' access to products and services based on gender and even links systematic (dis)advantages to this positional attribute (e.g., offering "standard" tools that are a better fit for men's larger hands vs. more expensive "specialty" tools designed for women). When consumers accept these gender-specific marketing strategies, it reinforces a gender hierarchy at the macro level. Consumers may perpetuate inequality by steering children toward specific interests and behaviors, perhaps directing girls towards nurturing or appearance-based toys, such as dolls and domestic items, and encouraging boys to engage with toys emphasizing strength or exploration, like vehicles and building sets (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; see Davis and Hines, 2020, however, for a discussion of heterogeneity). Completing the cycle, this process may further entrench social hierarchies associating femininity with less socially valued traits like passivity and associating masculinity with more socially valued traits like assertiveness (Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

Notably, consumers may disrupt this cycle by *not* accepting stratification by gender. Disruption of inequality occurs when an arrow in Fig. 1 does not reach the next force. If a sufficient number of consumers reject differentiation by gender (e.g., they buy gender-neutral toys for both boys and girls; Auster & Mansbach, 2012) or refuse to pay more for gendered products, it reduces the profitability of differentiating product characteristics, distribution channels, pricing, and marketing communications for men and women. By reducing incentives for marketers to differentiate based on a positional attribute and by challenging social systems, consumers or consumer movements can disrupt cycles of inequality.

Represented by the solid arrows in Fig. 1, an inequality cycle may go from macro to consumer to marketer, returning to macro. For example, Veresiu and Giesler (2018) described how, in an effort to be multicultural and inclusive, Canadian politicians called for incorporating different ethnicities into Canadian culture (e.g., by celebrating holidays like the Chinese New Year). The political system (macro) affected consumer preferences, as ethnic consumers called for supermarkets to stock foods they prefer. Supermarkets began stocking such products, but in an aisle devoted to ethnic foods. Veresiu and Giesler (2018) suggest that instead of assimilating ethnic consumers into the mainstream, these actions reinforced the ethnic consumer as the "other," thereby perpetuating inequality. Instead,

marketers could have disrupted this cycle by stocking ethnic products alongside conventional offerings, encouraging the assimilation of ethnic consumers into the mainstream and giving them more equal status.

3.2. Scope and criteria for literature review

To better understand the macro, marketer, and consumer forces influencing inequality, we conducted a review of the marketing literature using eight search terms associated with inequality: inequality, hierarchy, socioeconomic status, social class, status, power, income distribution, and discrimination. These terms capture both general descriptors of differences in individuals' standing in society (i.e., inequality, hierarchy, discrimination, income distribution) and positional attributes that can serve as the basis of ranking individuals in a social hierarchy and whose discrepancies ultimately influence consumers' ability to fulfill their needs in the marketplace (i.e., socioeconomic status, social class, status, power). We identified marketing articles using these search terms that were published between 2013 and 2024 in ten top marketing journals (i.e., *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Marketing Science*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Marketing Letters*).

We focus our literature review on marketing journals because we are interested in research that helps us understand inequality as a marketing-oriented system. We limited the review to the past decade because these papers represent the latest knowledge related to inequality in our field. Although focusing on marketing journals over an 11-year period (2013–2024) narrowed our scope, our set of eight search terms related to marketplace inequality yielded 623 journal articles. We then reviewed the abstracts of this initial list of articles and excluded 195 that were deemed irrelevant to our research topic of marketplace inequality. For instance, the search term “hierarchy” returned papers on cognitive hierarchy in game theory, and the search term “power” identified articles discussing statistical power. See Web Appendix A for the breakdown of papers for each search term.

Following the definitions of macro forces, marketers, and consumers outlined in Section 3, we categorized this collection of 428 papers based on whether the paper mainly approached the topic of inequality from a macro perspective (78 papers), marketer perspective (192 papers) or consumer perspective (158 papers). Each set of papers was then assigned to a subgroup of authors for further review to identify subcategories and themes within each perspective. For instance, papers within the macro perspective were grouped by type of social system (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class) that the papers discuss. Within the marketer perspective, we organized papers based on the type of marketer and firm actions. Within the consumer perspective, we organized the papers based on the motivational insights they reveal about consumers and inequality. In addition to reviewing these 428 papers, we asked our team of authors to identify other papers that they felt were relevant to our framework but were not generated by our literature search (e.g., papers outside of our time frame or list of journals). We also included these papers – many of which are classics in this topic area – in our review. This larger set of papers derived from the literature search informed our thinking about marketplace inequality. We then focused on a subset of papers to create our framework of how macro forces, marketers, and consumers create, perpetuate, and disrupt inequality. See Web Appendix A for a complete bibliography of the collection of 428 papers, as well as the 25 papers that were added by our team of authors.

To illustrate our framework, we focus on a subset of 109 papers that best exemplify the dimensions of our framework. Table 2 categorizes the findings from these 109 articles based on both perspective (macro, marketer, or consumer) and its effect on inequality (creating, perpetuating, or disrupting). Our analysis focuses on three broad macro forces – social, technological, and legal – because these are the contextual factors that have been studied the most based on our search results. In the following sections, we draw from this research to describe how macro forces, marketers, and consumers contribute to the creation, perpetuation, and disruption of marketplace inequality. Then, we outline an agenda for future research on marketplace inequality as it relates to the three forces and highlight implications of our framework for marketing research.

3.3. Creating marketplace inequality

Macro forces create inequality when non-positional attributes become positional attributes used to create a social hierarchy. (i.e., when a product, resource, trait, or attribute becomes the basis of a social hierarchy). A good deal of research shows that social hierarchies based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) can serve as markers of vertical differentiation among consumers (Grier et al., 2024; Hein et al., 2016; Jacob et al., 2022; Poole et al., 2021; Trujillo-Torres & DeBerry-Spence, 2023; Uduehi et al., 2024). These attributes may become positional for historical or cultural reasons, such as lighter skin color being a status symbol because it is associated with white European and American colonial powers (Hunter, 2007). These social hierarchies are then used by both marketers and consumers to perpetuate inequality (Crockett, 2017).

Marketers can create inequality by designing products or features to create new types of vertical differentiation among consumers. For example, marketers can create inequality by designing loyalty programs that divide consumers into tiers based on past or anticipated purchase behavior (Sayman & Usman, 2016; Tamaddoni et al., 2023; Viswanathan et al., 2017). Loyalty program status becomes a positional attribute by conferring rewards and preferential treatment to consumers who are identified as frequent or profitable buyers (Sayman & Usman, 2016; Stourm et al., 2020). A customer who receives better treatment than other customers feels heightened status (Drèze & Nunes, 2009) and may become more entitled and demanding (Wetzel et al., 2014), whereas a customer being treated worse than others experiences a sense of inferior status. Thus, loyalty programs can create socially desirable differentiators that provide access to better service experience to higher-tier (vs. lower-tier) members. Similarly, marketers can launch social media platforms that allow for the creation of new hierarchies based on metrics like followers or engagement.

Consumers create inequality when they identify and highlight new positional attributes. For example, consumers can create or

Table 2

Creation, perpetuation, and disruption of marketplace inequality.

	Macro Forces	Marketers	Consumers
<i>Create inequality by</i>	<p>Transforming non-positional attributes into positional attributes (i.e., a resource, trait or attribute becomes positional)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social identities become positional attributes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Race (Grier et al., 2024; Poole et al., 2021; Trujillo-Torres & DeBerry-Spence, 2023) o Gender (Hein et al., 2016) o Socioeconomic status (Jacob et al., 2022) o Intersectionality (Uduehi et al., 2024) 	<p>Designing a product or feature to create new types of vertical differentiation among consumers (i.e., to serve as a new positional attribute)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyalty programs divide customers into tiers based on characteristics of past or anticipated purchase behavior (Drèze & Nunes, 2009; Sayman & Usman, 2016; Stourm et al., 2020; Tamaddoni et al., 2023; Viswanathan et al., 2017; Wetzel et al., 2014) 	<p>Identifying and highlighting new dimensions of vertical differentiation, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busyness (Bellezza et al., 2017) • Success in sports or education (Goor et al., 2021) • Green consumption (Yan et al., 2021) • Owning (vs. renting) products (Guo et al., 2024) • Unused (vs. used) digital goods in the metaverse (Yang, 2024) • Effort to gain wealth (Warren & Warren, 2024) • Aesthetic and taste expertise (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017; Pomiès & Arsel, 2023; Üstüner & Thompson, 2013)
<i>Perpetuate inequality by</i>	<p>Amplifying vertical differentiation based on positional attributes, such as when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology facilitates discrimination and exclusion based on existing social hierarchies (Huang & Rust, 2021; Lambrecht & Tucker, 2019; Poole et al., 2021; Puntoni et al., 2021; Rathee et al., 2023) • Policy and regulations restrict access to positional attributes (Bao & Ni, 2017; Bone et al., 2019; Jaikumar et al., 2024; Kotschedoff & Pachali, 2020) 	<p>Using existing social hierarchies (e.g., based on race, gender, income) as inputs to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price discrimination (Busse et al., 2017; Crockett, 2022; Jiang et al., 2023; Orhun & Palazzolo, 2019; Ozturk et al., 2024) • Customer service policies (Bone et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2023; Stremersch et al., 2013) • Marketing communications (Proserpio et al., 2021; Varman et al., 2024) • Distribution decisions (Jang & Kim, 2018; Larson et al., 2009) <p>Offering positional products (e.g., luxury products) that help already advantaged consumers to further enhance their social standing (Wang, 2022)</p>	<p>Engaging in behaviors that reinforce existing social hierarchies, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursuing status-seeking consumption (Bryant & Hill, 2019; DeCelles & Norton, 2016; Desmichel & Rucker, 2024; Durante et al., 2014; Kurt & Gino, 2023; Martin et al., 2013; Moreau et al., 2020; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Otterbring et al., 2018; Shalev & Morwitz, 2012; Walasek et al., 2018; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014; Wang & John, 2019) • Coping with discrimination in ways that further increase a position of disadvantage (Harmeling et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2022; Moorhouse et al., 2023) • Making interpersonal judgments based on stereotypes that reinforce discrimination (Hagerty & Barasz, 2020; Lin et al., 2024; Olson et al., 2016, 2021, 2025; Veresiu & Giesler, 2018) • Becoming less willing to act and more vulnerable to deception from a low sense of power (Brick et al., 2018; Fan et al., 2023; Min & Kim, 2013; Mourali & Yang, 2013; Mourali et al., 2018; Rucker et al., 2014; Schaerer et al., 2018; Wieseke et al., 2014) <p>Accepting inequality and, as a consequence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming less motivated to alleviate the inequalities experienced by disadvantaged others (Winterich & Zhang, 2014; Xu et al., 2021) • Seeking vertical differentiation with more luxurious and high price products (Dommer et al., 2013; Gao et al., 2016; Kim & Kramer, 2015; Kim et al., 2018; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018) and loyalty programs with more tiers (Kim, Han, et al., 2018)

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

	Macro Forces	Marketers	Consumers
<i>Disrupt inequality by</i>	<p>Reducing disparities in consumers' access to positional attributes, such as when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology expands access to goods and services among the disadvantaged (Chan et al., 2022; Ekpo et al., 2018; Kopalle et al., 2022; Rosengard, 2016; Zhou et al., 2020) and creates a system of consumer-to-consumer access (Bajde & Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Kozinets et al., 2021) • Regulations help disadvantaged individuals accumulate cultural, social, and economic capital (Chytkova & Kjeldgaard, 2024) and improve health outcomes for lower SES consumers (Araya et al., 2022) • Social movements are driven by a shared purpose of social justice (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Nam et al., 2023; Nardini et al., 2021; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Wang et al., 2022) 	<p>Making product, communication and pricing decisions that reduce disparities in consumers' ability to fulfill their needs, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering products that address the needs of disadvantaged consumers (Park et al., 2023; Shulman & Gu, 2024) • Offering products that have an "egalitarian value" (Liu et al., 2024) • Mitigating misinformation to dispel stereotypes (Gupta, et al., 2024; Beck et al., 2024) <p>Reducing inequality within marketing organizations (Zhang, 2024) by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping disadvantaged communities via workplace policies (Patel & Feng, 2021) • Addressing gender inequality in mentorship (Germann et al., 2024) 	<p>Making choices that undermine validity of a positional dimension, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in cultural appreciation and elevation of non-dominant culture (Cruz et al., 2024) • Engaging in activities that challenge perceptions of disadvantage and weakness (Drenten et al., 2023; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015; Velagaleti & Epp, 2024). • Engaging in boycotting and buycotting to voice one's values (Li et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2025)

emphasize new categories of status signaling, such as busyness (Bellezza et al., 2017), success in sports or education (Goor et al., 2021), green consumption (Yan et al., 2021), owning (vs. renting) products (Guo et al., 2024), unused (vs. used) digital goods in the metaverse (Yang, 2024), and investment of effort to gain wealth (Warren & Warren, 2024). Financially advantaged consumers may devote resources to developing aesthetic and taste expertise that allows them to stand out against consumers who lack such resources and expertise (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017; Pomiès & Arsel, 2023; Üstüner & Thompson, 2013), thereby creating a social hierarchy measured by these forms of expertise. These new social hierarchies based on new positional attributes create inequality (perceived and objective) when access to these attributes results in advantages in the marketplace. Past research shows that those who display use of luxury brands are more likely to receive preferential treatment and greater financial benefits compared to those that do not (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). By identifying new positional attributes beyond the use of luxury brands, consumers may create new pathways to obtain these benefits.

3.4. Perpetuating marketplace inequality

Macro forces can also perpetuate inequality. Technology can perpetuate inequality by amplifying vertical differentiation and exclusion based on existing positional attributes (Puntoni et al., 2021). Reduced access to technological advancements among disadvantaged consumer groups, such as low-income consumers in rural areas, can leave such consumers further behind. The digital space not only reflects, but also amplifies, inequalities found in the physical world. Biases in the corpus used to train large language models can result in biased algorithms that may treat disadvantaged consumers unfairly (Huang & Rust, 2021). For example, facial recognition algorithms used for security perform worse with non-White (vs. White) faces (Poole et al., 2021). Algorithms may learn to associate women with more negative consumer attributes, resulting in a discriminatory delivery of digital advertisements (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2019; Rathee et al., 2023).

Another macro force that can inadvertently perpetuate inequality is government regulation. Bone et al. (2019) highlight how lack of regulation can exacerbate structural inequalities by making it more difficult for minority-owned businesses to compete on a level playing field. This dynamic can stem from factors such as unequal access to resources, discriminatory practices, or market conditions that favor established, majority-owned businesses. Even well-intentioned government regulations designed to correct inequality can backfire. Pharmaceutical price regulation in India, which was intended to make sure that poorer populations received important drugs, decreased rather than increased sales volumes for those drugs (Jaikumar et al., 2024). As a result of the lower prices imposed on those drugs, firms reduced marketing expenditures on providing detailed information to poorly trained doctors who served rural populations. These doctors then prescribed the drugs less, thereby lowering sales of those drugs. Similarly, in the retail banking industry, an increase in deposit-insurance coverage, though intended to safeguard consumer interests, diminished returns for small investors as banks lowered their deposit interest rates due to moral hazard (Bao & Ni, 2017). Finally, the German government's implementation of regulations to protect animal welfare in the battery egg market (consisting of low-quality eggs from farms that do not follow high animal protection standards) resulted in a loss of consumer welfare in low-income households (Kotschedoff & Pachali, 2020). The reason was that while the price of high-quality eggs went down (helping high-income consumers), low-income consumers, who were satisfied with lower quality, had to pay more to buy eggs.

Marketers perpetuate inequality when they reinforce positional attributes rooted in existing social hierarchies (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity). One mechanism is through price discrimination tactics. Predatory inclusion occurs when marketers target disadvantaged consumers with higher prices or lower quality versions of existing products (Crockett, 2022). For instance, in the financial service sector, automotive dealers have been shown to charge a higher interest rate to consumers in zip codes with larger percentages of Black or Hispanic residents (Jiang et al., 2023), and women and minorities pay a higher interest rate for auto loans, on average, than do men (Ozturk et al., 2024). In the domain of automotive repair, marketers tend to offer higher prices to female (vs. male) consumers (Busse et al., 2017). In the domain of consumer-packaged goods, when marketers offer discounts for those who can buy in larger quantities, lower (vs. higher) income consumers receive shallower discounts because liquidity constraints prevent them from buying in bulk (Orhun & Palazzolo, 2019).

Marketers also perpetuate inequality by basing customer service, marketing, and distribution decisions on existing social hierarchies. In terms of customer service, research shows that bank loan officers treat minority (vs. White) consumers more poorly, demanding more information for loan applications and providing less encouragement and assistance (Bone et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2023). In the context of health care, doctors in areas with a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic patients are less accommodating of drug requests (Stremersch et al., 2013). Marketing communications also play a role in perpetuating existing societal biases against certain groups. For example, class- and color-based tropes pervade advertising in India, where lower class individuals are shown as darker skinned, and lighter skin is held up as desirable (Varman et al., 2024). In online reviews, marketers are more confrontational and aggressive when responding to female (vs. male) reviewers (Proserpio et al., 2021). If female consumers receive harsher treatment, this serves as a disincentive for input, and their input is less likely to impact company behavior. Distribution decisions can create geographic barriers for consumption (e.g., food deserts). Research shows that lack of access to healthy foods is particularly acute in neighborhoods in which there is intersectionality of race/ethnicity and poverty (Jang & Kim, 2018). Residents of low-income, minority, and rural neighborhoods in the United States have greater access to high price, low assortment convenience stores than to supermarkets, contributing to poorer diets and higher levels of obesity compared to more affluent neighborhoods (Larson et al., 2009).

To the extent that new positional attributes align with pre-existing dimensions of inequality, marketers may perpetuate inequality by offering them. For example, marketers may offer line extensions differentiated based on quality and price (e.g., BMW's 1, 3, 5, 7 series) and exclusive, luxury offerings. Typically, consumers with greater access to resources (e.g., higher income brackets) are in a better position to afford such offerings, reinforcing a hierarchy in which material goods are seen as signals of social value (Wang,

2022).

Consumers perpetuate inequality when they engage in behaviors that reinforce hierarchical social systems, such as by engaging in status-seeking consumption. Extensive research shows that desire for status encourages consumers to buy luxury brands, national brands (vs. private label), and other status-signaling goods or services (e.g., Kurt & Gino, 2023; Durante et al., 2014; Walasek et al., 2018). Desire for status may even lead to acquisitive crime to acquire valued status objects (Martin et al., 2013) or marketplace aggression (DeCelles & Norton, 2016).

Notably, macro-level forces – including cultural dimensions such as power distance beliefs – influence consumers' acceptance of inequality. Power distance beliefs describe how much individuals in a society accept and expect power to be distributed unequally. Consumers with high power distance beliefs are more accepting of inequality, making them less likely to attempt to alleviate the inequalities experienced by disadvantaged others (Winterich & Zhang, 2014; Xu et al., 2021). Consumers who are more accepting of inequality are more likely to seek vertical differentiation with more luxurious and high price products (Dommer, Swaminathan, & Ahluwalia, 2013; Gao, Winterich, & Zhang, 2016; H.C. Kim & Kramer, 2015; J.C. Kim, Park, & Dubois, 2018; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018) and loyalty programs with more hierarchical levels (Kim et al., 2018).

Consumers may perpetuate inequality even when they engage in coping strategies to manage their fear of discrimination. For example, being identified based on stigmatized personal attributes (e.g., disease, body weight) increases interest in products that promise to alleviate the stigma but are associated with considerable risks (Harmeling et al., 2021), potentially making consumers worse off. Anticipation of negative treatment in upscale malls may encourage lower income consumers to engage in suboptimal financial behaviors, such as paying higher prices to avoid such environments (Jacob et al., 2022). In the domain of financial decision making, fear of stigmatization may lead consumers to conceal their indebtedness and avoid situations where their financial status might be exposed or scrutinized; unfortunately, engaging in social spending to appear financially stable or avoiding seeking help can hinder effective debt reduction efforts (Moorhouse et al., 2023).

Interpersonal judgments based on positional attributes also play a key role in perpetuating inequality. Consumers use others' income and government assistance as inputs to make moral assessments about others' consumption choices, such that the consumption of certain products is viewed as less permissible for lower (vs. higher) income consumers (Hagerty & Barasz, 2020; Olson et al., 2016, 2021). Consumers also (erroneously) believe that lower (vs. higher) income consumers enjoy a smaller range of experiences, specifically those that are more psychological (e.g., earning special recognition at work, traveling abroad) than physical (e.g., eating, taking a walk) in nature (Olson et al., 2025). Stereotypes about other cultures can be perpetuated when consumers engage in cultural appropriation, positioning non-dominant cultures—such as non-White or non-European—as “other” or “inferior.” White consumers who consume ethnic products like food or activities may, intentionally or not, reinforce the perception of ethnic consumers as outsiders (Veresiu & Giesler, 2018). Thus, the commercialization of marginalized cultures incurs the risk of perpetuating historical imbalances of power (Lin et al., 2024).

When disadvantaged consumers are unable to engage in compensatory consumption, the perception that they have lower access to positional attributes (i.e., being less powerful) can produce behaviors that may exacerbate disparities in consumers' ability to fulfill their needs in the marketplace. Specifically, a low sense of power decreases one's willingness to act (Rucker et al., 2014; Schaerer et al., 2018) and the likelihood to negotiate price (Wieseke et al., 2014), while increasing the likelihood of deferring decision-making (Mourali et al., 2018). Consumers with a lower sense of power are also less likely to exert social influence (Schaerer et al. 2018), more susceptible to persuasion attempts from marketers (Fan et al., 2023; Min & Kim, 2013; Mourali & Yang, 2013), and more likely to conform to other consumers' preferences (Brick et al., 2018). These characteristics can perpetuate marketplace inequality by making low power consumers more vulnerable to deception and manipulation in the marketplace.

3.5. Disrupting marketplace inequality

Disruption of inequality cycles occurs when macro, marketer, or consumer forces counteract or reject vertical differentiation. Macro forces that disrupt inequality include technology, government regulations, and social movements. Technology can help reduce economic disparities by expanding access to goods and services among disadvantaged consumers (Chan et al., 2022; Ekpo et al., 2018; Kopalpe et al., 2022; Rosengard, 2016; Zhou et al., 2020), such as by creating a system of consumer-to-consumer access (Bajde & Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Kozinets et al., 2021). For example, Chan et al. (2022) found that auto loan applicants whose employers had recently joined Equifax's digital employment verification system, which provides lenders with an easy and fast way of accessing employment data, increased loans to disadvantaged consumers. Similarly, technology has ushered in a “mobile banking revolution” in developing countries such as Kenya, where marginalized consumers can more easily gain access to formal financial services with basic technologies such as flip phones (Rosengard, 2016). Beyond financial services, technology can help serve disadvantaged consumers better by allowing marketers to offer online channels to consumers who face offline marketplace discrimination and reduced access (Ekpo et al. 2018). Novel technologies, such as converting face images to contour images, can also help consumers mask discriminatory factors like age and gender (Zhou et al., 2020).

Another macro force that can disrupt inequality is government regulation, which can reduce disparities in consumers' access to positional attributes (e.g., knowledge, socially valued skills and tastes, credentials). For example, research suggests that governmental regulations on warning labels for food items that exceed the recommended amounts of sugar, sodium, saturated fats, or calories can reduce disparities in health-oriented behaviors and outcomes across consumers with high vs. low SES (Araya et al., 2022). Spending on public institutions (e.g., universities, governmental agencies) can help disadvantaged consumers access positional attributes. For instance, state-financed educational institutions in Europe help migrants attain cultural capital, which provides a jump start for further capital accumulation (e.g., social, economic; Chytкова & Kjeldgaard, 2024).

Finally, social movements may disrupt inequality by affecting both marketer and consumer behavior. In a social movement, individuals and organizations band together to engage in collective action, united in a shared purpose of achieving social justice and correcting inequality in existing social systems (Nardini et al., 2021). While social movements, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo, may be seen as evolving at the consumer level, they are set in motion through the macro forces of resistance to the discrimination in social systems. Social movements can spur action in marketers to mitigate inequality, such as when firms undertake corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts to contribute to social causes (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Firms can also engage in brand activism by voicing their support for causes that help elevate disadvantaged populations (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020). However, these actions may be received with skepticism when marketers do not incur a cost (Nam et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

Marketers can disrupt inequality by making product, communication, and pricing decisions that help reduce disparities in consumers' ability to fulfill their needs. For instance, marketers can expand product offerings (Park et al., 2023) and invest in inclusive product design (i.e., product design that enables consumers who identify with marginalized social identities, such as people of color, people with disabilities, and older adults, realize the benefits of a product) to better address the needs of disadvantaged consumers (Shulman & Gu, 2024). Another way to disrupt inequality is to offer products that have "egalitarian value," such as "dupes," which are legitimate products by fast-fashion companies whose design follows those of luxury products; such products increase disadvantaged consumers' access to otherwise non-accessible positional products (Liu et al., 2024). Beyond profit maximization, marketers can focus on mitigation initiatives to reduce negative outcomes from marketing actions (Gupta et al., 2024). For instance, review platforms can engage in practices to reduce misinformation and fakery and to cultivate consumer trust (Beck et al., 2024). Reducing misinformation can decrease inequality by fostering more accurate perceptions and breaking down stereotypes.

Marketers can also help to reduce inequality by taking action within their own organizations (Zhang, 2024), such as by taking steps to reduce gender-based hierarchy, increase access to benefits, and reduce discrimination. In Uganda, female entrepreneurs saw greater success with female mentors, likely due to reduced gender hierarchy (Germann et al., 2024). Companies may extend benefits to same-sex domestic partners and prohibit workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation (Patel & Feng, 2021).

Consumers can disrupt inequality through individual choices that undermine the validity of positional dimensions. For instance, consumers can choose to counter an existing bias by engaging in cultural appreciation (e.g., American consumers appreciating K-Pop) and elevating non-dominant ethnicities (e.g., "Black is Beautiful"; Cruz et al., 2024). Disadvantaged consumers can break norms and expectations by engaging in activities that challenge the typical view of them as disadvantaged and weak (Thompson & Üstüner, 2015). Same-sex couples disrupt existing binary gender scripts and gender expectations in the wedding industry to obtain legitimacy (Velagaleti & Epp, 2024). However, these practices may be co-opted by advantaged consumers and inadvertently perpetuate inequality (Drenten et al., 2023).

Consumers also can engage in boycotting (i.e., abstaining from purchasing) and boycotting (i.e., deliberately buying) to voice their values (Li et al., 2024). Consumer boycotting became prominent during the BLM movement, where consumers deliberately increased their patronage and support toward Black-owned businesses, spurring the Buy Black sub-movement (Sharma et al., 2025). Such support may then help lift up Black entrepreneurs and Black-owned businesses, thereby attenuating inequality. Notably, these individual actions may lead to greater change when they become a social movement, that is, when they are adopted by a large segment of consumers, thereby reflecting consumer influence on macro forces.

4. Agenda for future research

We next outline a research agenda related to marketplace inequality. Table 3 lists 22 research questions (RQ), which are described below. These questions are related to each of the three levels of analysis (macro, marketer, consumers) across different stages of the inequality cycle (creation, perpetuation, disruption).

4.1. Future research on creating inequality

4.1.1. Macro forces

We need a better understanding of the macro-level mechanisms that create specific value hierarchies. Macro forces, including economic globalization, technological advancement, and cultural shifts, can amplify the significance of certain attributes by altering their accessibility or perceived importance. One question for future research is how economic (e.g., labor market demands), institutional (e.g., educational system, legal system), and cultural (e.g., media and popular culture that glamorize certain attributes) shifts intersect to create new bases for social hierarchies (RQ1). Do these mechanisms vary across cultures (RQ2)? Research on intersectionality (Uduehi et al., 2024) has shown that overlapping social identities (e.g., SES, race, gender) shape consumers' experiences of inequality in the marketplace. More research is needed to understand how intersectionality is manifested and experienced in different parts of the world. Intersectionality in non-Western cultures and in the global South includes different dimensions, such as nationality, migrant status, caste, religion and linguistic identity, and research should continue to explore how these dimensions overlap to shape consumers' experiences and outcomes

Relatedly, is there a predictable temporal pattern to the transformation of non-positional attributes into positional attributes (RQ3)? Do certain types of attributes more readily become positional attributes over time than others? For instance, digital literacy, once considered a basic skill, may become a critical positional attribute, enabling some actors to dominate data-driven decision-making while marginalizing others. Investigating the mechanisms through which macro forces elevate the status of such attributes and examining their cascading effects on inequality would provide valuable insights into systemic drivers.

Table 3
Research questions related to marketplace inequality.

	<i>Macro Forces</i>	<i>Marketers</i>	<i>Consumers</i>
<i>How is inequality created?</i>	<p><i>RQ1:</i> How do economic factors, technology, institutions, and cultural shifts intersect to create new bases of social hierarchies?</p> <p><i>RQ2:</i> Do the processes by which non-positional attributes become positional attributes vary significantly across different cultures?</p> <p><i>RQ3:</i> Is there a predictable temporal pattern to the transformation of non-positional to positional attributes?</p>	<p><i>RQ4:</i> How do marketers transform non-positional attributes into positional ones?</p> <p><i>RQ5:</i> How do seemingly positive or beneficial marketing strategies (e.g., promoting health and wellness, sustainability initiatives) inadvertently contribute to marketplace inequality by creating new forms of vertical differentiation?</p>	<p><i>RQ6:</i> Do the ways consumers uncover new positional dimensions and the reputational benefits of these dimensions vary based on consumers' socioeconomic conditions?</p> <p><i>RQ7:</i> How do consumers develop and utilize taste and aesthetic expertise to create new positional attributes?</p>
<i>How is inequality perpetuated?</i>	<p><i>RQ8:</i> How does the collection, use, and interpretation of consumer data contribute to the perpetuation of marketplace inequality through technology?</p> <p><i>RQ9:</i> How do macro-level forces (e.g., technological advancements, regulatory environments) interact with micro-level processes (e.g., consumer choices, marketing strategies) to reinforce inequality?</p>	<p><i>RQ10:</i> Under what conditions do upward product extensions (e.g., premium products) trigger positive (vs. negative) consumers' responses?</p> <p><i>RQ11:</i> How can marketers design upward product extensions that preserve customer satisfaction among non-premium segments?</p> <p><i>RQ12:</i> How do income-based stereotypes translate into systematic differences in the offerings targeting low and high SES consumers?</p>	<p><i>RQ13:</i> How do consumers' overlapping identities affect their response to marketers' offerings in ways that perpetuate inequality?</p> <p><i>RQ14:</i> What factors predict consumer behaviors that perpetuate inequality, such as prejudice and discrimination, and how these individual factors become macro-level distinctions?</p>
<i>How is inequality disrupted?</i>	<p><i>RQ15:</i> How can AI be used to expand access to resources (financial, educational, health, etc.) among disadvantaged consumers?</p> <p><i>RQ16:</i> How can policy makers preempt or minimize negative effects of regulations intended to help disadvantaged consumers?</p> <p><i>RQ17:</i> What factors predict the impact of social movements on reducing inequality?</p>	<p><i>RQ18:</i> To what extent is the democratization of luxury effective in reducing status-based distinctions among consumers?</p> <p><i>RQ19:</i> What is the effect of supply-side interventions, such as increasing product availability and affordability, on the reduction of inequality across consumption domains (e.g., food, housing, education, financial services)?</p>	<p><i>RQ20:</i> What are effective interventions to disrupt consumer stereotyping of disadvantaged groups?</p> <p><i>RQ21:</i> What contributes to consumer activism versus consumer complacency towards inequality?</p> <p><i>RQ22:</i> When and how does deliberate consumer activism become habituated purchasing behavior over time?</p>

4.1.2. Marketers

Earlier, we discussed how marketers create inequality through mechanisms such as loyalty programs. Future research could investigate other ways in which marketers create new positional attributes (RQ4). Marketers often play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of value through branding, messaging, and product positioning, turning non-positional attributes into positional ones, such as when they market fitness, artisanal goods, and specialty foods as symbols of status. This can create inequality by introducing new dimensions for consumer stratification and disadvantages for those that lack access to these new positional attributes (e.g., a less “physically fit” consumer encountering fewer product choices). Seemingly positive or beneficial marketing strategies, such as those that promote health and wellness, sustainability, and minimalism, may inadvertently contribute to marketplace inequality by creating new forms of vertical differentiation (RQ5). Exploring how marketing strategies amplify the perceived importance of certain non-positional attributes to the point where they become positional attributes would shed light on how companies play a role in the creation of marketplace inequality.

4.1.3. Consumers

An important question for future research is how consumers uncover new positional attributes. Do the processes they use to uncover new positional differences and the reputational benefits they provide vary significantly depending on consumers’ socioeconomic conditions (RQ6)? According to theory on cultural capital, socialization and cultural exposure leads elite groups to develop distinct aesthetic preferences that are used as markers of social status (Bourdieu, 1984). This expertise allows high-status individuals to accumulate symbolic capital and emphasize cultural competence (Holt, 1998; Veblen, 1899). However, these markers of cultural competence are often treated as conferring similar reputational benefits across consumers. Future research could explore how consumers develop and utilize taste and aesthetic expertise to create new positional attributes (RQ7), such as minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022) and sustainability (Yan et al., 2021). Notably, minimalism may be seen as a deliberate aesthetic choice for high-SES consumers, reflecting cultural capital and signaling sophistication, while similar practices by lower-status individuals might be interpreted as stemming from necessity, such as financial constraints. Similar divergent interpretations of the same behavior may apply to sustainability-related behaviors. Investigating these questions will provide insights into how both advantaged and disadvantaged consumers play a role in creating new positional attributes.

4.2. Future research on perpetuating inequality

4.2.1. Macro forces

We described how technology can perpetuate inequality by enabling vertical differentiation and exclusion. An important avenue for future research is to explore how the collection, use, and interpretation of consumer data contribute to the perpetuation of inequality in the marketplace (RQ8). First, is the quality of data gathered from less (vs. more) advantaged populations the same? If technology is updated more often in affluent areas, marketers may have access to better quality information for some geographic areas or segments of consumers compared to others, allowing them to match the needs of consumers in some areas better than those in others. Similarly, biases about different socioeconomic groups may color perceptions of the needs of those groups compared to others (Olson et al., 2025). The rapid pace of new technology, along with companies’ desire to get their products to market quickly, means that such biases may be discovered after the technology is launched. To what extent does publicity about these biases (e.g., biases in facial recognition systems used by police) increase the perception of inequality among the less advantaged consumers? What is the impact of the field of ethical AI on marketers and consumers?

More generally, research is needed to examine how macro-level forces (e.g., technological advancements, regulatory environments) interact with marketer strategies and consumer behavior to create and reinforce marketplace inequality (RQ9). Answering this question will require a broad research perspective that incorporates different actors in the perpetuation of inequality cycles. One approach might be to explore the same marketplace phenomenon from the perspective of key actors operating at different levels of analysis. Though past empirical research has tended to focus on a single level of analysis, exceptions exist that could help guide future research. Dion, Pavlyuchenko, and Prokopec (2025), for example, conducted an ethnographic study of the luxury watch industry to explore the market dynamics of the enrichment economy. They interviewed managers and consumers, and analyzed press articles, market reports, and exchange platforms to identify enrichment privilege—when brands offer the ability to purchase rare goods to a limited number of customers—as a novel mechanism perpetuating marketplace inequality. Similar approaches could be used to uncover how other marketing strategies interact with macro-level factors to create and perpetuate vertical differentiation among consumers. Researchers have also combined methods to explore the same phenomenon across different units of analysis. For example, Bellet and colleagues (2025) studied the impact of the #MeToo social movement on consumer behavior at the country- and product-level by combining web search data (country level) and high-frequency stockout and price data from a leading global fashion retailer (product level) with an online experiment to explore potential consumer-level mechanisms. Such multi-level, multi-method data analyses are challenging, but are likely to be more informative than single-level analyses in understanding the interaction of different forces in marketplace inequality.

4.2.2. Marketers

Marketers often engage in upward product extensions and preferential treatment services that provide value to a set of premium customers (Schwartz, 2020). Future research can investigate conditions under which such premiumization initiatives evoke positive or negative responses from consumers (RQ10). We expect that zero-sum inferences, that is, the extent to which the premium offering imposes costs on non-premium customers, predict the perceived fairness of such offerings. That is, the lower the costs imposed on

others, the more a firm's action is deemed justifiable, and the less negative the reaction to the vertical differentiation. For example, an entertainment park can cater to premium customers by offering special comfortable lounges and family-friendly rest areas. In this case, the premium offering does not affect the objective experience of those using the standard park facilities (and in fact it may reduce crowding in existing public spaces). Alternatively, an entertainment park may offer express or skip-the-line services, allowing premium customers to enter a venue or attraction without waiting in line. This premium feature imposes a direct cost to non-premium customers, who must wait longer in a physical line, potentially sparking negative reactions towards the company. Future research should explore the conditions that make premium products seem more or less fair, and how marketers can design such services to preserve the satisfaction of non-premium customers (RQ11).

Further, marketers can play a role in the perpetuation of inequality when they mispredict what lower vs. higher SES consumers want (Olson et al., 2025) and, as a result, offer products that exacerbate stereotypes about high and low SES consumers. This raises the question about the effect of SES-based stereotypes on systematic differences in product offerings across consumer segments (RQ12). As marketers become further removed from the consumers they actually serve, and artificial intelligence (AI) and big data tend to reduce (and dehumanize) people into data points, does reliance on stereotype-laden decision making persist, or does micro-targeting lead managers to consider multiple perspectives to a greater degree?

4.2.3. Consumers

Reinforcing the notion of intersectionality, future research can examine how consumers' overlapping identities affect their behaviors in ways that perpetuate inequality (RQ13). Consumers at different intersections, e.g., White suburban women, conservative African American men, or urban Hispanic teens, may have different lived experiences as well as different interpretation of concepts such as power and inequality (Uduehi et al., 2024). How do consumers perceive their status when they have multiple identities, and how do their distinct experiences affect their choices of products and services, reactions to advertising, and other aspects of the marketing mix?

Beyond power distance beliefs, what are some of the individual differences predicting consumer behaviors that perpetuate inequality (RQ14)? For example, which individual differences correlate with more vs. less reliance on stereotyping? More generally, what is the process by which consumer-level differences become macro-level forces? Is it a matter of the number of consumers who think a certain way, or do these differences combine with other factors to affect macro-outcomes?

4.3. Future research on disrupting inequality

4.3.1. Macro forces

We identified three macro forces that can disrupt cycles of inequality: technology, regulation, and social movements. In terms of technology, future research is needed to more rigorously understand the impact of AI on the expansion of resources among under-represented or underserved communities (e.g., education, healthcare, and other public services) (RQ15). The effects of AI on inequality remain largely unknown, and multiple macro factors such as digital infrastructure, economic models (funded by government, not for profit, or commercial organizations), and regulatory frameworks may interact to predict whether AI can expand access to resources among disadvantaged consumers, or end up exacerbating inequalities. In domains like education and healthcare, certain features of the technology itself, such as level of personalization and personal support, are likely to play a key role as well. For example, the use of chatbot tutors paves the way to personalized teaching, reducing the intensive investment from educators to repackage content to best meet students' needs (Capraro et al., 2024). Another important criterion for technological advancements to act as a disruptor of existing inequalities is that they must be affordable and accessible (Veinot et al., 2018). AI tools that require expensive devices and subscriptions, or high-bandwidth connections, are unlikely to achieve widespread adoption among disadvantaged consumers. Which business models (public-private partnerships, freemium or tier priced models, open-source models) are the most effective for aligning the economic interests of key stakeholders with the goal of delivering AI solutions that solve challenges of those most in need?

Regarding the role of regulation, future research should explore how policymakers can preempt or minimize unintended negative effects of policies intended to help those who are less advantaged (RQ16). We suggest that one way is to take a systemic perspective to anticipate how marketers and consumers may react to such regulations. In particular, as in the case of pharmaceutical regulation in India (Jaikumar et al., 2024), policymakers need to understand the effects of incentive systems that may derail the intention of the regulations. In addition, research may examine why some regulations are more successful in reducing inequality than others. What are the characteristics of effective legislation and implementation strategies?

Lastly, in the context of social movements, an important direction for future research concerns the conditions under which social movements lead to large disruptions versus small or negligible changes (RQ17). Although some research suggests the #MeToo movement spurred consumers to reduce their purchases of stereotypically "feminine" products (Bellet et al., 2025), other research, such as a meta-analysis of 44 years of field experiments on hiring decisions, found generally improving outcomes for women and no inflection point associated with the onset of the #MeToo movement (Schaerer et al., 2023). Given the difficulty of interpreting time trends (Schaerer et al., 2023), marketing researchers could use meta-analyses to explore whether gradual shifts in social norms or immediate shifts by social movements drive marketers' and consumers' responses to marketing actions, such as gender-based pricing (i.e., pink tax) or race-based rebranding (e.g., changing the name of Aunt Jemima to Pearl Milling Company).

4.3.2. Marketers

Many companies have tapped into larger consumer segments by offering "affordable luxury" products (Granot et al., 2013). For example, lower cost versions of luxury products (e.g., outlet collections, mini versions of products, rental services of luxury items)

expand access to status-signaling products and provide hedonic benefits to consumers who otherwise would not have access to these products. However, the impact of these strategies in reducing status-based distinctions among consumers is unclear. An interesting avenue for future research is exploring conditions under which the consumption of such products effectively reduces perceived inequality (RQ18). The democratization of luxury may expand access to the hedonic benefits provided by luxury offerings, but it is unclear whether it effectively reduces perceived inequality or vertical differentiation among consumers.

Can marketers effectively reduce inequality by simply increasing the availability of products in underserved geographic areas or to segments of underserved consumers? Initiatives designed to address dietary inequality across socioeconomic groups often focus on supply-side factors, such as the affordability and availability of healthy foods in underserved areas, but a significant portion of dietary inequality stems from consumer-level preferences—particularly the stronger demand for filling foods among lower-income individuals (Andretti et al., 2025). Thus, in the domain of food consumption, increasing availability and affordability of healthy foods may not fully address dietary inequality. In other domains, such as health care and housing, increasing availability and affordability may have a stronger direct effect in reducing inequality. Thus, the impact of supply-side interventions to reduce inequality may be context dependent, with larger effects in some domains versus others (RQ19). More research is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms behind these effects.

4.3.3. Consumers

How can we disrupt consumer stereotyping of disadvantaged groups (RQ20)? There is research on the effectiveness of interventions to reduce prejudice (Paluck et al., 2021), and meaningful interactions with those at different income levels may attenuate the undervaluation consumers have of each other's psychological needs (Schroeder & Epley, 2020).

Further, consumers can engage in activism (i.e., deliberate behaviors targeted toward reducing inequality) to disrupt inequality in the marketplace. A fruitful area for research may be exploring factors that contribute to consumer activism versus complacency (i.e., lack of awareness, concern, or action regarding inequality; RQ21). For example, consumers who have a higher sense of control may be more likely to view their purchase decisions as effective tools for enacting marketplace change. In contrast, those with a lower sense of control may inadvertently perpetuate inequality by failing to use their purchase power to penalize organizations for unequal treatment of consumers. Future research could explore whether differences in perceived efficacy of consumption decisions explain differences in activism vs. complacency among consumers.

Additionally, some types of activism may be more effective than others in helping to disrupt inequality. One such type of activism is consumer boycotting, i.e., directing purchases to companies whose values align with those of the consumer (e.g., minority-owned businesses). Consumers may be reluctant to engage in boycotting because it seems less instrumental and self-enhancing than boycotting (Li et al., 2024), and future research might examine the most effective motivations for consumers to engage in boycotting. In the vein of our dynamic analysis, we ask when and how deliberate consumer activism becomes habituated purchasing behavior and how underlying motivations may change over time (RQ22). A consumer may start buying from a minority-owned business as a boycott but then discover that the business fits their needs well and continue to purchase without remembering the original motivation that drove the boycott. Future research can explore this dynamic process and how the nature of consumer activism changes over time.

5. Implications and Conclusion

We conclude with two major takeaways, one conceptual and one methodological. Our major conceptual takeaway is that marketplace inequality must be envisioned as a system in which macro forces, marketers, and consumers create, perpetuate, and disrupt cycles of inequality. While inequality has many negative consequences, our systemic perspective acknowledges several functions of social hierarchies in the marketplace and the incentives for perpetuating inequality. For consumers, inequality creates aspirational goals, motivating upward mobility through consumption (Bellezza et al., 2017; Durante et al., 2014; Jaikumar & Sarin, 2015; Walasek et al., 2018). While this may lead to problematic behaviors like purchasing counterfeits (Amaral & Loken, 2016) and saving less (Garbinsky et al., 2014), it also serves as a pathway to enhanced social status. Inequality enables consumers to signal their social standing, potentially allowing them to bond with other consumers who share their values (Amaral & Loken, 2016; Wang & John, 2019).

Our perspective also highlights several ways in which inequality can benefit marketers. First, inequality provides a natural framework for market segmentation, allowing marketers to target specific consumer groups based on their social status and purchasing power (e.g., Narayan et al., 2015). This enables more efficient allocation of marketing resources and the development of tailored messaging that resonates with targeted segments. Further, brands associated with higher social status can command premium pricing due to consumers' willingness to pay more for exclusivity and prestige (Kuksov & Wang, 2013; Rao & Schaefer, 2013), potentially increasing profits for firms targeting affluent consumers. Finally, marketers can leverage inequality to reinforce brand identity and positioning (Bellezza et al., 2017). Linking a brand to a specific reference group may strengthen brand meaning associations (du Plessis et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in the luxury market, where brand meaning plays a key role in driving consumption (Wang, 2022).

The second major takeaway of our analysis of cycles of inequality is methodological. A more systematic investigation of the cyclical nature of inequality is challenging, but possible and necessary. Approaching marketplace inequality as a complex system enables the identification of critical tipping points—threshold points in complex systems where self-reinforcing feedback loops trigger a transition to a fundamentally different system state (Lenton, 2020). Recent research on climate change has adopted a similar approach, moving beyond traditional energy-system models to a climate-social system in which feedback processes identified across different disciplines connect to influence CO₂ emissions (e.g., Moore et al., 2022). To study marketplace inequality as a complex system of interactions

between macro, marketer, and consumer forces requires an integrated multidisciplinary perspective. Insights from a variety of fields, such as economics, sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, and marketing, and methodological approaches need to be integrated to identify and explain the feedback loops existing among the different forces. Simulations and computational modelling can be used to uncover dynamic feedback loops and long-term systemic processes within the market environment, allowing researchers to test diverse scenarios and potential interventions. Experimental methods, including consumer decision-making experiments, can be used to provide causal evidence on the micro-level mechanisms—such as biases, perceptions, and strategic behaviors—that contribute to systemic disparities. Ethnographic studies can offer contextual richness, capturing cultural and social nuances that influence consumer engagement and perceptions of fairness in specific market settings. Finally, surveys can complement these approaches by generating large-scale, quantitative data on disparities, attitudes, and perceptions across diverse populations, establishing the macro-level patterns of inequality. The combination of some of these methods to explore a single phenomenon can enable researchers to develop a nuanced understanding of how individual behaviors, firm strategies, socio-cultural factors, and systemic forces interact to sustain or disrupt marketplace inequality.

The discussion about the use of multiple methods to advance our understanding of marketplace inequality is especially timely given that generative AI (GenAI) is becoming a key tool for analyzing large and complex datasets. GenAI can help identify inequality cycles that might otherwise go unnoticed (see [Epp & Humphreys, 2025](#)). However, as [Huang and Rust \(2025\)](#) caution, GenAI often relies on average-based predictions that can overlook or misrepresent marginalized consumers, such as older adults, low-income individuals, or populations from the Global South, who have different lived experiences and needs compared to the “average” consumer. This poses a serious challenge for studying marketplace inequality, as it risks excluding or distorting the experiences of key groups. [Huang and Rust \(2025\)](#) call for more human-centered research approaches that move beyond general trends produced by big data and focus on unique individual experiences and perspectives. One good example is photography-based methods, where participants use their own phones to capture everyday people, places, and events as they experience them, and later reflect on these images in dialogue with researchers (e.g., [DeBerry-Spence et al. 2019](#); [Sobande et al. 2021](#)). These methods help researchers observe behavior and culture in real-life settings from the participants’ own perspective and are particularly useful for understanding cycles of inequality because they can capture how micro-level marketplace activities connect to broader macro dynamics. They can visually illustrate the various actions through which consumers or marketers create, maintain or disrupt marketplace inequality shaped by social hierarchies. For instance, in their study of micro-entrepreneurs in a major market in Accra (Ghana), [DeBerry-Spence et al. \(2019\)](#) show how repeated pictures of itinerant commercial activity helped them better understand the everyday physical mobility central to both consumers and entrepreneurs in urban subsistence markets. Traditional ethnographic methods like go-alongs often struggle to capture such mobility across multiple participants and sites at once, whereas photography allows researchers to see various views through several images. Moreover, compared to methods that rely on participants’ memory and real-time reflection, photography gives participants more space and time to reflect, which can help build trust and reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants.

In closing, we hope our article will inspire marketing researchers to study the phenomenon of marketplace inequality as a system, examining the interdependences among consumers, marketers, and macro forces in creating, perpetuating, and reducing inequality in markets for goods and services.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Debora V. Thompson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Amna Kirmani:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Rebecca Hamilton:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Andy Li:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Christilene du Plessis:** Writing – review & editing. **Daniel Fernandes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Guillaume Johnson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Brent McFerran:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Jian Ni:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Vladimir Pavlov:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Francine Petersen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Lisa Scheer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Yan Vieites:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Keith Wilcox:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2025.09.004>.

Data availability

No new data were generated for this article. The data supporting our conclusions are from published sources and are reported within the article and its supplementary material.

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