

# How consumers with disabilities perceive “welcome” in retail servicescapes: a critical incident study

*Stacey Menzel Baker*

University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming, USA

*Jonna Holland*

University of Nebraska-Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, USA, and

*Carol Kaufman-Scarborough*

Rutgers University-Camden, Camden, New Jersey, USA

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to extend understanding of the cues that customers with disabilities use to judge inclusion/welcome (or not) in interactions in retail stores.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Critical incident interviews were conducted with 115 informants who provided rich descriptions of 113 welcoming incidents and 105 unwelcoming incidents. Interview transcripts were content analyzed to determine inductively the cues customers with disabilities use to perceive welcoming.

**Findings** – Four primary situational factors explain to what perceptions of welcome/inclusion are attributed: service personnel; store environmental factors; other customers; and product/service assortments. Further, a disability becomes salient only when there is an interaction between these situational factors and consumers’ disabilities.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings suggest an extension to Bitner’s servicescape conceptualization in that it specifies that the assessment of an environment as enabling or disabling is important for at least some customers in deciding whether they should stay, go, or return to a particular servicescape.

**Practical implications** – The results reveal that consumers with disabilities should be viewed as customers first, and only as possessing a disability in particular interactions in the customer-firm interface.

**Originality/value** – This research presents the views of a set of customers who are under-represented in research samples. It discusses how not all people with disabilities are alike and begins to develop a deeper understanding of their behavior as consumers. The research is valuable for retail managers and service providers who need useful information for training employees, for designing servicescapes that are welcoming for consumers with disabilities, and for fulfilling the inclusive intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It will also be of interest to academics who are engaged in research that attempts to improve the quality of life for consumers.

**Keywords** Disabled people, Critical incident technique, Consumer behaviour, Perception, United States of America

**Paper type** Research paper

**An executive summary for managers can be found at the end of this article.**

It is generally understood that when customers enter a retail servicescape, they immediately make judgments as to whether they belong or are welcome there. As they move through the servicescape, they have multiple points of contact that further communicate whether they are welcome or not. There is a lack of empirically based research that examines what those factors are that signal welcome, though some researchers have proposed what those factors might be. For example, in

developing the concept of self-congruity, or the mental match between a customer’s image and his/her image of the “type” of customer that is supposed to patronize a particular retail store, Sirgy *et al.* (2000, p. 128) indicate that “type and quality of merchandise, prices, store ambiance, and so on” are likely to have an impact on whether a person feels like he/she “fits” in the setting. However, no known previous research has verified inductively and empirically what the servicescape attributes are that signal welcoming. This research helps to fill that gap with a focus on one specific population: consumers with disabilities.

Current census data indicate that approximately 20 percent of all Americans have a disability of some type, including

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hearing, sight, speech, and mobility impairments; severe obesity; and "hidden" disabilities such as severe asthma and learning disabilities (Waldrop and Stern, 2003). Therefore, it is reasonable that marketers should expect one out of every five customers who patronize their business to have a disability of some sort.

The intent of Civil Rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), was, in part, to provide equal access to public facilities, including grocery stores, department stores, restaurants, and places of entertainment. In compliance with such legislation, widespread structural accommodations have been implemented since that time, such as ramps, automatic doors, accessible restrooms, and elevators. Transportation systems have been upgraded, and many forms of assistive technology have been developed and implemented for use. While progress has been made, studies indicate that only partial accessibility has been achieved (Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001; Burnett, 1996; Schaefer, 2003; Stephens and Bergman, 1995).

When forty-first US President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), he noted that it was time for people with disabilities to be *included* in mainstream America. "Mainstream" means regular, expected, a natural part of everyday life, which demonstrates the intention of the ADA was to make certain people with disabilities feel included or "welcome" in the places and activities of everyday life. Though feelings of welcome are not under the jurisdiction of the ADA legislation, the intention of that legislation was clearly to create those feelings. In reality, accessibility is more than widening the doors and building the ramps. Unfortunately, many aspects of the experiences of people with disabilities remain overlooked and understudied, such as psychological feelings, interactions with salespersons, and actual experiences in the store setting. Quite simply, compliance is not synonymous with welcome. Welcome is something that the customer perceives as a result of the retailer's environment and actions toward a consumer.

The particular servicescape elements (Bitner, 1992) that signal "welcome" (or not) for consumers with disabilities are the focus of this study. In essence, the issue of concern is the attribution(s) that customers with disabilities make as to why they feel welcome/unwelcome in a retail setting. For the purposes of this study, we define "welcoming" as a perception of whether a person feels like he/she "fits" or belongs in the store, is valued as a customer, and is comfortable with the shopping experience.

This research contributes to the services marketing literature in three primary ways. First, if consumers have a choice of retailers to patronize, they presumably will choose those retailers that understand their needs and provide welcoming environments. When service providers do not understand their customers' needs, perceived discrimination may be brought to the forefront on the basis of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, and so forth. Second, this exploratory study helps to understand the cues that customers use to perceive inclusion/welcome. If service managers can control those cues appropriately, they can better manage customer perceptions. Finally, following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, retailers have tended to focus more on structural accommodations (e.g. ramps, elevators) than other types of perceived barriers for consumers with disabilities (Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001; Kaufman-

Scarborough, 1999). As the results of this study show, other factors deserving equal attention contribute to how consumers with disabilities perceive welcome.

The paper begins with a discussion of background literature that provides a foundation for understanding how "welcoming" is perceived in the retail servicescape. After a description of the critical incident technique, data collection, and analysis procedures, the results of the study are discussed. The paper concludes with implications for theory and practice, as well as outlines the study's limitations and directions for future research.

## Background literature

### Self-congruity and the retail servicescape

Research has shown that consumers prefer products when the product brand image matches the consumer's self image (Dolich, 1969). Similarly, consumers are theoretically more likely to prefer to shop in retail stores when the retail store image matches the consumer's self image (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). This matching of image types (i.e. product/store and customer) is referred to as self-congruity (Dolich, 1969; Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). Self-congruity occurs when a person believes his/her self "fits" with a product or retail store image. Appropriate "fit" is determined when the customer assesses elements in the store environment, and these elements are perceived as consistent with his/her self-concept.

Bitner (1992) proposes a framework that conceptualizes the elements of the store environment – the "servicescape". The servicescape framework illustrates that consumers will approach or avoid a store environment based on their perceptions of and responses to ambient conditions such as temperature and noise; space/function elements such as layout and furnishings; and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Both customers and employees respond to each other and to the design elements of the servicescape.

Marketers who study the servicescape are concerned with the co-creation of experience between designers, marketers, and consumers (Sherry, 1998a). When a particular focus is placed upon consumers, as with this paper, the emphasis is on consumers' experiences of "being-in-the-marketplace" and their "immediate experience of the environment" (Sherry, 1998a, p. 9). To understand that experience, often the focus becomes the service encounter, which is a discrete episode in which the customer interacts with the servicescape (Bitner, 1992; Langeard *et al.*, 1981; Shostack, 1985). Consumers interact with and form impressions of any number of elements in the service encounter, including other customers (Langeard *et al.*, 1981), contact personnel (Langeard *et al.*, 1981), lighting, music, and store layout (Baker *et al.*, 1994; Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Langeard *et al.*, 1981), special themed environments (Gottdiener, 1998; Sherry, 1998b), and costumes (Solomon, 1998), all of which may contribute to evaluations of servicescapes and decisions to patronize or return to stores (Kotler, 1973).

Some of the servicescape elements may be under the retailer's control and some are not (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). Sirgy *et al.* (2000, p. 129) propose that controllable servicescape elements such as "atmospheric cues, location cues, merchandise cues, price cues, and promotion cues" signal the retail patron image, or the type of customer that is expected in the store, and the authors assume shoppers use these types of cues to figure out the type of customer who

should shop at particular stores. The resulting “patron images” may include such descriptors as youthful versus senior, fashionable versus bargain-hunter, or innovator versus conservative, and so forth. Basically, if there is a match between a person’s self-concept and their perceived store patron image as cued by the elements in the servicescape, the more likely the individual is to think favorably about the store and actually patronize it.

### Consumers with disabilities in the retail servicescape

According to the consumer marketplace response model, consumers with disabilities assess each environment as enabling or disabling (Baker *et al.*, 2001; Kaufman-Scarborough and Baker, 2005). People with disabilities formulate specific responses to environments based on the access or barriers perceived, while assessing perceived adaptation skills and perceived costs of participation. While enabling environments are thought to offer independence, some consumers with disabilities may perceive an environment as disabling, but feel that they can adapt to it and have a satisfactory experience. Others may decide to reject that same environment if the adaptation is unacceptable or if the costs of participation are too high. Additionally people may choose a role of dependence in that environment, requiring support and assistance. This model allows for consideration of the full range of choices that consumers with disabilities can make when deciding to interact with a specific environment, such as a retail store. It also incorporates both the characteristics of the environment and the characteristics of consumers with disabilities.

This study examines one specific aspect of retail experiences of consumers with disabilities – the factors that affect perceptions of welcome or unwelcome. The self-congruity and servicescape concepts seem particularly well suited to investigate whether customers with disabilities feel welcome in a retail servicescape. For instance, shoppers with mobility impairments have reported significant contrasts, ranging from stores that are “spacious” to those that they were “unable to enter [...] due to the alarm system [...] in front of the doors” (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). Similarly, shoppers with visual impairments may encounter some servicescapes that assist their independence through employees who give advice when requested, while other retail environments may simply inhibit their ability to function effectively (Baker *et al.*, 2001).

Retailers create an image of accessibility through the cues that are sought and noticed by people with disabilities (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999, 2001). Some retailers, such as the discounter Kohl’s, have noted the importance of such signaling. Kohl’s maintains a store policy of having an in-store display with a mannequin seated in a wheelchair, intentionally creating the image of a store that is accessible to all customers (Luckenbill, 2002). Kohl’s display represents a servicescape element controlled by the store manager and designed to signal to patrons in wheelchairs that they “fit”, belong, or are welcome in the store. This research examines, from the customer’s perspective, whether these and other signals create the impression of welcome.

## Method

### The critical incident technique (CIT)

The critical incident technique (CIT) was chosen because its methodology can capture the “unique subjective and processual qualities of services” (Grove and Fisk, 1997, p. 67). That is, the CIT methodology focuses on the process characteristics consistent with being-in-the-servicescape. The CIT is a projective technique that assists in developing knowledge on the phenomenon in question about which relatively little is known (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004). This technique has been used in a variety of studies examining the customer-firm interface, including studies to determine sources of customer satisfaction in contacts with service employees (Bitner *et al.*, 1990, 1994), sources of satisfaction in internal service experiences (Gremler *et al.*, 1994), reasons for switching service providers (Keaveney, 1995), the behavior of thoughtless and abusive customers (Harris and Reynolds, 2004), the effect of other customers in service encounters (Grove and Fisk, 1997), sources of service failures and employee recovery efforts (Hoffman *et al.*, 1995), and rapport-building strategies used by service personnel (Gremler *et al.*, 2002).

The critical incident technique consists of a set of procedures for collecting qualitative data from people who are in a good position to observe and report on the question of study (for a recent review, see Gremler, 2004). Subjects are asked to recall *specific* incidents that are critical examples of the phenomenon under study. More specifically, a “critical” incident is one that represents “extreme behavior, either outstandingly effective or ineffective” in demonstrating the issue in question (Flanagan, 1954, p. 338). These “extreme” incidents are desired because they allow a more accurate identification of the behavior than would be possible with “average” incidents (Flanagan, 1954). After reports of critical incidents are collected, qualitative data are content analyzed to uncover the dimensions of the phenomenon of study. Thus, the CIT is good for both its rich description, as desired with many qualitative research techniques, and for its ability to uncover the relative incidence of certain cognitions or behaviors, as desired with many quantitative techniques (Bitner *et al.*, 1990).

### Data collection

The present research requires the selection of a context where a variety of factors could contribute to the perception of welcome. Thus, recent critical encounters at department, specialty, or discount stores were sought. Data were collected by undergraduate students who were enrolled in upper-level business courses at two universities in the midwest and who received course credit for their work. (Students have also been used to collect data in prior CIT investigations, for example Bitner *et al.*, 1990, 1994; Gremler *et al.*, 2002; Grove and Fisk, 1997; Keaveney, 1995.) After data collection procedures were approved by Human Subjects Review Boards at two universities, students were instructed on subjects’ rights. Then, students were informed that the purpose of the study was to explore consumers’ perceptions of welcome and, though they were required to recruit individuals with specific characteristics, they were not to assume that their physical characteristics had anything to do with why they did or did not feel welcome in a particular retail experience. They were

trained on how to recruit individuals and on how to conduct the interview by means of simulated interviews.

Each student was asked to recruit an informant who had a physical disability, including hearing, speech, mobility, or sight impairments. Rather than restricting our sample to a specific disability "type", however, we chose to include persons with many types of diagnosed disabilities to gain insight into a wide range of factors that affect perceptions of welcome. Students were encouraged to identify their informant through the recommendations of family, friends, co-workers, members of social organizations, or faculty and staff. Students explained the purpose of the study and that the sample of informants was narrowed by looking at people with a specific set of personal characteristics, including physical impairments.

After meeting at a prearranged place and time, the interviewers were instructed to spend some time getting to know the person they were interviewing. Then, students provided their informants with a letter which further explained the purpose of the study and provided contact information for the researcher and the Human Subjects Review Board. If informants hesitated on reading the letter, or if they had a severe visual impairment, interviewers were instructed to ask, "Would you like me to read the letter to you?". Next, informants were provided with a consent form and asked to complete it, or assist the interviewee in completing it. They were asked to sign the form and provide at least one means of contact so that accuracy could be verified. Finally, interviewers were instructed to read questions exactly as specified on the structured interview protocol, but to probe if incomplete answers were given. Interviewers asked about both a welcoming and an unwelcoming incident. Half of the students were assigned to ask about a welcoming incident first, while the other half asked about an unwelcoming incident first. The following questions were asked of all informants and answers were typed and transcribed verbatim in the standardized format:

- Think of a time, roughly within the last year when as a customer you had a particularly welcoming [unwelcoming] encounter at a department, specialty, or discount store (e.g. Dillard's, J.C. Penney, Radio Shack, Ace Hardware, or Target). By welcoming [unwelcoming] we mean that you felt [did not feel] you belonged in the store, you were [not] valued as a customer, and you were [not] comfortable with the shopping experience. When did this incident happen?
- What was the store?
- Why were you at the store?
- Is this a store you usually shop in, or were you a new customer?
- Exactly what happened during the shopping experience or encounter?
- What specifically was it that made you interpret the encounter as welcoming [unwelcoming]?
- What has been the result of this experience? Have you gone back to the store? Told others about it? Taken any other action?

Informants also provided basic demographic data, including age, ethnicity, physical impairment (yes or no, if yes, what type?), occupation, and gender.

### Classification of incidents

The analytical procedures for the CIT suggested by Flanagan (1954) and reviewed by Gremler (2004) were followed to interpret the results of this study. As these authors suggest, the process of description began by essentially listing all of the statements that consumers provided to define the welcoming or unwelcoming experiences. Next, a set of major area headings were inductively developed by the authors (different from the interviewers). Flanagan's (1954) three basic criteria for determining and naming primary factors was followed:

- 1 headings should be neutral, not defining welcoming or unwelcoming behavior;
- 2 headings should be explanatory; and
- 3 headings should be comprehensive.

The goal of this categorization scheme was to provide "insights regarding the frequency and patterns of factors that affect the phenomenon of interest" (Gremler, 2004, p. 66). Next, secondary factors (subareas) that were appropriately categorized under each primary factor were listed. From there, lists of verbatim quotes that could be used to add qualitative richness to the findings were developed.

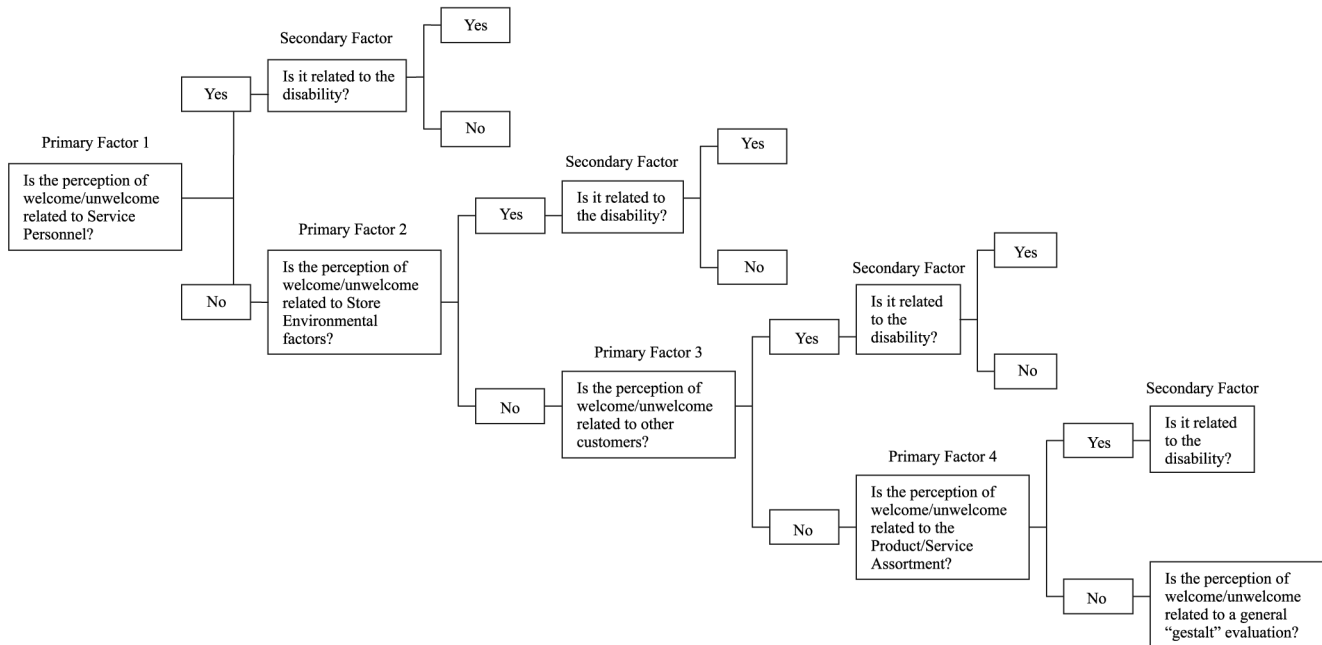
The initial analysis was done on 134 incidents collected by the students. This systematic analysis resulted in four major factors and eight secondary factors related to disability status, as illustrated in the decision tree in Figure 1. (We labeled incidents that did not fit into the classification scheme as *Gestalt* evaluations and considered these incidents to be a result of an informant's inability to make an attribution. These incidents ( $n = 3$ ) were considered to be an artifact of the method, and not a factor that could explain the data.) Because the CIT methodology is based on consumers' reports of their experiences, how an incident was classified came from their description of the events and their attributions for why the incidents were welcoming or unwelcoming. Importantly, it was the informants who defined whether their incidents were "related to a disability" or not. This is certainly not an objective measure, but perceptions of welcome or unwelcome are subjective.

After the initial categories were developed, an additional 84 incidents were analyzed to establish the validity of the initial coding scheme. Because no new factors emerged, data collection ceased. This is consistent with Flanagan (1954), who suggests that when the analysis of approximately 100 new incidents reveals no more than two or three new factors, the number of incidents gathered is sufficient.

Once the authors reached a consensus as to the appropriate classifications for the incidents, one of the authors coded all the data according to that scheme. Two additional individuals, who were not authors or interviewers, were recruited to code the data. Their coding helps to further establish the validity of the classification scheme. Inter-rater reliability was calculated between each pair of coders and also for agreement across all three coders on the primary and secondary factors derived for the study (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). Inter-judge agreement among the three coder pairs was 0.90, 0.92, and 0.91, all exceeding Kassarjian's (1977) recommended threshold of 0.85 for content analysis. The most stringent test was for agreement across all three coders, which was 0.87. Thus, the interjudge agreement figures exceed the level needed to ensure the validity and reliability of the CIT categories (Andersson and Nilsson, 1964). Discrepancies between the three coding pairs



Figure 1 Coding scheme for primary and secondary factors



were resolved and then the results were analyzed and interpreted.

The students collected 113 welcoming incidents and 105 unwelcoming incidents from 115 informants. Eight incidents, not included in the sample total specified, failed to meet at least one of the criteria for inclusion, including non-qualified informants and non-critical incidents. In addition, four informants provided only one “type” of incident. Of the 115 informants, 55 were females. Ethnic backgrounds of the informants included African American (seven informants), Asian American (two informants), and Caucasian. Our informants ranged in age from 18 to 87 and had a variety of disabilities including hearing, sight, and mobility impairments, colorblindness, severe asthma, severe obesity, and attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Numerous types of classifications can be used when working with a sample of consumers with disabilities. For instance, Reedy’s (1993) system of mobility, hearing, sight, and speech is one possibility. However, this typology does not include learning and mental disabilities, so it is somewhat limited for work with the general population. The Census Bureau’s “disability status” statements take a different approach, grouping together blindness, deafness, and vision and hearing impairments, while separating out other major groups such as mobility disabilities, learning disabilities, and problems getting around in the home, going outside, and working (Waldrop and Stern, 2003). In contrast, the National Organization on Disability’s Harris surveys provide far more detail by recording disability types at the diagnosis level, while providing the level of severity and when the disability was acquired (National Organization on Disability, 1999). Given this diversity, our sample is described at a general level similar to the NOD so that can be compared to all these different approaches. In our study, the disabilities reported were grouped into seven major categories. Almost half the sample (47.7 percent) reported mobility disabilities. The next

prevalent disabilities were hearing (18.0 percent) and vision (13.5 percent). The remainder were made up of persons with neurobiological disabilities (9.0 percent), respiratory problems (2.7 percent), multiple disabilities (2.7 percent), and others that were not clearly specified (6.3 percent).

## Results

The 218 incidents were first analyzed to determine if informants were interpreting welcome in the same way it was defined for the study. The verbatims suggest that the informants understand the concept, which is revealed through their vivid descriptions of what welcome means to them. Consider the following discussion between an informant and interviewer about a welcoming experience:

... I get treated like a normal customer ... Nobody stares or says anything about my leg. The customers are at the store to shop for what they want to shop for and I am there for what I want to shop for. And, if I need help finding something, I’ll ask an employee and he/she will help me and be on their way. After I find what I’m looking for, I get in my car and go home.

Interviewer: What specifically made you interpret this encounter as welcoming?

It is just the fact that I hate when I can tell other people are looking at me, and I look up at them and they look away as if I didn’t already see them. Don’t get me wrong, I never say anything about it, but it just tweaks me a little when it happens over and over in a day. It just feels good when I walk into a store and I get treated like everyone else. I even like it sometimes if the employees are mean to me. At least I’d know they aren’t trying to help me or be overly nice because I’m different (20, Caucasian female, prosthetic leg).

This informant interpreted welcome to mean “treated like everyone else” and not “different”. The feelings used to describe unwelcoming were sometimes vivid and poignant:

Uncomfortable is not the word. I guess left out of the experience is a better way to describe it (48, Caucasian female, amputee).

These informants, as well as the others, clearly understood the welcome concept as being accepted, normal, and expected

in the environment and a *participant* in creating the experience.

Next, the incidents were read to determine the factors informants use to ascertain welcoming/unwelcoming. After reading the incidents through several times, it became apparent there were many similarities in the reported welcoming/unwelcoming experiences. These similarities were grouped into four primary factors common to all incidents. Consumers were concerned about:

- 1 the treatment they received from the service personnel;
- 2 the physical environment of the store;
- 3 other customers present in the retail setting; and
- 4 the product and services assortment.

Many informants attributed welcoming to more than one primary factor.

The data further show there are unique issues related to customers' disabilities that influence perceptions of welcome/unwelcome. Disabilities or impairments become salient only after these "triggering" primary factors bring the condition to the forefront of the encounter. Therefore, the four primary factors required further division into those secondary factors that related to the consumer's disability and those that did not (as defined by the informants and expressed in his or her narrative). For example, a typical incident report would follow the chronology of the individual's experience. The consumer would enter the retail environment thinking of his/her needs for products and services, not focusing on his/her disability, unless something happened that caused the disability to become an issue. "I entered the store to get a few things on sale" was a typical report, but then something would happen that triggered feelings of welcome or unwelcome. "The clerks wouldn't even look at me" is an example of the service personnel factor coming to the forefront of this customer's experience. Whether or not this lack of service was related to the individual's disability can be determined only through the reported perceptions of the consumer. These attributions varied. Some individuals reported that they did not think the poor service was related to their condition because, for example "everyone who came into the store was ignored". Others attributed the treatment to the service personnel's "lack of training regarding people with disabilities", or something similar. These particular cases were then recorded as relating to either "Service Personnel – Disability, No" or "Service Personnel – Disability, Yes" accordingly (see Figure 1, which illustrates the decision process for classifying incidents).

### Factors that cue welcome/unwelcome

#### *Service personnel*

The first primary factor that emerged from the critical incident reports is that the consumer perceptions of welcome depend a great deal upon service personnel. This factor was revealed as informants discussed the words, actions, attitudes, and characteristics of the retail employees. For example, a welcome experience was revealed through the words and actions of the people that worked in a sporting goods store:

There are two older guys that work in there, and they're just really cool. They always come up and ask us if there's anything we need. They're always just really friendly (36, Caucasian male, paraplegic).

These retail personnel show this customer that they care about his needs and make themselves available to assist him, should he want help.

The informants just want good customer service: they want to be greeted upon entering a store; offered help, but not pushed; and they expect sales people to be knowledgeable and friendly. Like all customers, they want service tailored to their needs. Sometimes their needs are different than non-disabled customers, and sometimes their needs are not different. The consumer's disability does not always become salient, but it can when triggered by an interaction between the disability and the service needed, as this welcoming experience reveals:

The clerk saw I couldn't reach and came and helped, then shopped with me. She wasn't scared of me and wasn't overpowering – just very friendly (26, Caucasian female, mobility impairment).

This clerk's behavior was welcoming because she anticipated the customer's needs, without being overbearing and providing an extreme level of assistance. More strikingly, the respondent is pleased with the clerk since he/she was not afraid of her. The informant intimates that overbearing and extreme service (i.e. an over-reaction to their disability) is a common service personnel failing, but in this instance the service provider treated her with dignity, respect, and confidence.

Unwelcoming experiences attributed to service personnel also bring the customer's disability to the forefront in the customer-provider interface, as in this experience of an informant who was Christmas shopping and went into a specialty clothing store:

I'm not really sure if this has anything to do with my leg or not, but when I went there I found that the sales associates were not very friendly or helpful. Then, when I went to use the fitting room the girl replied by telling me it would be just a minute for *that* fitting room to be open. I was rather surprised and sort of offended because I don't think I need to use a different dressing room just because I use a cane. I am not in a wheelchair and therefore do not need a bigger fitting room than anyone else ... I guess what made this experience so unwelcoming for me is that I don't really think of myself as being physically impaired because I am never treated that way. But, in this case I was and I will remember that (39, Caucasian male, degenerative blood condition, walks with cane).

The informant believes the service provider set him apart from other customers and used his observable characteristic of walking with a cane to assume that he was like all people with disabilities. The informant's comments clearly indicate his/her perceptions that "the specific dressing room is not for me". As Chin (1998) observes with respect to the race of her informants and Peñaloza (1995) observes with immigrant consumers, his personal characteristics (i.e. disability) marked this informant for monitoring and judgment by the sales associate in the store (see also Goffman, 1963). Similarly, when service personnel stare, become impatient (e.g. when a consumer with a hearing impairment is having trouble understanding directions), or rush to help in a way that is interpreted as assuming incompetence, the informants interpret these behaviors as unwelcoming, communicating that they are not expected as customers, and they do not belong. The intent of the service providers is not clear, but the informants' perceptions of the service providers' behaviors is.

#### *Store environment*

The second primary factor that emerged from the informants' experiences is related to the store environment (e.g. Baker, 1986). Attributions to this factor were revealed through discussions of structural or temporary conditions in the store, display layout, atmospherics, and conditions outside the store such as in the store parking lot. The informants use store environment cues to determine whether they should stay or

leave, and interpret whether they belong or not. The general aesthetics of the store contribute to feelings of welcome, as this informant discusses:

Everything [in this furniture store] is set up just the way it would be in a house. The displays are just really neat and they give you a lot of good ideas (25, Caucasian female, visual impairment).

A person feels accepted at home and when the store triggers feelings of home, it signals that the person is expected and welcome. The commercial displays help to stir her imagination as to what her home could be like and, because she can relate to these ideas, she feels at home, i.e. welcome.

Some perceptions of welcome are attributed to an interaction between the store environment and an informant's disability. The informants find it enjoyable to see signals that they are expected in the environment, as this informant reveals in a welcoming experience:

Well it is nice to walk into a clothing department and see one of the mannequins using a walker or sitting in a wheelchair. It shows that they understand and it is a welcoming site (24, Caucasian male, cerebral palsy/mobility impairment).

The mannequins are "like him" and he interprets their display in the store to mean that store managers understand that people "like him" want to shop, as shopping is a normal activity of everyday life. This example is a clear illustration of self-congruity as perceived by the informant. The store environment provides cues to this informant about the expectations of the retailer in terms of what customers "can be". The set of expectations draws on the attributes enacted by the store (and society) as it defines who is "normal", and who is not (Baker, 2006; Goffman, 1963). Congruity theory helps understand the process shoppers use to determine if they match the expectations held by specific retail stores (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). In the case of this informant, this evaluation was based upon the store's environment and the presence of the mannequin, but the evaluative process can range from whether products match one's expectations to whether a specific "type" of clientele is the desired target of the store's efforts. When the informant matched the expectation of what customers are "supposed to be" (i.e. the person's image and the store's image were congruent), he felt welcome in the retail servicescape.

The size of letters on signs (particularly for people with visual impairments), the intensity of noise (especially for people with hearing impairments), and the intensity of smells or light (mainly for people with neurobiological impairments such as ADD) often create a sense of welcoming (or not) for customers:

I was walking past the perfume section [in a store in the mall], which is much too strong for my sensitive nose. I started sneezing because of my allergies and the perfume ladies wouldn't leave me alone. They kept asking if I was okay. Everything was too bright and all the glass makeup counters made me feel claustrophobic ... Everyone in the area started looking at me. It made the situation even worse so I just walked really fast out of the store (24, Caucasian female, ADD).

This customer felt overwhelmed by the atmospheric conditions and the service personnel who kept asking if she was okay, and she just wanted to get out of the store. Clearly, she felt like she did not belong there. The store atmosphere did not match what the individual needed the store to provide, and the clerks and other patrons did not expect a customer with allergies or with sensitivity to multiple stimuli.

Other characteristics that signaled unwelcoming for the informants, particularly those with mobility disabilities, were the width of aisles, the general accessibility of merchandise, placement of the door, the spacing between racks, and the height of the checkout counter:

My wife and I went to [a speciality store in the mall] to buy a birthday gift ... there really was no shopping experience because I couldn't even get my wheelchair into the store. They had all of these boxes out all over the floor. The store was kind of small to begin with, but there was no way I was able to get in without them moving all of the merchandise ... One of the women who worked there came up to us and saw our problem. She apologized for the boxes and said she would be willing to look around or get something for us or my wife could go in. I was thinking why in the he\*\* would I want to buy something from you when I can't even get into your store. We ended up speaking to the manager for a few minutes and he also apologized and then we just left, needless to say without a gift (38, Caucasian male, paraplegic).

This informant wanted to browse and the inventory presented, at best, a temporary barrier to his participation and access to the store. Not only was there a physical mismatch due to the clutter, but there was a more subtle misunderstanding of his need to shop personally. That is, he believed the sales people did not understand why he himself needed to browse to buy his gift (with his wife) and they did not act immediately to remove the barriers to his entry. Thus, he felt misunderstood, and believed he was not welcome in that store. The store personnel had certainly not understood this customer's specific needs.

#### Other customers

As Langeard *et al.* (1981) suggest and Grove and Fisk (1997) found, these data indicate that other customers may have either a positive or negative effect on a consumer's store evaluations, in this case perceptions of welcoming. Interestingly, Grove and Fisk (1997) found that negative evaluations of other customers are often rooted in easily observable characteristics (e.g. age, race, and "foreign" status). Our informants did not use these types of characteristics to evaluate other customers. Instead, a sense of welcoming (or not) is related to other customers' words and actions, as well as the number of other customers (i.e. crowdedness). For example, sometimes other customers create unwelcoming experiences for the informants that are unrelated to their disabilities:

They only had one woman working ... It was taking forever and the customers were getting impatient and one woman was late for the airport. It was a mess. The poor woman. I couldn't believe they [management] would do this to her. I felt so bad for her that I started helping her (53, Caucasian female, hearing impairment).

This informant felt empathy for the service provider and wanted to help. The other customers were being inconsiderate and unsociable (see also Grove and Fisk, 1997). She attributes this unwelcoming experience to the lack of amicability of the other customers, as well as to management's scheduling (i.e. process quality, discussed in the next primary factor).

Other experiences were related to the interaction between other customers and the informant's disability. For example, a person with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) talks about how he felt unwelcome in a grocery store:

It was when I was first diagnosed with ALS. I was inside [the store] shopping for groceries. I was near the meat department, when I started staggering and lost my balance, falling against the frozen food cooler. A customer approached me and accused me of being intoxicated and told me I should not be there in that condition. I got extremely angry and left the store and have not returned.



Interviewer: What specifically was it that made you interpret the encounter as unwelcoming?

That my disease causes me to stagger and lose balance easily and a customer humiliated me by accusing me of being intoxicated (41, Caucasian male, ALS).

The misattribution of the other customer and what he/she said, coupled with the informant's disease, made this informant feel like he was not welcome in the grocery store. Indeed, he left and did not return.

Other informants also felt unwelcome not because of what other customers said or did, but because of crowded conditions (see also Grove and Fisk, 1997):

Basically we were just there to look at all the displays in the store and talk about them, but we could not do that because I could not hear my wife with all the noise in the store, because there were so many people (68, Caucasian male, hearing impairment).

The sheer number of other customers and the concomitant noise level, made it difficult for this shopper to hear his wife. The noisy store environment did not match the background noise level that the customer and his wife had defined as meeting their specific need. They had come to the store to browse and talk, but they could not do that, causing him to interpret the experience as unwelcoming. In a less crowded situation, he and his wife may have been able to talk without a problem, making his disability irrelevant.

#### *Product/service quality and assortment*

For some informants the product/service assortment was critical to the perception of welcome. Consumers discussed the product/service availability, quality, pricing, policies, the time it took to get service, and how the service process was designed (e.g. management's scheduling of employees). "They had everything I needed", "the product fell apart", "they always have low prices", or "I couldn't believe they [management] would do this to her" are examples of this factor. For one informant, unwelcoming was revealed through price and assortment, but his perception does not have anything to do with his disability:

Oh God, no, [I usually don't shop there], it's way too expensive for me and I really don't wear those kinds of clothes (19, Caucasian male, learning disability).

The clothes are not "him" and the store is not there to serve people with his income and this clearly makes him feel unwelcome there. That is, his self-image does not match his store image, including its prices and its merchandise.

In general, issues related to the product/service assortment dealt with the consumer getting or not getting the product or service that prompted the visit to the store:

Before I went to the [electronic] store, I called them and asked if they carried the part I was looking for. The guy on the phone said they did and that they had some in stock. So, thinking they had the part I drove over there. When I walked in the store, I found an employee and asked him where the part was in the store. The employee had no idea what I was talking about and said they did not carry anything like that. I began to get frustrated. I asked the only other employee in the store about the part and he had no idea either. I had to end up looking through all of the racks for myself and ended up leaving out of frustration (47, Caucasian male, back disability).

Though this customer felt unwelcome and frustrated with the employees, what he was most bothered by is that he did not walk out of the store with the product he wanted. Originally, he determined through his phone call that the store assortment matched his needs, only to find out upon arriving that this belief was incorrect.

Though this factor clearly contributed to the informant's perceptions of welcome, very few consumers attributed the perception to their disability. One female informant talks about a welcoming experience at a department store:

I gave them my name and they are responsive to this ... They are friendly ... I know the layout, which is important because I don't want to have to walk further than I have to. They have a variety of clothes with a variety of price ranges. People think, oh [store name], that's expensive, but it's not (48, Caucasian female, amputee).

Welcoming to this informant is revealed through the assortment, prices, and service personnel who respond to her and are friendly. These attributions have nothing to do with her disability, but her perception of store layout (store environment factor) does. She does not want to walk further than she has to; knowing the layout of the servicescape allows her to match her capabilities to the demands of the store.

#### **Relative incidence of factors**

As noted previously, the power of the critical incident technique comes from the depth and richness of the qualitative data, as discussed above, and the explanatory power of the quantitative data (Bitner, 1992). As can be witnessed in reading some of the informants' quotes above, the informants often attributed their perception of welcome to more than one factor. Thus, although the total sample size is 218 critical incidents, the average number of factors cited per incident was 1.5. Therefore, the total number of primary factor mentions cited in formulating perceptions of welcome for this sample is 320. (The frequency percentages have been calculated based on the total number of primary factors mentioned, rather than the total number of incidents.) In total, 70.0 percent of the mentions were related to the service personnel's words, actions, perceived attitudes, and characteristics; 13.1 percent to the store environment, including the structural conditions, temporary conditions, display layout, and atmospherics; 4.6 percent to other customers and their words, actions, and quantity (crowdedness); 11.3 percent to the product/service assortment, including the availability, quality, and pricing; and less than one percent to a *Gestalt* evaluation that is an artifact of the method because no specific attribution could be made (Table I).

Next, the frequency with which each primary factor was associated with the consumer's disability was assessed (Table I). The majority (140 of 224 mentions) of welcome or unwelcome experiences related to the the words, actions, attitudes and characteristics of service personnel were not related to the consumer's disability. However, when the store environment, which involved temporary or structural conditions, display layouts, or atmospherics, triggered feelings of welcome or unwelcome, it was most likely related to the customer's disability (36 of 42 mentions). When welcome or unwelcome is perceived as related to other customers, the majority of the time it is interacting with the consumer's disability (nine of 15 mentions). Finally, issues regarding the product/service assortment, including availability, quality, pricing, policies or the time involved, mostly were not related to the consumer's disability (33 of 36 mentions).

Overall, the results of this critical incident study reveal that when consumers are interacting with the retail servicescape, the servicescape sends signals to them that impact their perceptions of welcome (or unwelcome) and their



Table I Primary and secondary factor results

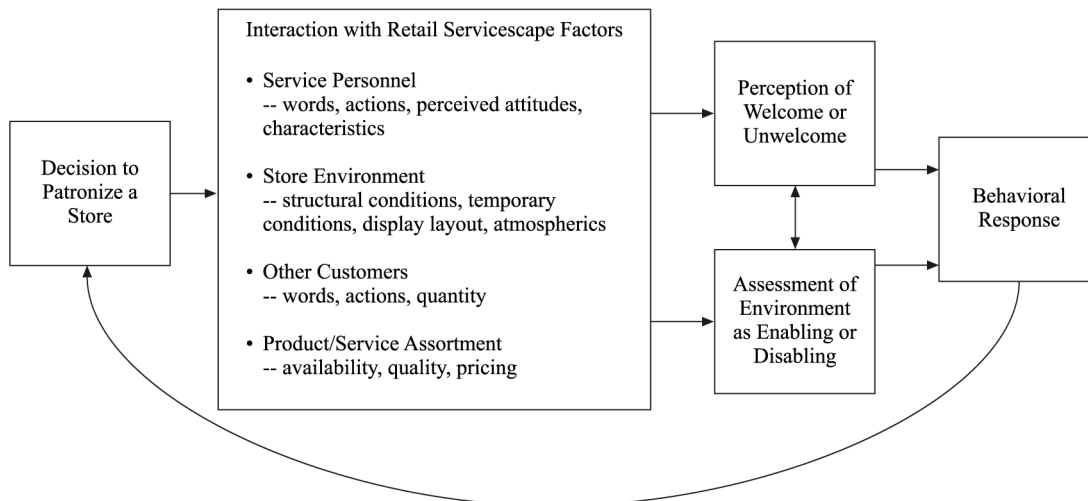
Primary/secondary factors	Total factor mentions (percent)	Welcoming mentions (percent)	Unwelcoming mentions (percent)
(1) Service personnel	224 (70)	125 (79)	99 (61)
(a) Related to disability	84 (26)	44 (28)	40 (25)
(b) Not related to disability	140 (44)	81 (51)	59 (36)
(2) Store environment	42 (13)	13 (8)	29 (18)
(a) Related to disability	36 (11)	8 (5)	28 (17)
(b) Not related to disability	6 (2)	5 (3)	1 (1)
(3) Other customers	15 (5)	5 (3)	10 (6)
(a) Related to disability	9 (3)	2 (1)	7 (4)
(b) Not related to disability	6 (2)	3 (2)	3 (2)
(4) Product/service assortment	36 (11)	14 (9)	22 (14)
(a) Related to disability	3 (1)	0 (0)	3 (2)
(b) Not related to disability	33 (10)	14 (9)	19 (12)
Gestalt (method artifact)	3 (1)	1 (1)	2 (1)
Total primary factors mentioned	320	158	162
Total number of incidents	218	113	105
Average number of factors/incidents	1.5		

assessments of whether the environment enables them to experience the servicescape in the way they intended. These evaluations are based on the words and actions of service personnel and other customers, the perceived attitudes and characteristics of service personnel, the sheer number of other customers, and the availability, quality, and pricing of products. The perceptions of welcome/unwelcome and the assessment of the servicescape as enabling or disabling, lead to behavioral consequences such as decisions to avoid the store in the future or to share their experiences with others. Figure 2 summarizes these results.

For comparison purposes, a sample of non-disabled customers was also recruited using the same techniques and CIT interview protocol. It was thought that a comparable

study would be instructive in assessing these results. Ninety-seven consumers were interviewed and asked to describe both a welcoming and an unwelcoming experience they had within the last year. The data were analyzed using the same procedure as for the first sample. The total number of incidents analyzed was 189, and the total number of primary factors mentions was 239, with an average number of factors per incident at 1.3. No new primary factors emerged from analyzing the second sample of critical incidents. Furthermore, not only did the same factors describe the experiences of the non-disabled sample, the factors affecting the feelings of (un)welcome for the non-disabled informants were nearly in the same proportions as those described by the informants with disabilities.

Figure 2 Conceptual model for how consumers with disabilities perceive welcome in retail servicescapes



Almost 73 percent of the factors affecting the informants' feelings of (un)welcome related to the service personnel, as compared to 70 percent for the sample of people with disabilities. Only 3.4 percent were related to the store environment, as opposed to 13 percent for the informants with disabilities. Both disabled and non-disabled informants reported other customers as a factor affecting their feelings of (un)welcome representing nearly five percent of the total factors mentioned. Nineteen percent of the factors mentioned related to the product and service assortment, as compared to 11.3 percent for the consumers with disabilities.

## Discussion

Important linkages between servicescape signals and consumers' perceptions of welcome are demonstrated in this study. The paper began by asking the question, how do customers with disabilities determine if they are welcome or included in the servicescape? This study reveals that customers perceive welcome (or not) by evaluating signals in the servicescape that cue whether they belong. As congruity theory predicts (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000), the shopper uses the servicescape characteristics to see if they match the expectations of the type of customers that are expected. The particular servicescape elements customers use to determine welcome are store personnel, the store environment, other customers, and the product/service assortment. Further, as the consumer response model predicts (Baker *et al.*, 2001; Kaufman-Scarborough and Baker, 2005), the shoppers' interaction between the servicescape characteristics and their personal characteristics influence the assessment of the environment as enabling or disabling. That is, each servicescape element may interact (but not always) with a person's disability and the environment is read as either enabling or disabling.

In qualitative research, it is the framework, not the findings, that is generalizable (Peñaloza, 1994). The framework in this case is the servicescape elements consumers use to determine welcome and to assess the servicescape as enabling or disabling (i.e. meeting my personal needs or not). This framework suggests an extension to Bitner's (1992) servicescape conceptualization in that it specifies that the assessment of an environment as enabling or disabling is important for at least some customers in deciding whether they should stay, go, or return to a particular servicescape. The servicescape has not previously been considered as "enabling or disabling" and the specific servicescape factors that lead customers to that assessment has not been previously examined.

Importantly, these results show that response to a disability is not automatically a primary factor in the consumer's perception of welcome/unwelcome. Rather, the consumer's disability only becomes important when there is some type of interaction between the disability and one of the primary servicescape factors that signal welcome. This interaction reveals that consumers with disabilities should be considered consumers first, and as possessing a disability only under those conditions where the interaction of the servicescape element(s) and the disability warrant special attention. For instance, in the servuction service model, Langeard *et al.* (1981) identified three of the four factors discussed here (inanimate environment, contact personnel, and other customers) as relevant to how *all* customers evaluate the

benefits received in the service environment. Thus, the servuction service model lends further support to the finding that customers with disabilities should be treated as customers first. Further, it should be noted that there is tremendous variation between how different disability types interact with the factors in the servicescape. All people with disabilities are not the same and all people within different disability types are the same. That is, not all people with visual impairments are the same, nor are all people with mobility impairments the same. This suggests that disability type should not be the first variable used in segmenting customers into groups.

When consumers with disabilities are unwelcome in the retail servicescape, they feel excluded from the mainstream and perhaps unable to have agency in decisions that affect their daily lives. These feelings of unwelcoming and exclusion for consumers, and even groups of consumers, may serve as barriers to fulfilling the inclusive intent of the ADA. If consumers with disabilities leave a retail servicescape feeling unwelcome or excluded, this experience can foster perceptions of discrimination on the basis of disability. Although there may be objective tests for discrimination, most consumers are influenced more by their own perceptions than by objective reports. In other words, if the consumer perceives that the unwelcome service encounter is related to his or her disability, then that perception is likely to have attitudinal and behavioral consequences, regardless of any objective evidence of such discrimination.

## Designing welcoming servicescapes

When service managers hear the stories of the informants elicited through the critical incident technique, it can create a lasting impression and they may be more likely to understand their customers with disabilities (e.g. Gremler, 2004). This study indicates that service personnel play a critical role in creating feelings of welcome for customers with disabilities. To the extent that an unwelcoming experience related to service personnel constitutes a type of service failure, the extreme level of service discussed by our informants is related to the employee responses in the servicescape that Bitner *et al.* (1990) uncover, including employee response to service delivery failures, employee response to customer needs and requests, and unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. "Helping too much" appears to be another subcategory for unprompted/unsolicited employee actions. Providing intrusive levels of service may threaten the consumer's perceived independence, just as "helping too little" may (Baker *et al.*, 2002). Managers who ensure that personnel training builds necessary skills so that appropriate levels of help are offered, as defined by the customer his/herself, will help to welcome consumers with disabilities into the retail servicescape. If managers and decision-makers are lulled by a false sense of security from meeting the structural requirements of ADA (e.g. ramps and elevators), then they may miss the more important and pervasive issue that must be addressed through educating and training customer service personnel.

Many attributes of the store environment communicate whether a specific customer "type" is expected or not (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). Design elements may also "speak" to customers with disabilities, inviting them in or refusing them access, such as wide or crowded aisles, Braille printed materials or not, or including them in representations of their customers (e.g. a mannequin in a wheelchair) or not. Our informants with mobility impairments did not comment on what some

may typically think of as store environment issues relating to mobility impairments, e.g. elevators, automatic doors, or ramps. This may indicate that retail outlets have achieved a level of success in their attempts to address these particular issues as mandated by the ADA. However, other store environment issues such as crowding, noise levels, space between racks, overpowering smells (no matter how pleasant), size of lettering on signage, and so forth also contribute to perceptions of welcoming.

Previous research has shown that other customers (i.e. strangers), including their presence, amicability, interpersonal influence, and whether they follow expected protocols or not, can affect one's service experience (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Grove and Fisk, 1997; Langeard *et al.*, 1981; McGrath and Otnes, 1995), but no previous research has specifically looked at other customers as a servicescape factor which influences perceptions of welcome for people with disabilities. In this study some perceptions of welcome/unwelcome which had to do with other customers related to the informant's disability, and in some cases it did not. It is clear that how strangers in the servicescape respond to a shopper's particular personal characteristics (e.g. disability) can affect whether a shopper feels welcome in a store or not. Though managing the behavior of customers toward each other is often beyond the control of the retailer, employee training should include behaviors aimed at diffusing and managing possible negative interactions that are likely to create unwelcoming experiences for customers. How employees respond to other customers that create unwelcoming experiences for their customers appears to be another type of service failure which further extends the Bitner *et al.* (1990) typology.

In many instances, welcoming is found and experienced when shoppers are able to find merchandise and services that specifically meet their needs. The products that are available (or not) and accessible (or not) communicate to the customer whether they are expected (or not) (see also Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). When shoppers with disabilities are seeking products or assistance associated with a specific disability-related need, and they cannot find those products or receive that assistance, they may come to believe that the store is not for people "like them".

Inevitably, these types of service management issues lead to questions about how to balance the needs of the many with the needs of the few. Obviously, a retailer cannot design the servicescape around every type of disability, and every type of consumer. Such an approach would fly in the face of designing a retail store around target customers. However, customers with disabilities may, in fact, be in that group of target customers when the market is defined based upon the benefits sought in the retail store, especially since customers with disabilities should be considered as customers first, and as disabled only under conditions where the servicescape interacts in some way with the disability. The line for making structural accommodations is fairly clear, as spelled out in the Americans with Disabilities Act. The line for making personnel adjustments and product/assortment adjustments is less clear, but clearly that line should be based upon a retailer's assessment of meeting customers' needs, achieving profitability, and behaving in a socially responsible manner.

### Limitations and future research

The critical incident technique is important for developing an understanding of the factors that contribute to perceptions of

welcome for customers with disabilities. However, the critical incident methodology is not without limitations. The informants were asked to recall incidents that happened within a year, and memory and recall biases may lead to a re-interpretation of the incident (for a review, see Gremler, 2004). The perception of welcome/unwelcome was clearly there, and in all but three cases, the informants were clear on to what they attributed that unwelcome, but it is possible that less significant indicators of welcome could have slipped from their memory.

In addition, given our purpose and this technique, it is not possible to determine whether one group feels more or less welcome than another. This research provides insight into what those factors are that create welcoming/unwelcoming. Future research should examine the distribution of these factors across customer types as well as the intensity of welcome/unwelcome experienced by different customer types in different types of servicescapes, including themed environments, restaurants, hotels, and airlines. Particular attention should be paid to target customer's perceptions, particularly targets defined based upon benefits sought.

Visible characteristics of people play a role in developing inferences about character and competence (e.g. Solomon, 1998). The majority of our informants in the original sample have disabilities that are visible. Only 23 of the 218 informants' welcoming/unwelcoming incidents were reported by people who had ADD or asthma or some other disability that is not obvious to an observer. Again, it is not possible to determine whether those with visible disabilities feel any more or less welcome than those with "hidden" disabilities. The differences in factor reports between consumers with visible and "hidden" disabilities in our data do not follow any particular pattern, with the exception that nine people with visible disabilities reported that other customers triggered a focus on disability and no one with a "hidden" disability attributed unwelcoming to other customers. This pattern is speculative at best, but future research into the relationship between visible and hidden disabilities and perceptions of welcome may provide interesting insights into the symbolic meaning of appearance in the retail servicescape.

The ADA, at least in terms of how it has been implemented, has primarily focused on correcting structural problems (Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). In this study, 70 percent of the factors related to perceptions of welcoming/unwelcoming come from the interaction (or lack thereof) with service personnel. Unfortunately, this study has not been a longitudinal study. It may be that structural issues were, in fact, dominant a decade ago and many of these barriers have been resolved. Regardless, now the focus needs to broaden to correct attitudinal and behavioral barriers. With additional research into these attitudinal and behavioral barriers to participation and access, marketing and consumer behavior scholars may be in a unique position to facilitate the removal of these barriers and the inclusion of people with disabilities into the marketplace.

The *marketspace* requires further exploration as well. Marketers should continue to examine how assistive technologies, including the internet, are used as a shopping tool or for screening retail alternatives for people with disabilities. None of our informants ( $n = 115$ ) mentioned assistive technologies as a factor in determining welcoming in the retail store itself. It could be that the customers evaluate



the internet as a separate component of the shopping experience, or as a distinct type of shopping experience. Regardless, future research into how assistive technologies provide accessibility for and create perceptions of welcome/unwelcome for people with disabilities is sorely needed.

Finally, the focus here has been to understand the experience of people with disabilities; however, there are numerous other consumer types who may feel welcomed or excluded for various reasons when they shop. For example, an African-American woman who cannot find the appropriate cosmetics for her skin tone may view a store environment as unwelcoming since her needs have not been considered. Her attributions about the experience could lead to negative word-of-mouth or other behavioral consequences (Holland and Gentry, 1999). Likewise, an elderly person who is aggravated by the loud music in a department store will likely view the environment as unwelcoming. However, importantly, people with certain demographic characteristics or physical conditions are not the only ones that feel unwelcome at times in the retail servicescape. All customers feel unwelcome in retail servicescapes and other public places at some point in their lives. Understanding the factors that create this unwelcoming feeling, as well as the intensity of these feelings, will ultimately lead us to a deeper understanding of consumers and their behavior as they seek inclusion in the retail servicescape.

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### About the authors

Stacey Menzel Baker is Associate Professor and Governor Geringer Scholar in the Department of Management & Marketing at the University of Wyoming, College of Business Administration, Laramie, Wyoming, USA. Her research explores experiential and symbolic aspects of acquisition and consumption, including issues related to consumer vulnerability and welfare. Stacey Menzel Baker is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [smbaker@uwyo.edu](mailto:smbaker@uwyo.edu)

Jonna Holland is Assistant Professor of Marketing, College of Business Administration, University of Nebraska-Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, USA. Her research relates to target marketing of under-represented groups in advertising, retail and on-line environments.

Carol Kaufman-Scarborough is Professor of Marketing, School of Business, Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey, USA. Her research focuses on consumer perception and use of time, product preferences of subcultural groups, and the shopping experiences of persons with disabilities.

### Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.*

"So you got to let me know, should I stay or should I go?" was the thumping refrain of one of the best-known songs of the iconic English punk band The Clash. And it's a question which every manager of every retail store should imagine their customers and potential customers might be singing rather more quietly to themselves. Assuming they do want customers to stay rather than go, how do they let them know?

Self-congruity and the retail servicescape aren't terms that fit easily into song lyrics, but they can combine to provide a harmonious answer for managers and owners who want to know how to make their shops and stores welcoming and inviting.

Self-congruity is a way of describing how someone believes he or she "fits in" with the image of a product or retail store, an assumption being that consumers will approach or avoid a store based on their perceptions of and responses to ambient conditions such as temperature and noise, space/function elements such as layout and furnishings; and signs, symbols and artefacts. Both customers and employees respond to each other in this "servicescape" and to its design elements.

What makes customers use or avoid shops is vital knowledge for the companies or individuals that own the stores. Vital yet challenging, as people are different from one another and while blaring pop music and flashing lights might be appropriate in an outlet selling clothes to healthy young people, it would be a turn-off in a store catering for an older clientele.

As important to the stores as the question of how to be welcoming is how to be enabling – allowing people to use the store and get what they want in as pleasant and accommodating manner as possible. And when marketers realize that they should expect a large proportion of their customers to have a disability of some sort, the question becomes even more important.

In the USA the Americans with Disabilities Act attempts to ensure equal access to stores, restaurants and places of entertainment etc. In Great Britain the Disability Discrimination Act gives disabled people rights of access to everyday services. But the issue for retailers is not just about installing ramps and widening doorways, but about seeking to include and welcome people of all disabilities – and none.

Stacey Menzel Baker, Jonna Holland and Carol Kaufman-Scarborough say: “Unfortunately, many aspects of the experiences of people with disabilities remain overlooked and understudied, such as psychological feelings, interactions with salespersons, and actual experiences in the store setting. Quite simply, compliance is not synonymous with welcome. Welcome is something that the customer perceives as a result of the retailer’s environment and actions towards a consumer.”

For instance, a customer who has to use a walking stick, was about to enter a fitting room when a sales assistant told her to wait a moment for “that” fitting room to become vacant – “that” room being the larger one reserved for wheelchair users. Whether the assistant was trying to be helpful or not, the impression of the customer was that she didn’t feel

welcome. Similarly, when a wheelchair user entered a store to find boxes in the aisles blocking her way, an assistant offered to help her by going to the appropriate shelf to find what she had come for. The result was to make the customer feel a nuisance and robbing her of something all of us like to do in shops – to browse around on our own.

To put it more formally, when consumers are interacting with the retail servicescape, it sends signals to them that impact their perceptions of welcome (or unwelcome) and their assessments of whether the environment enables them to experience it in the way they intended.

Consumers with disabilities should be considered consumers first, and as having a disability only under those conditions where the interaction of the servicescape elements and the disability warrant special attention.

The study of Stacey Menzel Baker *et al.* indicates that service personnel play a critical role in creating feelings of welcome for customers with disabilities. “Helping too much” is also to be avoided. Staff should be trained to give appropriate – not intrusive – levels of help, with “appropriate” being defined by the customer him/herself.

Many attributes of the store environment communicate whether a specific customer “type” is expected or not. Store environment issues such as crowding, noise levels, space between racks, overpowering smells (no matter how pleasant), size of lettering on signage, and so forth also contribute to perceptions of welcoming or the opposite

Inevitably these types of service management issues lead to questions about how to balance the needs of the many with the few. Clearly that line should be based upon a retailer’s assessment of meeting customers’ needs, achieving profitability, and behaving in a socially responsible manner.

*(A précis of the article “How consumers with disabilities perceive ‘welcome’ in retail servicescapes: a critical incident study”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)*