



Retail design and the visually impaired: A needs assessment



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ABSTRACT

This research explores the lived experience of consumers with visual impairment to better understand their everyday shopping challenges, gaps in retail design, and opportunities for improved service. Three focus group interviews were conducted with 17 informants. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using QSR NVivo 8. Findings highlighted many challenges: mobility and getting into the store; judging quality; distinguishing colour; reading labels, store signage, and receipts; negotiating store lighting, merchandise layout, and fitting rooms; and interacting with sales associates. This paper identifies visually impaired shoppers' need for universal retail design, discusses implications, and provides recommendations to retailers and product, graphic, and interior designers.

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1. Introduction

Shopping is an integral part of daily life (McCracken, 1988). Beyond simply needing to purchase a specific product, people shop for a variety of personal and social reasons: recreation, physical activity, self-indulgence, to find out the latest trends, as well as peer group interaction, status, and the thrill of bargain hunting (Tauber, 1972). Although shopping may be a routine activity for many people, it can be a daunting task for those with disabilities, including the visually impaired.

Over the last 30 years, society has increasingly become aware of the rights of people with disabilities as federal and provincial legislation mandates barrier-free living (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2011) as well as improved accessibility to goods and services beyond the built environment (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009), a trend that is echoed in the United States as well as the United Kingdom. Embracing the intent of accessibility legislation is critical for retailers because a failure to do so has financial ramifications as is evidenced with recent litigation by disability advocacy groups to businesses like Target Corp. and others (Grubbs et al., 2012). In the Province of Ontario, Canada, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) became law in 2005 with a goal of making Ontario fully accessible for the disabled by 2025 (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), 2015). This landmark legislation mandates compliance reports regarding accessibility

standards in the key areas of employment, transportation, information and communications, built environment, as well as customer service (Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure, 2015a), with critical implications to retailers. While Ontario is the Canadian pioneer of AODA-style legislation, other provinces in the country are considering similar implementation (Semansky, 2012).

Market accessibility, one of the key principles of Universal Design (The Center for Universal Design, 2010) and a global issue for many businesses and customers (Baker et al., 2002), serves as a focus point for this study. Universal Design (sometimes referred to as Inclusive or Accessible Design) is defined as “the design of all products and environments to be usable by people of all ages and abilities to the greatest extent possible” (Story, 2001, p. 10.3). Utilizing this design paradigm involves rethinking product innovation as well as retail environments to serve a wide range of consumers, including aging baby boomers and the disabled community (Coleman, 2001; Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). This study investigates the lived experience of people with visual impairment within the shopping environment, centering on three research questions: (1) How does visual impairment impact their shopping experience, (2) What challenges and barriers are encountered? (3) How can retailers provide retail servicescape (Bitner, 1992) design solutions to address the issues? Findings of the study will contribute to new knowledge which benefits policy makers and design and retail practitioners on developing accessibility standards, training programs, and strategies for ensuring accessibility.

User experiences are influenced by the design of products as well as environments. According to Lawton and Simon (1968), the environment impacts the functional abilities of people, suggesting

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that a person's competence or ability to perform specific tasks is highly influenced by environmental characteristics. Nagi (1991) proposed that disability is not inherent within a person but occurs when there are gaps between personal capabilities and the demands of certain activities, such as those encountered when shopping. Thus, understanding the kinds of challenges faced by people with visual impairment within the shopping environment provides opportunities to create retail spaces and services that maintain the delicate balance between independent functioning and dependence. Regardless of the nature of the disability, retail design features have the power to support individuals' desire to feel independent and competent, or to disable them, making them feel disempowered and incapable. Further, inclusive design sends positive messages to people with disabilities, messages that tell them "you are important," "we want you here," and "welcome" (Napolitano, 1995, p. 33).

From a retailer's perspective, however, an effective retail design strategy is oftentimes primarily geared toward supporting product sales and creating a strong brand image (Padgett, 1999). Return on investment (ROI) and costs are prioritized over aesthetic elements. While people's shopping behaviours may be considered in relation to traffic flow and space utilization for operational efficiency, incorporating user-centred, inclusive design criteria is not typically linked to businesses' core value propositions and commercial objectives ("Inclusive Design," 2005). On the other hand, inclusive retail environment design makes sense not only in financial terms but also on moral grounds (Semansky, 2012). In Ontario, some retailers embrace AODA regulations with trepidation, while others see an opportunity to elevate overall performance, grow market share and increase consumer satisfaction (Semansky, 2012). According to a Martin Prosperity Institute study (2010), AODA implementation could lead to a retail revenue increase of \$3.8 billion to \$9.6 billion in Ontario in the next five years. In order to better understand the retail setting from an inclusive design perspective, this study investigated challenges inherent in the shopping experience of people with visual impairment. Study findings will help promote effective inclusive design solutions and practices to address the needs and aspirations of mainstream and sidelined customers alike.

2. Literature review

2.1. Vision loss and consumption experience

Vision loss is a detrimental effect of aging that impacts physical, social, and psychological aspects of people's lives (Moore and Miller, 2003; Pelletier et al., 2009). Approximately 3.8 million Canadians are diagnosed with disabilities, including 756,320 people with visual impairment or blindness, many of whom are elderly (Statistics Canada, 2013a, 2013b). Using North American criteria, blindness is defined as the maximal visual acuity in the better eye being equal or less than 20/200, while low vision is classified as maximal visual acuity in one eye equal or less than 20/40 (Maberley et al., 2006). It is important to note that only a small percentage of the Canadian population is blind; the majority of visually impaired persons live with low vision (Maberley et al., 2006). Most people reluctantly adjust to predictable changes in vision as they enter middle age; however, serious forms of eye disease may contribute to vision loss in people of any age, although most common with those who are elderly. Eye disease may include macular degeneration, which typically impacts central vision; cataracts, which manifest as reduced glare recovery and decreased visual acuity; glaucoma, which initially presents as a loss in peripheral vision; and diabetic retinopathy, whose symptoms include overall decreases in visual acuity, colour perception,

and the ability to adapt from dark to light (Castor and Carter, 1995; Eye Diseases Prevalence Research Group, 2004; Rosenberg and Sperazza, 2008). Some of these symptoms may be improved with surgery or medication (Pelletier et al., 2009) and resulting vision loss may be offset by using handheld magnifiers, specialized glasses with tinted filters to reduce glare, large-print computer software, voice synthesizers, and audio books or other talking devices (Castor and Carter, 1995).

People with visual impairment have not been widely studied as a consumer group. In 1999, Stephen J. Gould suggested that consumer researchers include visual impairment as a determinant of consumption (sub)culture in order to examine "the equity issues in terms of fairness of being able to consume" (p. 414). Gould (1999) further proposed a new domain of consumer research be targeted toward learning more about the visually impaired experience. However, 15 years later, a review of literature reveals few empirical studies that investigate the needs of consumers with visual impairment. The studies examined may be categorized into two main themes. The first group explores the impact of visual impairment on body image (Kaplan-Myrth, 2000); emotion, shopping and consumption behaviour (Bradley et al., 2000; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2000); anxiety and depression (Evans et al., 2007); marketplace stresses (Balabanis et al., 2012); as well as the coping strategies utilized by those with low vision (Bradley et al., 2000; Worth, 2013). The second group of studies investigates low-vision consumers' marketplace experiences (Baker et al., 2001); the symbolic and experiential value of shopping to the visually impaired (Baker, 2006); and proposed strategies for enhancing accessibility (Baker et al., 2002; Dias de Faria, 2012; Kulyukin and Kutiyawala, 2010). To our knowledge, no empirical research has been carried out within the context of the Canadian retail marketplace. This represents a significant gap in knowledge because as AODA regulations include mandatory compliance reports and are progressively implemented, it is important to gain feedback from consumers in respects to how retailers are doing and how accessibility standards can be further enhanced. This study fills that gap. Findings may also provide insights applicable to a broader context, such as the aging market segment.

2.2. Inclusive retail servicescape in the context of experiential marketing

The experiential aspects of consumption began to gain recognition in the 1980s. In a seminal paper, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argued for incorporating "the symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic nature of consumption" (p. 132) to broaden the prevailing information processing model (Bettman, 1979). The experiential perspective is significant because consumption is viewed as not only offering utilitarian values but also a "primarily subjective state of consciousness" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). As markets progressed beyond commodities to goods, and to services, the experience economy emerged (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). As Pine and Gilmore pointed out, "an experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates memorable event" (p. 98). In the context of experiential marketing, businesses focus on customer experiences, view consumption as holistic, understand the rational and emotional motivations that lead to consumption, and employ diverse methodologies to develop strategies (Schmitt, 1999). Experience-design becomes of paramount importance in the experience economy.

Shopping experience involves interactions with both tangible and intangible service factors that affect consumer shopping behaviours, pre and post purchase (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1999). A number of studies suggest that ambient and social cues are significant atmospheric elements that influence consumers' affective

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