



Designing retail spaces for inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This article delineates the existence of consumer groups with vulnerabilities, discusses the lack of attention paid to the topic of vulnerable consumers, and calls for both retailing academics and practitioners to work toward constructing frameworks for research and service provision that enhance the welfare of vulnerable consumers. Extant theories and frameworks comprising the foundational knowledge of the retailing and consumer service disciplines have largely explained the marketplace experiences of consumers, without investigating the needs of vulnerable consumer segments. Because the larger consumer base does not necessarily generalize to vulnerable consumers, little is known about how these specific groups of vulnerable consumers can realize the full value inherent in retail exchanges.

An expert is one who knows more and more about less and less.

—Nicholas M. Butler

1. Introduction

More than a decade ago, Mick (2006) questioned the contribution of consumer research in promoting consumer welfare. He suggested that the discipline's research practices and focus on experimental design had fallen short of achieving meaningful outcomes that enhanced people's lives and consumption experiences; instead, consumer researchers were simply learning more about increasingly less. Although Mick's address to the Association for Consumer Research seemed hawkish, it fueled the creation of the transformative consumer research (TCR) movement. As a research paradigm, TCR encourages the exploration of topics that affect consumer welfare and confront social justice issues, including poverty and subsistence marketplaces, sustainable products, addiction, at-risk populations, and food choices.

Following Mick's (2006) call for change in consumer research practices, a group of leading service researchers also questioned the extent to which service research was promoting consumer well-being and consequently set the transformative service research (TSR) paradigm into motion (Anderson et al., 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2011). TSR encourages researchers to attune their research investigations to enhancing consumer welfare by exploring how services, service providers, and service systems can create uplifting changes and improvements in

consumer, communal, and global well-being. Building on the TCR and TSR paradigms, we posit that the time is ripe for retail literature to question the efficacy of its extant research stream on truly promoting consumer welfare and enhancing consumer experiences in retail settings. Indeed, we suggest that, by and large, retailing researchers have built around a theoretical foundation on understanding the marketplace behavior of consumers, the majority of whom do not experience vulnerabilities such as physical impairments, mental limitations, or social and economic stigmas. While researchers have examined subsets of the consumer base to learn how various demographic characteristics may affect consumer behavior, studies on how the retail environment can be improved to enhance the well-being of vulnerable consumers who enter the marketplace with biophysical or psychosocial characteristics are rare. As such, retailing researchers need to reconsider the impact of their theoretical work on consumer welfare and engage in “disciplinary disruption.”

The goal of this article is to twofold. First, within the literature review, we aim to delineate the existence of vulnerable consumer groups and to bring to light why the retailing discipline's extant theories and frameworks do not always generalize to those with disabilities, financial limitations, and aging issues. Second, we demonstrate the need for a TSR-based approach by exploring in-depth how various commercial retailers, including fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and small retailers do not consistently provide adequate service quality to consumers with vulnerabilities. Thus, we highlight the extent to which models and frameworks representing the foundation of service research

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(e.g., service quality, service failure and recovery, servicescape) were not built on a foundation of inclusion or even fairness. We conclude with a discussion of pioneering theoretical research opportunities for retailing researchers who want to explore non-traditional consumers in the hope of creating a disciplinary disruption that turns attention to fostering consumer welfare in retail settings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Exposing the research void

The retailing paradigm emerged from the functional and regional schools of thought in marketing in the years following World War II (Shaw and Jones, 2005). Both these schools encouraged researchers to address the “how” and “where” questions that U.S. retailers were pondering during the economic expansion after the war. Gaining inspiration following the opening of the first climate-controlled, enclosed shopping mall near Minneapolis in 1954, retailing academics began focusing their investigatory efforts on understanding market segmentation and conducting location-based analysis to address the “where” questions, primarily directed at the burgeoning U.S. suburban marketplace (Gillette, 1985). In the early 1970s, Tauber's (1972) work on why people shop stimulated a plethora of research investigations that attempted to understand consumer behavior in retailing settings (Shaw and Jones, 2005). The “who” question, as it relates to retailing, was beginning to garner attention after Ayres (1991) highlighted the existence of gender and racial discrimination in automobile retailing in a *Harvard Law Review* article.

Ayres's (1991) article exposed the reality that service quality is not a universal axiom and that retail organizations are often culpable of practicing discriminatory behaviors that erode a customer's ability to obtain the same value afforded to other customers during marketplace exchanges. Specifically, Ayres found that despite regulation and apparent social mores to the contrary, Chicago-based auto dealerships consistently charged female and African American consumers higher prices than white male consumers for identical vehicles. This study also showed a marked difference in the transaction process, with women and African Americans being steered to salespeople of their own gender and race and being asked different questions than white men. Today, social scientists use a similar auditing framework to identify discrimination based on race, gender, and other protected categories in various contexts, including the employment market (Cherry and Bendick, 2018). Despite that pioneering work, we suggest that, in general, retailing research has not focused on understanding the “who” question; consequently, its models and frameworks representing the foundation of the retailing discipline do not readily generalize to many consumers.

2.2. Defining consumer vulnerability

Countless numbers of consumers possessing stigmatizing biophysical or psychosocial characteristics are vulnerable in terms of realizing the maximum value available during marketplace exchanges (Baker et al., 2005). Biophysical characteristics include, but are not limited to, age (e.g., teenagers, the elderly), ethnicity, chronic illness, disability or mobility issues, and age-related illnesses (e.g., Alzheimer's). Psychosocial characteristics include income level and education, with vulnerability being positively correlated with both a lower household income and the uneducated or undereducated.

As such, even if retail organizations provided consumers with vulnerabilities with sufficient access to public accommodations, many consumers would still remain susceptible to lower or negative levels of value during marketplace exchanges because of other factors, such as discrimination and inferior service from frontline employees (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). The problem in the retailing domain is that, for the most part, its theories and frameworks have not

specifically focused on vulnerable consumers; thus, retail practitioners are often ill-equipped on how to best deliver value in a way that is truly inclusive of a wide range of consumers.

The concept of vulnerable consumers in the marketplace originates from Brenkert (1998), who postulated that all people are vulnerable in some way to marketing practices involved in the selling of goods and services. Despite the omniscient warning of marketing practices to all consumers, Brenkert coined the term “especially vulnerable” to denote select groups that were more likely than others to be susceptible to harm because they enter the marketplace with vulnerabilities that prevent them from realizing maximum value during retail exchanges. Brenkert argued that specific vulnerabilities that were not necessarily physical and remained beyond a person's control would lead to experiences of inferior service quality. These consumer vulnerabilities include the physical (e.g., allergies, sensitivity to chemicals), cognitive (e.g., cognitive immaturity, senility), motivational (e.g., grave illness, grief), and social (e.g., ethnicity, religion, gender, age, poverty) characteristics that make consumers susceptible to inferior service quality in retail settings.

Whereas Brenkert (1998) focused on specific human characteristics that result in consumer vulnerability, later researchers perceived a broader vision of the vulnerability concept. For example, Baker et al. (2005) defined vulnerable consumers as those who enter the marketplace with conditions that put them at a disadvantage in terms of receiving an optimal experience. Similarly, Jafari et al. (2013) considered that any consumer who enters a retail setting and feels uncomfortable or powerless, for any reason, may be vulnerable to receiving expected service quality. Finally, service researchers have tried to link consumer vulnerability with the concept of value and, more specifically, to value co-creation. Rosenbaum et al. (2017) argue that vulnerability ensues when consumers enter consumption settings with stigmatizing personal or social characteristics that may lead to discriminatory and even predatory actions by retail organizations and service providers and thus prevent them from receiving the maximum value possible during an exchange. They further asserted that these personal and social characteristics include a consumer's ethnicity/race, migration status, age, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and physical and mental disabilities.

In a similar vein, Shi et al., (2017, p. 772) link vulnerability to both value and consumer well-being, stating that “consumer vulnerability is an individual characteristic that refers to a tendency to make decisions that will damage one's welfare when stimulated or tempted by external factors in a consumption situation.” This definition suggests that consumer vulnerability entails any human condition that causes consumers to make sub-optimal decisions because of egregious fraudulent marketplace or communication practices that, in turn, lead to the receipt of inferior service quality or the purchase of harmful products.

An underlying theme in many consumer vulnerability perspectives is that consumers with stigmatizing personal or social characteristics are vulnerable in retail settings because they lack expertise regarding the services they are purchasing (e.g., medical, financial, insurance; Anderson et al., 2013). Baker et al., (2005, p. 134) deemed this vulnerability as arising “from the interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions with a context where consumption goals may be hindered.” As such, many consumers may find themselves vulnerable because they lack the ability to patronize competitive alternatives, due to physical or mental disabilities (Shultz and Holbrook, 2009), and thus their ability to maximize the value inherent in the retail marketplace is severely curtailed or even fully diminished.

2.3. The theoretical voids

Despite the existence and vast numbers of vulnerable consumers, the extant models and frameworks that comprise the bedrock of service research (e.g., satisfaction/loyalty, service quality, service failure and

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