



Diversity from the Customer'S Perspective. Good or Bad? the Case of Disability

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ABSTRACT

The effect of workforce diversity on customers is an important and understudied topic in marketing. The following article reviews the published studies investigating how customers perceive and are influenced by employees with disabilities. Studies included for review examined how customers respond when served by an employee with a disability. Scopus was used as the primary database in the search for articles. A total of eight studies have been reviewed. Nearly all the studies are published recently, indicating the growing academic interest in the topic. Findings are discussed as there is no consensus on whether disability can positively or negatively affect the customer's perception of the employee and the company. Research gaps, methodologies and limitations are addressed, and future research directions are suggested and discussed. This review indicates that there is still room for research on the topic with important gaps that could be the reason for inconsistent findings.

Keywords: Diversity, Disability, Customer perspective, Literature review

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is defined as an actual or perceived difference in physical or socio-cultural attributes in people and how these differences are represented in research, market, space, and organizations (Arsel et al., 2022). The effect of diversity on organizations has been well documented and investigated in the literature (Colella & Varma, 2001; Hoffman, 1959; Scherbaum et al., 2005; Watson et al., 1993), but little importance has been given to how diversity can influence customers. This phenomenon is becoming more relevant as companies hire employees from different nationalities and backgrounds, resulting in a diverse workforce. How the diversity of the workforce can impact consumers is becoming of interest to scholars (Khan & Kalra, 2021) and practitioners. The emphasis and pressure on companies to become more diverse and inclusive are translated by initiatives such as the Fortune list of "The 100 Best Workplaces for Diversity" and Forbes Best Employers for Diversity. Governments, especially in the western world, stress companies to be more diverse and inclusive through legislations (quotas, equal pay...). Customers also play a role in encouraging companies to be more diverse as they might favour inclusive companies when choosing between alternatives (Siperstein et al., 2006).

For instance, the effect of diversity on consumer's perceived morality of a firm has been investigated by Khan & Kalra (2021). They proved that diversity in the workforce yields more positive consumer attitudes and behaviour towards a firm. In another study by Pandey et al. (2005),

they showed that firms that publicise their inclusion on the diversity elite list as a part of their marketing communication strategy had significant shareholder gains. Even though having a diverse workforce could yield positive results for a company, employers still worry about customers' responses to a diverse workforce and use that to justify their discriminatory hiring behaviour (Domzal et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, one of the effective ways to encourage businesses to become more inclusive is by transforming diversity into a business case (Slater et al., 2008), showing its economic and non-economic benefits. A positive effect of diversity on customers' perception and loyalty behaviour will undoubtedly motivate employers to change their attitudes towards hiring and including a diverse workforce. Even though laws and regulations like the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Article 21 of the European Union treaties prohibit all types of discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age, the effectiveness of these laws depends on the employer's collaboration and good intentions (Vornholt et al., 2018).

One of the dimensions of diversity that is understudied is disability. Disability is considered one of the diversity dimensions besides age, gender, religion, physical appearance, and sexual orientation. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities, "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". A review by Arsel et al. (2022) about diversity studies published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* highlights the need for more research on disability. One of the reasons disability is a relevant dimension of diversity is the number of people with disabilities in the world. According to the World Bank, about 15 % (one billion people) of the world population have some form of disability (World Bank, 2021), and about 150 million people experience a significant disability (a disability that hinders main daily activities such as transportation, learning, and working). Second, companies are showing openness to hiring people with disabilities to be part of the workforce that represents the company. For example, multinational brands like Gucci and Victoria's Secret hired models with down syndrome to be a part of their teams (Barr, 2020; Vines, 2022). Marriott International hotel chain also commits to hiring employees with disabilities (Gibbons, 2020). Even though companies are changing their hiring practices to be more inclusive, little is known about how this could influence consumer behaviour and perceptions of a company. Hiring a service employee with a disability could positively influence consumer loyalty and generate positive word of mouth, but it can equally likely negatively influence consumer perception of service quality and purchasing behaviour, especially in a service context. Companies could be perceived as socially responsible for hiring socially vulnerable people, but they could also be perceived as unreliable service provider. Employees are among the first contact points a customer encounter when interacting with a service company. As a result, employees can significantly influence consumer behaviour and how the company is perceived and positioned in customers' minds.

Accordingly, the focus of this article is on the customers' reactions towards employees with disabilities in a service context for the following reasons. Firstly, disability may differ from other

diversity dimensions due to the different psychological, cognitive and emotional responses it can generate in customers when interacting with them (Kleck et al., 1966; Stone & Colella, 1996). Additionally, in most of the service encounters, customers are in direct contact with front-line service employees. The delivery of the service and its perceived quality highly depend on the subjective evaluation of the customer. Consequently, customer experience could be significantly influenced depending on the interaction between service employees and customers. Secondly, people with disabilities constitute a large social group, "about one billion people" worldwide (WHO, 2011), and they suffer from strong discrimination and marginalization. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities at the age of work can reach up to 90% (United Nations, 2005). Thanks to legal obligations that are set by laws and regulations such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, law number 68 of 1999 in Italy, and Directive Proposal (COM (2008)462) of the European Union, some sectors as the service sector started hiring people with disabilities to be part of their staff members (ISTAT, 2019 - 11.7% of the total people with disabilities that have a flexible contract; US Department of Labor, 2020 - 18% from the total workforce with disabilities).

In particular, Stone & Colella (1996) identified six factors that could influence how individuals treat and perceive people with a disability. Those factors are aesthetic qualities, the origin of the disability, the course, the concealability, the disruptiveness, and the danger that the disability could expose others to. As those factors vary, the cognitive evaluation of a person with a disability will change accordingly by the observer. Another factor differentiating the disability from other forms of diversity is the emotional response it could provoke in the observer upon close interaction. Some studies (Beckwith & Matthews, 1994; Farnall & Smith, 1999; Kleck, 1966, 1969; Nordstrom et al., 1998) show that in the social interaction between persons with and without a disability, the focus shifts from the substance of the encounter to managing it, resulting in emotions such as anxiety, uncertainty, and artificiality. This consequence could significantly affect the service encounter. On the other hand, positive emotions such as empathy and happiness may be evoked due to social interaction with an employee with a disability. These emotions could be caused by the observer's willingness to help people with disabilities or his familiarity with interacting with them.

The article will proceed as follows. The first section (Literature review) will explain the methodology followed to find and select the relevant articles. It then continues by reviewing each article separately and by grouping them under subgroups depending on their findings. The second section (Gaps and Future research) will discuss the relevant theoretical and methodological gaps that were not covered by the selected studies. The article concludes with some insights on the importance of the study and its managerial and theoretical contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will review all the studies that meet the selection criteria in terms of context, disability type, methodology, theoretical background, and findings. Subsequently, a discussion of the relevant gaps is presented, along with possible future research directions.

The methodology employed in searching for the targeted studies is the following. Using Scopus as the primary database, the author used the following keywords ('disability', 'customer', 'service', 'employee') to search in the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the published articles limiting the search to social sciences and business, management, and accounting subject areas without specifying a timeframe. Since the literature is relatively new, an individual search has been conducted on each of the following top management and marketing journals' websites (following the ABS ranking list): Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Marketing Science, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Retailing. This additional search aimed to include articles that have been accepted for publication but have not yet been assigned to a publication volume/issue (articles in press) and consequently do not appear when searched for. Finally, the reference list of the selected articles was scanned for studies on the topic (snowballing). After reading the abstracts of the articles found, only articles that chose the customer as a unit of analysis and the disability of the service employees as a stimulus were selected.

A total of eight published studies have investigated how the presence of a service employee with a disability could influence the company through service quality, corporate reputation, and loyalty. Most of the studies have been published recently, indicating the evolving academic interest in the topic. A common factor shared by nearly all these studies is that they are conducted in a service context where the level of contact between the customer and the front-line employees is high. This consequence could be referred to the fact that the service sector is one of the sectors that hire a significant number of employees with disabilities (Donnelly & Joseph, 2012), and customers' evaluations are primarily based on service employees' performance (Bitner, 1990). Nearly all the studies have used a quantitative approach and specifically experiments. Qualitative analysis as interviews with customers was completely absent except for Rosenbaum et al. (2017), which conducted a qualitative analysis on the customers' reviews of businesses that hire employees with disabilities. Another element regarding the methodology was the lack of field studies and the overreliance on online experiments (except for Dwertmann et al. (2021)). Stone & Colella (1996), in their recommendations for future research on disability, advocated the use of unobtrusive methods such as observation and natural experiments to study reactions to persons with disabilities.

The Evolution of the Literature

The most recent study on the topic is the paper by Dwertmann et al. (2021). They investigate how receiving a service from a front-line service employee (cashier) with a disability (wheelchair or deaf) can influence perceptions of corporate social responsibility, stereotypes, and the corporate

reputation in a retailing context (supermarket chain). The study relies on three theoretical lenses to explain its results. These theories are the signaling theory (Spence, 1973), stereotyping (Fiske et al., 2002), and valuation by association logic (Kulik et al., 2008). The authors argue that customers will perceive the interaction with a service employee with a disability as a CSR initiative that will positively affect the company's reputation. The company's reputation is also positively affected by disability stereotypes (warmth and competence). According to the authors, this could result from the belief that companies control the people they hire. Recruiting negatively stereotyped individuals will be perceived by customers as a conscientious act of a reputable company. Methodologically Dwertmann et al. (2021) used a field experiment (manipulation followed by a survey) and an online experiment (Solomon four-group design) to guarantee the internal and external validity of the findings. Social desirability bias was controlled by checking if there was a difference between the contact quality ratings of the cashiers with and without a disability and by placing all the disability-related measures in the post-test conditions. Other factors that could control for the effect of social desirability are the context of the study (Lithuania – different social norms) and the fact that the results of the online experiment (randomization, pre- and post-measures ...) replicate the field study results. The choice of the disability type depended on two main factors: the visibility of the disability and the stereotypes attached to it. The study included visible (wheelchair) and invisible (deaf-mute) disability types where the cashier wore a badge to disclose his/her disability. The other factor was investigated by studying the variability in the disability-job fit (Colella & Varma, 1999).

The first study investigating how consumers perceive companies that hire people with disabilities was the national survey conducted by Siperstein et al. (2006). The survey was among the first to show consumer preference for socially responsible companies. Specifically, the study shows through 803 telephone interviews in the US that 75% of the participants had worked with or received a service from a person with a disability (an indicator of familiarity). Nearly all the participants were satisfied with the service they had received. Customers expressed a high favorability rating for companies that hired people with a disability and preferred to give their business to these companies. The study does not use any specific theory to explain the findings. There was no control for the social desirability responding. The disability type was not specified, but it was left to the customers to decide what is meant by disability. Finally, there was no specification for the sector or context in which the customers received the service from an employee with a disability. After these findings, a series of studies were conducted in the hospitality sector (restaurants and hotels) to study better the effect of disability on the perceived service quality and loyalty behaviour of customers. Following, I will present two groups of studies that show contrasting findings regarding the effect of disability.

Studies Advocating Disability

The first group of studies that showed either no negative effect or a positive effect of the disability status of front-line service employees on the quality of the service and consumer behaviour are Kalargyrou et al. (2018; 2020), Kuo & Kalargyrou (2014), and Rosenbaum et al. (2017). All these

studies were conducted in a service delivery context where the employee with a disability was conducting the role of a waiter in a restaurant or a receptionist in a hotel.

The study by Rosenbaum et al. (2017) investigated how the disability of the service providers can impact the evaluations of service quality and behavioural intentions. The paper's main findings are that customers perceived and treated the hiring of people with disabilities as an important clue when evaluating the service quality and that the attitudes customers held towards people with disabilities influenced their loyalty behaviour (word-of-mouth). This is the only study that has used qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse customers' responses to disabled service employees. The study used word clouds based on customers' online reviews of a restaurant located in Nepal that hires deaf waiters and another restaurant that hires blind waiters "dining in the dark", based in a sizeable Middle Eastern city. Emotions emerged from customers' reviews, and the novelty of the experience counterbalanced the negative effect of premium pricing. Three subsequent studies were conducted using the survey methodology to test the effect of customers' attitudes on loyalty behaviour. Customers' attitudes played a significant role in their loyalty behaviour, but more important were the reliability and assurance of the service.

The first article by Kalargyrou and colleagues is the paper by Kuo & Kalargyrou (2014). Their work focused on how consumers perceive restaurants that hire a significant number of service employees with disabilities. Specifically, they investigated how consumers' purchase intentions vary as a function of attitudes, personal characteristics, and dining occasions. The interesting finding of this study is that customers' likelihood of choosing a restaurant that hires service staff with disabilities was lower if the dining occasion was more serious (a business dinner or a romantic dinner) than a regular dinner (family/friends' dinner). Customers felt less comfortable being served by a service employee with a mental disability. This finding could be referred to several reasons. However, a possible explanation is that customers may have perceived the service delivered by restaurants that hire people with disabilities as less reliable. As a result, they avoided choosing this restaurant for serious occasions where service failures are strongly intolerable. This study employed a single-factor experimental design manipulating only the dining occasion and using convenient sampling (snowball sampling). The total sample size was equal to 192 customers. The study did not specify the disability type of the service employees but only said that they are physically or intellectually challenged.

The second study by Kalargyrou et al. (2018) investigated how customers' service quality evaluations and stereotyping may vary as a function of different disability types (physical disability, sensory disability, emotional disability) in a hotel setting where the service employees served as receptionists. The study found no significant effect of disability on the perception of service quality except for visually impaired employees. Visually impaired employees were also stereotyped more than other types of disabilities. Additionally, disability had a negative effect on the tangible dimension of service quality but not on reliability and professionalism. In terms of methodology, the study followed a scenario-based experiment with five experimental conditions (No disability and four different types of disability: amputation, hearing, visual, and disfigurement). Two hundred and sixty-two participants were randomly assigned to watch a five-

minute video showing a receptionist conducting a hotel check-in. Participants were asked to fill in a survey. The most recent study by Kalargyrou et al. (2020) continues investigating how customers could be affected by the disability status of a service employee but this time by adding an experimental condition which is service failure. The study used the same setting (hotel) and the same disability types to test if customers will be affected negatively when served by an employee with a disability. Confirming the previous study's findings, customers evaluated only receptionists with visual disabilities less than their peers and were less tolerant in a service failure scenario.

The Negative Effect of Disability

The next group of studies that showed a negative effect of the disability of the service employee on customers' evaluations are the studies by Cowart & Brady (2014) and Madera et al. (2020). Cowart & Brady (2014) studied a new type of disability which is obesity (not overweight). They found a negative baseline effect of obesity on customer evaluations in a hospitality setting (restaurant). Customers rated the average weighted employee (in terms of attractiveness, expected interaction quality, and employee-level satisfaction) more than the obese ones. This negative effect affected the company (stigma by association). Customers who were shown the obese service employee rated the company lower on brand equity, service quality, firm satisfaction, and purchase intentions than the customers shown the average weighted employee. Social desirability did not affect the study results as it was controlled for and was not significant. The study is not limited to unveiling the baseline negative effect of obesity on customers. However, it continues to test if signalling unambiguous quality cues and using positive stereotypes could help attenuate the negative effect of obesity. Indeed, when participants were presented with clear clues that signal quality (indicating that the employee was nominated as the customer service employee of the month) or have been told that the employee is known for being jovial (positive stereotype), the firm's and employee's evaluation were more favourable compared to the scenarios where these tactics were not used. The study used a scenario-based experimental design to test the proposed hypotheses.

The last study by Madera et al. (2020) claims a negative effect of disability on employees' evaluations and the service offered. Using a sample of 370 participants and in a lodging context (hotel reception), this study used an experimental design to test if service employees with disabilities (amputee and visual disability) will be perceived as less competent compared to their peers without a disability and if this consequently will affect the service quality. They also try to test how these factors vary under a scenario of service failure. The findings show that the presence of a disability has negatively affected competence evaluations and service quality (assurance, tangibles, and reliability). Additionally, the service failure condition has negatively moderated the relationship between disability and service quality (assurance and reliability), as the negative effect of disability on service quality was stronger in a service failure scenario. The study uses the Justification-Suppression Model (JSM) to explain the findings. The model claims that prejudice could be expressed without hard feelings if there is a justification for it (service failure in this case).

GAPS & FUTURE RESEARCH

This section will discuss all the relevant gaps that were not covered and discussed by the previously reviewed studies. It will be divided into two main parts: the theoretical section, which will discuss all the possible theoretical contributions that could be studied and the methodological section, which discusses the used methodologies in the previous studies and suggests some adjustments and improvements.

From a theoretical perspective, the two main gaps highlighted in the above-reviewed literature are the absence of a detailed investigation of the role of the social interaction construct and the lack of focus on emotions. Since delivering a service usually requires a certain level of interaction between the service employee and the customer, it is crucial to investigate how the interaction with an employee with a disability may influence the service. The quality of interaction could influence important factors such as perceived quality and loyalty. In nearly all the previous studies (except for Dwertmann et al. (2021)), the effect of social interaction on customers was not investigated. Dwertmann et al. (2021) showed that interaction with a service employee with a disability could positively affect CSR and competence stereotypes. However, no study has investigated whether there is a difference between customers' reactions when they see a service employee with a disability working in a restaurant (no interaction) and customers that get served by that employee (close interaction). The argument behind this is that customers may feel and think positively when patronizing a socially responsible business, but this could change when customers need to interact with a disabled employee closely. This paradox between what customers want (more socially responsible firms) and how they behave (avoid interacting with a person with a disability) is an interesting theoretical aspect to be investigated. Goffman (1963) argues that the social interaction between a physically impaired and a physically normal person will be anxious and unanchored. This finding highlights the second important element that previous studies have not investigated, which is the emotional reaction of customers when interacting with an employee with a disability. Emotions play a great role in the service delivery context and especially when there are negative emotions (Hou et al., 2013). According to Kleck (1966), negative emotions such as distress and anxiety can result from the interaction between a person with and without a disability. These negative emotions could influence customers' evaluations and loyalty behaviour. On the other hand, positive emotions may result when interacting with an employee with a disability. These positive emotions could be due to customers' familiarity and personal interest in helping people with disabilities. The emotional dimension of service is an important theoretical factor that could explain consumer behaviour differences. Finally, a significant contribution to the consumer psychology literature could be by investigating how businesses can overcome relying on stereotypes to evaluate a service offered by a socially stigmatized person. An example of that is the study by Cowart & Brady (2014) which proposed some tactics to attenuate the negative effects of stereotypes.

From the methodological point of view, nearly all the published studies on the topic followed scenario-based online experiments (a video followed by a survey). There is an over-reliance on this type of method, even though it could affect the external validity of the research findings. The

pros of this method lie in the ability to control and check for all the variables that could affect the findings by isolating the treatment. It also allows the researchers to check if the manipulation was successful and to randomly assign the treatment to the sample. These elements enable the researcher to increase the internal validity of the findings while it weakens their external validity. A recommended solution for this problem is using methods that score high on external validity as field and natural experiments (Morales et al., 2017) alongside online or lab experiments. Since field experiments are weak on internal validity due to the difficulty in randomization and the lack of control over all the variables, a controlled experiment that replicates the results of a field one could be a great proof of the validity of the findings. This methodology was used by Dwertmann et al. (2021) paper to increase the robustness of the findings and tackle the social desirability bias.

The main concern when researching topics about discrimination is the social desirability bias which is the tendency of respondents to answer in a way that is viewed favourably by others even though it does not reflect what they think or believe (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Unobtrusive methods such as natural experiments or observation where the participants are unaware that they are participating in a study could be a solution. However, ethical concerns about collecting data in this way could be an obstacle. Another possible solution could be using anonymous online experiments where participants' identity is hidden. They can express their sincere opinions with no social pressure from the researchers or other observers. The tactics that have been used in the reviewed studies are 1) measurement scale of social desirability, 2) testing the difference in mean on certain variables (ex., Contact quality) to check if participants tend to give more favourable evaluations to employees with disabilities, 3) the use of a third-person view when asking about evaluations (ex. How do you think others would react) to alleviate the sensation of personal judgement 4) placing the disability-related questions and measures at the end of the survey and approaching participants without referring directly the disability (presenting the survey as a periodic customer satisfaction evaluation) 5) conducting the study in countries where expressing negative opinions about people with disabilities is acceptable (ex. Lithuania) 6) comparing the results of controlled experiments and field studies (if the experiment results replicate the field study findings).

Another critical factor that could influence the findings of a study in this field is the choice of disability type. As previous research shows, different stereotypes are attached to each disability type (Colella & Varma, 1999; Stone & Colella, 1996). Early studies, such as Siperstein et al. (2006), did not give importance to the disability type and left it for the participants to interpret what is meant by an employee with a disability. This factor could bias and affect the validity of the findings. Future research should emphasize the type of disability by investigating how different disability types can impact customers. Additionally, there has been a complete overlook of the intellectual disability types such as down syndrome and autism. These types of disabilities are among the most stigmatized ones due to the unpredictability of the subjects' behaviour. It would be interesting to investigate if customers will react differently to these types of disabilities. A final methodological consideration is the use of qualitative research methods to investigate the phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews could be a great tool to unveil what customers think and feel about employees with disabilities (Thompson et al., 1994). It may give a more explorative approach to an understudied research area (Gummesson, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Even though understanding how customers would react to a front-line service employee with a disability is an important aspect of diversity to study, it has received little attention in the marketing literature. This paper contributes to the discussion on how customers could react to a diverse workforce and specifically to service employees with disabilities. This review analyzes the previous studies on the topic in terms of findings, methodology, and theoretical grounding. It also addresses the gaps in the existing literature and provides suggestions for future research.

This research has a direct impact from the practical and managerial point of view since understanding how customers could react to employees with disabilities in a service delivery context is essential to manage the negative effects, if any, and to exploit the positive ones. Negative reactions to employees with disabilities could be managed either by educating customers on how to interact with such employees or by assigning tasks to service employees with disabilities that require less interaction with customers. Positive effects are also important in order to transform the hiring of employees with disability from a burden or a charity act into a business case and an asset that the company can use and exploit. This can lead to decreasing the discrimination in the hiring and selection process of candidates with disabilities and, consequently, a decrease in their unemployment rate.

Finally, this study highlights important theoretical gaps which could contribute to a better understanding of the discrimination phenomenon in a service context. Firstly, the study highlights the importance of the social interaction between the service employees and the customers when the employee has a visible disability and how this element was overlooked in the literature. Secondly, it underlines the importance of the emotional aspect in this type of interaction and how it could affect consumer behaviour and evaluations. Thirdly, it stresses the importance of understanding the psychological process that guides the customers' evaluations in order to be able to overcome the overreliance on stereotypes in evaluating a service offered by a socially stigmatized person and to adopt tactics that could mitigate this effect.

Although a detailed methodology was used to perform the literature review, it is important to mention some limitations of the study. First, potential articles that are published in journals that are not indexed by "Scopus" database might not have appeared in the search. Second, academic works such as books, unpublished articles, and conference proceedings were not covered in this review as it was limited to published peer-reviewed articles. Finally, the selection criteria that was followed in this review was limited to articles investigating how customers are influenced by service employees with disabilities. A broader article pool could be considered by future reviews that could include relevant studies (Colella & Varma, 2001; Krefting & Brief, 1976; Lindsay et al., 2018), which could provide a broader overview of how disability could impact other stakeholders (employees, managers, etc.).

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