

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SERVICE ENCOUNTER FAILURES AT SHOPPING CENTERS: A STUDY OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED CONSUMERS

AS CONSEQUÊNCIAS DAS FALHAS NOS ENCONTROS DE SERVIÇOS EM SHOPPINGS: UM ESTUDO COM CONSUMIDORES DEFICIENTES VISUAIS

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RESUMO

O advento da Lei Brasileira de Inclusão da Pessoa com Deficiência em 2015 trouxe uma série de implicações para pesquisadores de marketing, uma vez que garante o direito de inclusão dos deficientes aos diversos espaços públicos e privados de lazer e consumo, como shopping centers. Apesar da expansão desses espaços de consumo no Brasil, as falhas nos encontros de serviço são recorrentes, principalmente quando os consumidores são deficientes visuais. Diante disso, o presente estudo possui o objetivo de compreender as consequências das falhas nos encontros de serviços em shopping centers para o comportamento de consumo de deficientes visuais. Para o alcance do objetivo, utilizou-se uma abordagem qualitativa de cunho fenomenológico. Os dados foram coletados por meio de observações diretas e naturalísticas com os sujeitos de pesquisa e da condução de nove entrevistas face a face com consumidores deficientes visuais. Através da análise do conteúdo dos resultados, concluiu-se que há uma diversidade de falhas ocorridas nos encontros de serviço, como o excesso de piedade dos vendedores aos consumidores, o desprezo e a modificação brusca no script de serviço. Por esta razão, as consequências das falhas nos encontros de serviço foram diversas, desde o confronto verbal e a desistência da transação até o boca a boca negativo e a manifestação de sua frustração nas redes sociais virtuais. O estudo ainda apresenta contribuições gerenciais e acadêmicas para pesquisadores de marketing.

Palavras-chave: Falhas em Encontros de Serviço. Deficiente Visual. Shopping.

ABSTRACT

The enactment of the Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in 2015 has had a number of implications for marketing researchers, as it guarantees the right of disabled persons to inclusion in different public and private spaces for leisure and consumption, such as shopping centers. Despite the growth of these consumption spaces in Brazil, service encounter failures are recurrent, particularly when the consumers are visually impaired. The objective of the present study is thus to understand the consequences of service encounter failures at shopping centers on the consumer behavior of the visually impaired. A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to achieve the objective. Data were collected through direct naturalistic observations of the research subjects and nine face-to-face interviews with visually impaired consumers. Using content analysis to examine the results, it

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was concluded that there are a number of different service encounter failures, such as an excessive display of pity from salespeople towards consumers, contempt, and abrupt changes in the service script. For this reason, the service encounter failures had a range of consequences, from verbal confrontation and abandoning the transaction to negative word-of-mouth and expressions of frustration on online social networks. The study also presents managerial and academic contributions for marketing researchers.

Keywords: Service encounter failure. Visual impairment. Shopping center.

1. INTRODUCTION

The representativeness of people with visual impairment in the Brazilian population and the current legislation do not correspond to the difficulties faced by these groups of consumers, nor to the low amount of marketing research aimed at this group of citizens. In the Brazilian Census, over 45.6 million people – approximately 23.9 percent of the population – reported some type of disability (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2010). The visually impaired specifically represent 58% of Brazilian citizens with disabilities.

Besides, the Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities was enacted in 2015. It is a statute designed to ensure the fundamental rights of disabled persons in equal conditions, striving for their social inclusion and citizenship. The law's enactment has had a number of implications for marketing researchers, as it guarantees the right of disabled persons to inclusion in different public and private spaces for leisure and consumption, such as theaters, cinemas, schools and shopping centers (Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of People with Disabilities, 2015).

In Brazil, there are 522 shopping centers that recorded 35 billion dollars in sales in 2017 (Brazilian Association of Shopping Centers, 2018). Given the range of marketing decisions made by this retailer, such as the type of merchandise and services offered, product price and physical arrangement of goods, it is essential to understand that consumer evaluation occurs in the service encounter - during the time when the customer interacts directly with the company (Solomon et al., 1985).

Despite the importance of service encounters for evaluating the quality of retail services, service encounter failures are recurrent and can provoke a number of different feelings in consumers, such as anger, verbal confrontation or violence (Johnson et al., 2013). For the visually impaired, these failures can also have other impacts on their consumer behavior, as this group's sense of dependence and independence is directly related to their

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participation in the market as a consumer (Baker et al., 2001; Pavia and Mason, 2014), although there is a clear lack of preparation by companies for serving these individuals. Studies have highlighted the numerous challenges faced by the visually impaired as consumers (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2000; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001; Kaufman-Scarborough & Childers, 2009; Worth, 2013).

Based on an understanding of the representativeness of the visually impaired in the Brazilian population, the importance of shopping centers to the national economy, and the impact of service encounter failures on consumer behavior, the objective of this study is to understand the consequences of service encounter failures at shopping centers for the consumer behavior of the visually impaired.

2. SERVICE ENCOUNTER FAILURES

Service encounter is the period of time when the customer interacts directly with the company (Bitner, 1990). At that moment, the service provider and the consumer are interacting and playing roles, which creates expectations in them both. Goffman (1959) has noted that impression management is a guiding aspect of social interaction dynamics, whereby people's actions are aimed at projecting the behaviors expected of them.

In fact, a service encounter is a dyad, and a satisfactory service encounter is linked to congruence between the actors' - consumer and service provider - perceived behavior and expected behavior (Solomon et al., 1985). This congruence is closely related to satisfaction and the perceived quality of the service (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Bitner, 1990). However, Solomon et al. (1985) emphasize that the service provider and the consumer play roles during the purchase, which are directly influenced by the purchase context. In other words, a person who is consuming at a fast-food restaurant plays a completely different role than a consumer at a fine restaurant.

To improve perceived quality in service encounters, companies develop scripts to be adopted by their employees to meet customer expectations and satisfy them (Solomon et al., 1985). At a shopping center, for example, it is common to notice the adoption of a service script by salespeople in different segments, particularly employees of fast food chains. However, there are other aspects involved in the service encounter that are not related to

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consumer satisfaction, such as an inhibition of employee authenticity caused by scripts defined by companies for service encounters (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013).

Bitner et al. (1990) showed that despite the importance of human interaction for service encounter satisfaction, the empirical studies developed to that point did not specify behaviors associated with good or bad service and restricted the reported behaviors to a specific sector. The researchers thus presented three large groups of incidents that may be responsible for service failures: employee responses to customer needs and requests, spontaneous and unsolicited actions by employees, and employee responses to failures in the service delivery system.

In response to a service encounter failure, the consumer may complain or be angry, depending on the perception of unfairness and the situation in which the failure occurred (Dunning et al., 2004). Sometimes trigger verbal or physical aggressions, particularly when the encounter occurs between people of different ethnicities (Johnson et al., 2013).

Regarding complaints, Singh (1988) stated that this action is one possible customer response to shopping or service experiences that have caused dissatisfaction. Other possibilities are formal complaints; requesting a refund, exchange, repair or apology; negative word-of-mouth; abandonment of the transaction or contact with third parties to denigrate the company's image.

3 THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED AS CONSUMERS

Visually impaired consumers face various difficulties in their daily lives, including physical obstacles, e.g., on sidewalks and stairways, and other barriers imposed by their physical limitation (Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Goodrich and Ramsey, 2012). The unpreparedness of public and private service providers to serve this consumer group is another factor that prevents the full performance of these individuals in consumer environments (Faria et al., 2012). Such exclusionary and prejudiced market practices have been reported in banks, restaurants, hospitals, and bakeries (Baker et al., 2001; Yu et al., 2015) and in online shopping (Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2009).

External factors, such as accessibility in hotels, on bus tours, and in outdoor public leisure spots, can include architectural barriers and often inhibit the enjoyment of positive consumption experiences (Thomas, 2004). Other such inhibitory factors include a lack of

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adjustment in the floor plan and check-out area of shops (Pavia and Mason, 2014) and stigmatization in consumption environments.

However, it is important to note that visually impaired consumers are resilient and adapt to such market practices through alternative information sources (i.e., searching their memories; listening to commercials, friends, and family), which assists them in the decision-making process. In addition, other sensory perceptions in such individuals are overdeveloped, compensating for their visual limitations (Arum and Roksa, 2011). Baker et al. (2001) and Goodrich and Ramsey (2012) emphasize that true inclusion of the visually impaired in society as consumers will only occur when these individuals are given a voice to indicate what adaptations need to be made and how this should occur. A number of international marketing publications were therefore developed on the consumption of the visually impaired.

Baker et al. (2002) studied the accessibility experiences of visually impaired consumers at banks, restaurants, hospitals and bakeries and concluded that accessibility is also linked to the attitudes of service providers during their interactions with DP. Baker (2006) demonstrated the presence of hedonic elements during the consumption of the visually impaired when she reported that consumers want to interact in the market in a manner that is similar to other consumers, a concept defined as “consumer normalcy.” Kaufman-Scarborough and Childers (2009) analyzed consumption experiences in online purchases and found that many websites have accessibility problems, since their programmers are not prepared to understand that DP are typical users.

Another important contribution came from Baker et al. (2001). The researchers showed that the perception of the dependence or independence of the visually impaired is directly related to consumption and results from the interaction of individual characteristics and contextual factors. Moreover, in certain situations, these consumers prefer to be independent of service providers, whereas in others, the opposite is true.

The last example is discussed by Faria, Silva and Ferreira (2012), who critically noted that certain visually impaired individuals stopped visiting restaurants because of the prejudice of the service staff and other customers, who made derogatory comments regarding how the visually impaired ate their meals.

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4. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the study's objective, a phenomenological qualitative investigation was conducted, since the intention was more to understand rather than explain the phenomenon studied. To define the research subjects, blind or low-vision people who consume at shopping centers a minimum of once every six months were selected. Adopting this filter to define the respondents proved to be the study's first difficulty, as a number of pre-selected individuals expressed discomfort when visiting and consuming at shopping centers. However, this difficulty was mitigated by the fact that the study's first author volunteered at a non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on the literacy and artistic and physical education of the visually impaired, which also offers Braille transcription services and visual rehabilitation for people with low vision.

Regarding the empirical stage of the study, the decision was made to collect data at two points in time: first, nine face-to-face interviews were conducted with visually impaired consumers; then, direct naturalistic observations of the research subjects at shopping centers were conducted during consumption situations.

Regarding the interviews, the dialogs were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. The average duration of the dialogs was 1 hour and 21 minutes. Table 1 presents a description of the respondents.

Table 1: Profile of research subjects.

Pseudonym	Age	Type of Visual Impairment	Occupation	Monthly Family Income (times the minimum wage)	Frequency of consumption at shopping centers (every six months)
Alana	31	Low light perception	Housewife	3 - 4	4 times
Bianca	26	Totally blind	Student	More than 6	6 times
Cecília	19	Totally blind	Student	2 - 3	2 times
Débora	28	"Practically no vision"	Public Servant	More than 6	6 times
Elena	22	Totally blind	Student	5 - 6	2 times
Fábio	19	Blind in one eye	Intern		10 times
George	27	Totally blind	IT Professor	3 - 4	5 times
Hugo	25	Partial loss of vision	Administrative Assistant	3 - 4	2 times
Ítalo	32	Totally blind	Merchant	5 - 6	6 times

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Regarding the direct naturalistic observations, the data were collected by recording information in the natural consumption environment of four research subjects, preceded by field immersion, in which the consumer environments were visited and analyzed before the research subjects were observed.

Five research subjects were invited to participate in the observations. Two visits occurred on two different days. On one day, three research subjects - Alana, Cecília and George - were observed at a shopping center with 132 stores. On another day, the other two research participants - Hugo and Débora - contributed to the study by visiting a different shopping center with 290 stores.

Regarding the observations, the average duration was 1 hour and 40 minutes. There was no financial incentive for the research subjects to participate in the observations. Because of the first author's closeness to the research subjects, all that was asked was that the research participants invite the researcher to go with them when they went to buy something at one of the city's shopping centers. For there to be minimal interference from the researcher in the consumption interactions, notes were taken on a smartphone so as not to interfere with the reactions of the research subjects and shopping center employees. Finally, the data collected were analyzed using content analysis (Merriam, 2009).

5. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

By analyzing the statements obtained in the interviews, in addition to the naturalistic observations made at the two shopping centers in the northeastern capital city studied, it was possible to gain a better understanding of the consequences of service encounter failures for the consumer behavior of the research participants.

Although several interviews identified the architectural barriers that the visually impaired confront to fully act as consumers - such as difficulty accessing hallways, restrooms, store dressing rooms and counters and upper floors - the discussion below will focus on the service delivery failures of employees at stores located in shopping centers and employees of shopping center management companies.

This section will thus be divided into two topics: the first addresses service encounter failures, and the second discusses the consequences of these failures for the consumer behavior of the individuals participating in the study.

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5.1 SERVICE ENCOUNTER FAILURES

During their interactions with the employees of shopping center management companies, such as security guards and cleaning staff, the respondents reported that the speech of these employees is similar to that used by most of the society to which they belong, *i.e.*, filled with stigma and marked by a lack of preparation for addressing the visually impaired.

(...) and she wanted to make me use the handicapped restroom. I told her that she didn't have to worry, to no use. (...) Only later did I realize that she thought I also had mobility problems. Go figure (ALANA).

It was too funny. He kept telling me to turn right after the Guanabara kiosk, as if I knew how to get there. (...) Then, he was all bent out of shape, the poor guy (ELENA).

It's so common. They always ask, "Where's your mother? Your family?" I'm used to it by now (HUGO).

The stigma suffered by the visually impaired can become emblematic and bias the entire interaction process when disinformation, a lack of clarification, prejudice, stereotypes and fantasies prevail, which further complicates interactions between so-called "normal" people and the visually impaired.

Also regarding contact with shopping center employees, two recurrent reactions from this group of employees were mentioned by the respondents: an excessive display of pity or contempt. The statements below demonstrate this finding.

And he kept insisting that I go into the bathroom with him, as if I didn't know how to lower my pants (laughs). (...). They want to help, but they don't know how (ÍTALO).

(...) yes, that day was the worst. I felt pathetic, he (a security guard) thought I should come back another day because it was crowded. I was furious! (CECÍLIA).

The reactions mentioned above were not restricted to the employees of shopping center management companies. In several statements, retailers demonstrated their unpreparedness to assist this group of consumers. One practice mentioned by the respondents and frequently emphasized in the naturalistic observations was the salespeople's attitude of completely ignoring the visually impaired when they are accompanied by sighted people.

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Although the visually impaired consumers were asking the salespeople to help them with their purchases, the service providers ignored these consumers.

(...) yes, I remember. I went to buy underwear and the guy didn't even look at me, he kept directing all the questions to my fiancée (...). I'll never go back there (GEORGE).

It happens so often that I've lost count. If I go with my mother, then... you know. (...) At XXX (name of a shoe store), I asked to try on white sneakers by XXX (brand name) and the guy took a long time to bring them out, but eventually did... when I asked him questions, he only responded to my mother, it was like I wasn't even there. (...) She even answered his question about my shoe size (FÁBIO).

In addition to these reactions, during the naturalistic observations, other salespeople exhibited insecurity about assisting the research subjects. Some salespeople gestured to the study author who was making the observations to confirm whether the visually impaired customer was lucid or whether they were truly able to afford the products that they tried on. In another situation, a salesman discreetly asked to be replaced by the store manager because he clearly did not know how to address the two consumers.

Two other service encounter failures were highlighted by the respondents: abrupt changes in the service script and the belief that the visually impaired consumer has no buying power to purchase their products.

Actually, what the girl was doing was saying the price of all the products (...), it was frustrating, you know? It seemed like she was warning me, making sure I could afford to pay (DÉBORA).

(...) I left that shoe store and went to another one. It was horrible there too, the salesman was strange, I realized it as soon as I went in. (...) After I chose a shoe, he said he was going to look for it in the back. He returned very quickly... more quickly than usual in those stores. And he was saying that they didn't have my size (FÁBIO).

The saleswoman didn't even ask me to try on the clothes, she said they wouldn't look good on me (...) (ELENA).

Finally, two other statements demonstrate another serious service encounter failure: the salesperson's attempt to deceive the consumers.

I was outraged when I got home, it was absurd. The salesman told me the clothes were yellow, I believed him (...). I bought it because it was cheap, I needed basic clothes (...) (the blouse) was black (ELENA).

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I laugh so I don't cry from anger (laughs). I was wearing plaid shorts and the guy sold me a striped sweater, saying that it was plain (...) more like his face was plain (GEORGE).

In one of the observations, a saleswoman at a fast food chain actually gave the wrong change during the consumption experience. These service encounter failures triggered a number of reactions in the visually impaired consumers, which will be addressed below.

5.2 THE CONSEQUENCES OF SERVICE ENCOUNTER FAILURES

The retailers and employees of shopping center management companies committed a number of different failures, and thus several different reactions were reported by the respondents and observed in the naturalistic observations. The consequences of the service encounter failures were completely different from one another, depending on the consumer, the service provider and how the interaction went. As expected, the most common consequence of a service encounter failure was anger and a verbal confrontation between the consumer and the service providers.

I left the store cursing everyone, every ugly name, you know? Then, I posted it all on Facebook (FÁBIO).

The young man stopped me, asking me what I was going to do at a movie theater. Even if I was blind, he didn't have to ask me anything, just do his job (...). I didn't even end up watching the movie, I left the house to just be angry and argue (...) (HUGO).

I left XXX (name of an ice cream shop) angry, I was really angry. I only didn't make more of a fuss because of my niece (ALANA).

Due to their disappointment with the poor service provision, in several situations, the consumers gave up on the transactions. This behavior was also observed during the naturalistic observations; in some situations, the research participants interrupted the interaction in the consumption environment and moved to another establishment. The transcript below demonstrates this behavior by the respondents:

(...) no, I don't have patience (...). Look, when I see that the salesperson is one of those type of people, I leave the store right away. It could be the most beautiful clothes, jewelry, whatever. I don't buy it (...). I studied and worked hard to not have to go through this (DÉBORA).

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It is interesting to note that when the salespeople observed that the consumers were deciding not to make a purchase, they exhibited no concern for service recovery, which also reveals the stigma suffered by the visually impaired in terms of their buying power. Two other statements demonstrate atypical behavior from the respondents: when they realized that the salespeople did not believe in their buying power, the respondents showed their cash and credit cards to the salespeople and left the establishments.

However, also, I fought back, ok? I left showing my wallet full of money (...). (ELENA)

I've already become accustomed to the prejudices of other people, but from time to time, I fight back. When the saleswoman at XXX (cosmetics store) mistreated me, I turned around and went into her competitor's store. I also showed her my credit cards (laughs) (BIANCA).

Contrary to the findings of Singh (1988), where demands for refunds, formal complaints or requests for apologies were consumer responses to service failures, there was a certain conformity with market practices, which led some respondents to seek other ways to address the failures. One recurrent consumer behavior was thus to face the adversities encountered in the consumption interactions with a good sense of humor.

At the time I got angry, but then... it's no use... we're all just getting older. I listen to these people's bullshit and I start laughing (ALANA).

The funniest thing is the handicapped bathroom, you know? They always use it to store things (...). If only the light had burned out, there really wouldn't be a problem (laughs) (ELENA).

They usually ask what I think about the color of the clothes (laughs). I start laughing and say I prefer something darker. (ÍTALO).

However, the respondents were unanimous in pointing out one consequence of service encounter failures: negative word-of-mouth. Relatives, friends and, primarily, other visually impaired consumers were encouraged to no longer visit stores where the negative incidents occurred, in addition to some respondents reporting that they expressed their frustration on online social networks.

There are no people more united than the blind (...). I think only the deaf are closest because they are the "deaf people," right? So, we even joke: if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us (laughs). We don't buy, and we spread the word to the rest (GEORGE).

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I go out and spread the word, I don't care. I post on Facebook, I warn my friends... I always make noise (CECÍLIA).

This happens very, very often. We're always with other visually impaired people because of NGOs, associations, all that. So, it's common for people to speak well or badly about stores. There's even a blacklist (laughs) (DÉBORA).

Finally, two other consequences of service encounter failures for the consumption behavior of the visually disabled were reported: an aversion to consuming at shopping centers and a clash between harmful market practices and the consumer's sense of independence. Although all the respondents are frequent consumers at shopping centers, they reported that some relatives and friends who also have visual impairments no longer visit shopping centers and prefer to consume at other establishments.

I know several people who don't go to shopping centers anymore... and it's not an old person thing, there are people our age who only go with someone else, they got tired of hearing bullshit out there (ELENA).

(...) I only go because, well... I get a lot done there, but there are times when all I want is to do what people I know do. They don't dare to buy anything alone... but for now I'm going to keep going, it's my right (BIANCA).

What salespeople and store managers should understand is that it doesn't take much to please people... on the contrary. (...). You just have to treat them normally, with respect (...) It's great when you go to the shopping center and do everything you have to do, there's nothing better. It makes my day (HUGO).

Based on the statements above, it is clear that shopping center management companies and retailers adopt practices that compromise this consumer group's interest in visiting their establishments and consuming. A number of different failures occurred in the service encounters, and thus the reactions of the consumers were different and varied widely. The main consequences of the failures on the individuals' consumption behavior were: anger and verbal confrontation, abandonment of the transaction, mockery of salespeople (showing cash and credit cards), aversion to consuming at shopping centers and a clash with the sense of independence of the visually impaired consumers. Although some research subjects viewed the negative interactions with a good sense of humor, a common respondent reaction was negative word-of-mouth to both visually impaired and sighted people.

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6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Understanding the importance of shopping centers to the national economy and the difficulties faced by visually impaired consumers in their actions as consumers, this study was not directed at the architectural barriers confronted by this group of individuals but rather sought to expand a debate about the difficulties that arise from interactions between the visually impaired and service providers, in this case, shopping center management companies and retailers. It thus sought to understand the consequences of service encounter failures at shopping centers for the consumption behavior of the visually impaired using interviews and naturalistic observations. Based on the literature review and the data collection, some points should be highlighted.

First, there are a number of service encounter failures that do not seem to have been discussed in the Brazilian marketing literature. The errors made by service providers result from a negative perception of the visually impaired, associating them with a person incapable of acting independently and autonomously. This negative perception is similar to that observed by Kaufman-Scarborough (2000) and Baker et al. (2007) in the United States and Faria et al. (2012) in Brazil.

Due to this stereotype, there are a number of different service encounter failures, such as an excessive display of pity from salespeople towards visually impaired consumers, contempt, abrupt changes in the service script, and an expression of the belief that the visually impaired consumer has no buying power. In some cases, retailers exploited the vulnerability of these consumers and cheated them by selling them unwanted products.

Regarding the consequences of service encounter failures for consumer behavior, there was a recurrent disappointment with harmful market practices, which provoked different reactions, such as verbal confrontation, abandonment of the transaction and negative word-of-mouth. However, there is disbelief about the possibility that this scenario of stigmatization and disrespect will actually change. The research subjects seem to be looking for alternative means of addressing negative interactions in service encounters with poor service providers, such as no longer visiting the establishment, expressing their frustration on online social networks, and telling people close to them about the failures that occurred.

It is thus necessary for there to be new discussions on the topic, as Brazilian marketing researchers rarely discuss the actions of DP as consumers, contributing to the perpetuation of

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these harmful market practices. Only the visually impaired have an understanding of what changes must be made by managers to improve managerial actions. That said, in the context of the study, it is essential for there to be a change of attitude by salespeople and employees of shopping center management companies, as service encounter failures diminish the sense of independence of visually impaired individuals, encouraging them to no longer visit these establishments and causing retailers to repel a market segment with buying power.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the naturalistic observations may have influenced the reactions of the consumers and salespeople during the consumption interactions. Furthermore, the encounters were observed on only two occasions, and future studies may want to increase this number. Another suggestion for future studies is understanding the consumption behavior of people with other impairments, particularly those who are hearing impaired, since there are few studies about that topic.

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