

Customer's perspective on front-line service employees with disabilities: The role of interaction and emotions

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# **Customer's perspective on front-line service employees with disabilities: The role of interaction and emotions**

## **Abstract:**

The issue of hiring and including people with disabilities in the workplace has been extensively studied from a human resource (HR) perspective, largely ignoring the role played by customers in contributing to this problem. One of the main concerns of employers in the service sector is the customer's perception of service quality. Research shows that customers may patronize and prefer buying from businesses that hire and include people with disabilities in their staff members, but do not investigate if this preference remains under conditions where customer are in a close interaction with a front-line employee with a disability and what emotions could result from such an interaction. This paper aims at investigating the effect of disability status of service employees in the hospitality sector on the customer's perception of service quality. It specifically focuses on the role of close interaction and emotions in influencing the customers perceptions.

*Keywords: Disability, Interaction, Emotions, Service quality*

*Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics*

## **1. Introduction:**

According to the world bank, about 15 % (one billion people) of the world population have some form of disability, and about 150 million people experience a significant disability (a disability that hinders main daily activities as transportation, learning, and working). The problem of including and hiring employees with disabilities in the workforce has been always investigated and studied from a human resources (HR) perspective (Chi & Qu, 2003; Jasper & Waldhart, 2013; Kalargyrou & Houtenville, 2012), focusing on employers and HR specialists as a unit of analysis by studying their attitudes, concerns, corporate culture, or the nature of the job (Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Jasper & Waldhart, 2013; Loo, 2004; Schur et al., 2009). Another critical perspective that is equally important but largely ignored in the literature is the customer perspective. Since customers are a central pillar in the success of any business, customer preferences and reactions towards businesses that include service staff with disabilities in its workforce could be a significant element in the decision of a company to hire or not a person with a disability (Colella & Bruyère, 2011; Kalargyrou & Houtenville, 2015; Vornholt et al., 2018). That is why understanding how customers would react and perceive a company that has service staff with disabilities is crucial to for addressing the problem of hiring people with disabilities.

The service sector is among the industries that employ a significant number of people with disabilities to be a 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). Additionally, companies are either directly or indirectly stressed to hire people with disabilities either by being encouraged to be socially responsible or because of legal obligations that are set by laws and regulations as the American with Disabilities Act, Directive Proposal (COM (2008)462) of the European Union, and national laws as the law 68 of 1999 in Italy.

The aim of the current study is to investigate whether the decision of a company to recruit employees with visible disabilities in its service staff members could affect the company positively or negatively by investigating the customer's reaction to such a decision. It aims at better understanding whether customers will still patronize businesses that hire service employees with disabilities when they are in a direct interaction with those employees. It also aims at studying whether emotions (if any) could play any role in influencing customer's perceptions and behavior.

## 2. Literature Review:

The seminal work by Stone & Colella (1996) introduced a model of factors that affect the treatment of people with disabilities. In their model, there was an emphasis on the role of stereotyping in the way people perceive and treat people with disabilities. For example, they suggest that the expectations of the observer will depend on the type of disability and the stereotypes attached to it, and these stereotypes will help the observer draw conclusions about the competence, abilities, and other traits of the person with a disability. They also emphasized the role of job characteristics in the stereotyping process.

Studies that investigated customers' attitudes and preferences towards businesses that hire and include people with disabilities have shown positive results (Dwertmann et al., 2021; Siperstein et al., 2006). Findings indicate that most customers prefer to buy from companies that hire people with disabilities, but would this preference persist if customers directly interact with employees with disabilities? In sectors as the service sector, customers and employees are in direct contact, and this could directly affect their perception of service quality. Recent studies that investigate the effect of the disability status of service employees on the customer perception of service quality show inconsistent findings (Kalargyrou et al., 2018, 2020; Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014; Madera et al., 2020). In the first study by Kuok and Kalargyrou, they investigated how consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions towards restaurants that employ a significant number of employees with disabilities (intellectual and physical disabilities) are affected as a function of dining occasions. Findings show that respondents had positive purchase intentions for informal dining occasions like family or friends dinners while they were less inclined to choose such a restaurant for a more serious dinner occasion as a business meeting or a Valentine date (Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014). Another study that showed a negative effect of disability (amputee and visual disability) on customer service evaluations is the study by Madera et al. 2020. In their study, they used an experimental design to test the impact of disability on the assessment of the service and employees offering the service. Findings show that employees with disabilities (compared to their peers without disabilities) received lower evaluations as they were seen as less competent, and they impacted negatively the customer's service evaluation (Madera et al., 2020). Other set of studies show contrasting results as their findings show no significant effect of disability on the guest's service quality perception. In the first study by Kalargyrou et al. 2020, they tested in a controlled experiment if various disability types (amputation, disfigurement, visual and hearing disability) could significantly impact the consumers'

perception of service quality. The experiment also manipulated the context to check if a service failure vs successful service scenario could negatively impact the consumers' evaluation. Results show no significant effect of disability on either stereotyping or service perception (Kalargyrou et al., 2020). Another study that confirms these results is the work by Kalargyrou et al. 2018. In their findings, there was no significant effect of disability (arm amputation, visual and hearing, and disfigurement) on service quality evaluation, with the exception of employees with visual impairments (Kalargyrou et al., 2018).

Drawing on the above-presented literature and reviewing the recent studies done on the topic, there is room for additional research in the field. Starting from the research on the discrimination against people with disabilities, there is a focus on the role played by HR managers and employers and how they can influence the decision of hiring or not of a candidate with a disability. There is a scarcity of literature that investigates the consumer's reaction and response to businesses that hire front-line service employees with disabilities. This study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how the disability status of a front-line service employee can influence consumer behavior and evaluation of service quality.

One of the main gaps in the existing literature is the ignorance of the role of interaction. Previous studies have not manipulated the interaction variable to investigate if it can have an effect on consumer behavior and perceptions. Siperstein et al. (2006) have found that people are more willing to buy from businesses that hire people with disabilities, but it is not clear if this willingness will remain the same if the clients are in direct contact with service employees with disabilities. Consumers may favor businesses that behave in a socially responsible way but may not feel comfortable when interacting with service staff with disabilities. On the contrary, interaction with a front-line service employee may have an extremely positive effect on consumer behavior and may influence the business positively. So, it is not clear whether interaction with a service employee with a disability has a positive or negative effect on consumer behavior.

Another element that is not investigated is the role of emotions. Since emotions have an essential role in the purchasing process and can affect the consumer experience, it is crucial to examine if interacting with a service employee with a disability can generate any emotions. Questions as: What type of emotions (if any) can be developed upon interacting with a service employee with a disability (positive vs negative emotions)? Do these emotions persist when there is no direct interaction? are still not answered. This study aims to contribute to the

literature about emotions by investigating how the interaction with a front-line service employee with a disability can generate an emotional response in the customers and how these emotions can influence their behavior.

### **3. Theoretical Framework:**

One of the theories that could explain why clients could discriminate against and stereotype front-line service employees with disabilities is the social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identity theories try to answer the questions: Who am I? How should I act? Who am I not? How am I different? How am I different, and from whom? How am I similar, and from whom? The social identity theory and similar perspectives see the identity of individuals as having a fixed and specific core. Identity is a personal sense of self that is very important in how people see themselves and interact with others. When using the SIT in a diversity context as the one of disability, the focus is on salient characteristics as the kind of disability, assuming that these categories are the best predictors of group formation and behavior. So, clients that interact with front-line employees with disabilities and especially those with visible disabilities may categorize them as out-group members because they differ from them on salient characteristics. The categorization of the service staff with disabilities as out-group members will give rise to what is called the out-group homogeneity bias and will encourage the use of stereotypes to predict and evaluate performance. Other than the use of stereotypes, customers may feel a large social distance towards employees with disabilities which may affect how much they feel psychologically distant from them.

The theory that correlates psychological distance to the level of construal individuals use to process information and to make predictions and evaluations is the construal level theory. Construal level theory (CLT) is a framework that links psychological distance and abstraction in an attempt to explain whether primary essential characteristics or secondary marginal factors are used by individuals as their reference for evaluation (Yaacov Trope et al., 2007). According to the CLT, there are two levels of construal: the high-level construal and the low-level construal. Low-level construals are used for psychologically near events and high-level construals for psychologically distant ones (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Y. Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003). In the case of the low-level construals, events are more contextualized, unstructured, and concrete. In the high-level construals, on the other hand, events are more abstract, schematic, and decontextualized. There are four dimensions of psychological distance: temporal, spatial, hypothetical, and social. All these four distances are anchored on a

single starting point which is called the zero-distance point (now, here, fact, self) (Lieberman et al., 2007). In this study, social distance (one of the psychological distance dimensions) will be used to test how it can affect emotions and behavior.

Based on the literature reviewed above and using the theoretical frameworks discussed before we pose the following research questions: How the disability status of a front-line service employee can affect the consumer's perception of service quality and purchase intentions? How the interaction between consumers and front-line service employees with disabilities can affect consumer's perception of service quality and purchase intentions? And does the interaction with a front-line service employee with a disability generate any emotional response that can affect consumer's perception of service quality and purchase intentions?

Since the paper is still in its development stage in the following section, we will discuss the proposed methodology and research design to study the above listed research questions.

#### **4. Research design and Methodology**

The study adopts a 2x2 (interaction vs no interaction x disability vs no disability) between-subjects experimental design. Respondents will be distributed randomly to watch a short video clip that shows a service context (a bar) where a client is being delivered a service. There will be 4 different video-based scenarios followed by a questionnaire where two independent variables are being manipulated. The first variable, which is the disability, will be manipulated by showing a front-line service employee with a visible disability (Down syndrome) that is delivering a service to a client. In the second scenario, the same video will be shown except for the fact that the front-line employee will not have a visible disability. The choice of this type of disability is because previous research has not included it when manipulating disability types. Stone and Colella (1996) argue that cognitive disabilities are less desirable and more stereotyped than other types of disabilities. This type of disability has not been tested in previous studies, so it would be interesting to see how clients would react to it. Another reason for choosing this type of disability is that visible disabilities are easy to recognize, and customers must be aware of the disability in order to see if it can influence their behavior. The second independent variable that is manipulated is the interaction. In one scenario, the client will be having direct contact with a service employee while being offered the service. In the other scenario, on the contrary, there will be no direct interaction between the customer and the service employee.

The choice to use scenario-based experiments in the first stage of this study is referred to several reasons. First, doing research in the field of social stigmatization and discrimination is not simple because of the problem of social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is the tendency of respondents to answer in a way that is viewed favorably by others even though it does not reflect what do they really think or believe (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). This problem arises in research that investigates social phenomena as discrimination and stigma because individuals do not want to be seen as discriminatory or unfair. Social desirability bias can have detrimental effects on the validity of the research leading to nonrealistic findings. There are several solutions proposed in the literature to this problem, from which is the self-administered questionnaires where anonymity is guaranteed, and subjects are not exposed to social pressure that could be caused by the researcher when asking the respondent directly about his opinion (Nederhof, 1985). The second reason is the difficulty of data collection in the current COVID-19 pandemic and the complexity of the field experiment. Due to the national health restrictions, it would not be possible to execute the proposed experiment in the field (a restaurant or a bar) without the need to use safety measures (mask) which could indirectly affect the research design. Disability is used as a treatment in this study and wearing a mask (covering a significant part of the face) could make it possible that consumers do not recognize that the service employee is offering them the service has a disability. This problem can be avoided in the filmed scenarios where respondents will undertake a manipulation check to control if they recognized the disability of the service employee. Other than the ability to control this factor, online experiments give researchers the chance to control many aspects in the context in order to guarantee the isolation of the variables. Things as clothes, background music, scripts, or the level of interaction between consumers and service employees can be controlled and manipulated by the researcher. Finally, several published works have used this method to examine customer's behavior, and it has proven to be a valid method (Kalargyrou et al., 2020; Kuo & Kalargyrou, 2014; Madera et al., 2020; Wang, 2011).

## **5. Managerial and Theoretical Implications**

This study aims at contributing to the literature on the discrimination of people with disabilities in the workplace. This time the study does not examine the employer discrimination or colleagues' discrimination but if customers can also discriminate against people with disabilities through their evaluations and behavioral intentions towards a



business. This work helps us understand how and under which conditions consumer behavior can change by discovering the underlying cognitive and affective processes that could arise in a service context.

The study also contributes to the literature on consumer psychology by analyzing how a customer can react in psychologically stressful conditions. By comparing the scenarios in which consumers interact and do not interact with a person with a cognitive disability, the study aims at investigating how this “unusual” event can influence the customer quality perception and purchase intentions. By using the social identity theory and the construal level theory, this study tries to predict how customers will respond and behave in a similar condition.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on emotions. To our knowledge, there are no studies that measure the feelings felt by customers when interacting with a service employee with a disability. Emotions play a central role in the purchase process of customers and in their evaluation of service quality. Previous studies have examined the emotions that could result from an interaction between an individual with a disability and others without. The contribution of this study lies in measuring the emotions that could yield from this interaction in a customer employee service context and if such emotions could influence the customer quality perception and purchase intentions.

The managerial implications of the proposed study have significant importance, especially for companies operating in the service industry. Given the government regulations as the American with Disabilities Act and the European Union legislation that require companies with a specific number of employees to include people with disabilities in their workforce and the trend of corporate social responsibility, hiring employees with disabilities is no more a choice. By understanding how customers in the service context will react when interacting with a service employee with a disability, managers can make informed decisions on the position and the level of interaction with the client that an employee with a disability is supposed to undertake. If interacting with a service employee with a disability is able to make clients more loyal, happier, and more willing to patronize the business so engaging service employees with positions as bartender or waiter will benefit the company. Otherwise, managers can involve employees with disabilities with jobs that require less or no interaction with the customer.

Another important practical implication of the study is the contribution it offers in solving the problem of hiring and inclusion of people with disabilities in organizations. When employers and HR specialists are aware of how customers would react to such an initiative and when they understand how to use the disability as an asset and not to treat it as a liability, then the hiring decision will be much easier and based on scientific evidence and not solely on personal biases and unfounded predictions. When employees with disabilities prove beneficial to companies, this will also positively influence their career opportunities and perspectives.

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