

Revisiting the Customer Journey for Vulnerable Consumers

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Abstract

In this study we examine the experiences of consumers with invisible disabilities in retail brand settings, at different stages of the customer journey. With the lens of self-determination theory, we conduct sixteen in-depth interviews with autistic consumers, focusing on how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are shaped across pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase interactions with retail brand touchpoints. Using latent thematic analysis, we identify three overarching themes: preparation and rewards that help participants build confidence before entering stores; masking strategies that allow them to navigate overwhelming sensory and social environments; and compensatory and recovery responses that influence subsequent store choice, loyalty, and preference for online versus offline journeys. The findings show that vulnerability is not inherent to autistic consumers but emerges through misaligned sensory, social, and procedural elements within specific touchpoints that undermine basic psychological needs. The study contributes to customer journey research by theorizing “loyalty as self-determination,” whereby repeated patronage reflects protection of autonomy and competence rather than satisfaction alone, and it offers actionable implications for retailers and policymakers seeking to design more inclusive, neurodiversity-aware retail experiences.

Track: Consumer Behaviour