

Chapter 10

Expanding the Conversation on Inclusive Retailing: An Exploratory Look at the Servicescape-related Fashion Retail Experience of Families with Autism

Joanne Shin and Bethan Alexander

Keywords: Retail servicescape; retail atmospherics; in-store retail experience; autism spectrum disorder; inclusive retail design; invisible disabilities

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to demonstrate an understanding of:

- Inclusive retailing practices for disabled customers, specifically those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
- Theories of retail servicescape and customer experience in relation to disabilities.
- The barriers posed by retail atmospheric and sensory cues for neurodiverse autistic (ASD) fashion customers and their families in-store.
- Inclusive retail strategies to improve the retail experience of ASD families.

Introduction

People with disabilities (PWD) are an estimated 1.85 billion worldwide – friends, family and emotional connections to PWD represent an additional 3.3 billion (Donovan, 2020). This disability market contributes upwards of \$13 trillion in consumption value, demonstrating significant economic power (Donovan, 2020). In the UK, specifically, the Purple Pound – or the spending power of disabled households – was an estimated

£274 billion as of 2020 (Purple, 2021). Despite the influence of PWD, there remains a lack of research conducted to provide detailed, in-depth direction regarding inclusive retail practices for the disabled population.

While literature addressing the servicescape-related retail experiences of the mainstream, non-disability market is widely available, there is notable lack of focus on vulnerable consumer groups (Edwards, Rosenbaum, Brodahl, & Hughes, 2018). Among such groups, the *autistic* population is one that has yet to receive adequate academic attention despite their significant and growing presence in society. In the UK alone, an estimated 700,000 individuals are diagnosed with ASD (National Autistic Society, 2021). When family members are added to the picture, 2.8 million individuals' day-to-day lives involve autism (National Autistic Society, 2021). These rates are predicted to increase, as a 2021 prevalence study reveals that one in 57 children in the UK are autistic – higher than the previously reported one in 64 (Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021).

Parents of autistic children have provided insights into their unique lives in various studies, revealing the difficult nature of engaging in family activities compared to the neurotypical population (Schaaf, Toth-Cohen, Johnson, Outten, & Benevides, 2011). Among such activities, shopping recurrently has been acknowledged as stressful and challenging for parents to engage in with autistic children (Bevan-Brown, 2010; Myers, Mackintosh, & Goin-Kochel, 2009; Neely-Barnes, Hall, Roberts, & Graff, 2011; Nichols, 2018; Schaaf et al., 2011; Seepersad, 2016). Schaaf et al. (2011) point out the multisensory nature of retail establishments can irritate autistic children, and, thus, make shopping difficult for both the children and parents.

Efforts – albeit moderate – have been made to address sensory obstacles that physical retail environments may present. Perhaps most notable is the 'Autism Hour' scheme, in which retailers reduce background noises, dim lights, offer quiet spaces, weaken smells and educate staff and shoppers about ASD (National Autistic Society, 2021). However, as its name, 'Autism Hour', implies – the scheme is implemented for one hour daily, during the annual Autism Awareness Week for a majority of participating retailers. There is substantial room for improvement and expansion into adoption of permanently inclusive and autism-friendly measures in physical retail settings.

This study aims to offer strategic managerial recommendations regarding the fashion retail servicescape by exploring the impact of retail atmospheric variables on the in-store retail experience of parents with autistic children residing in the UK, achieved through the following objectives:

1. To explore theories of retail servicescapes and retail experience in relation to disabilities.
2. To contextualise ASD customer shopping challenges in a physical fashion retail environment.
3. To examine the in-store retail experience of parents with autistic children in fashion retail servicescapes.
4. To identify atmospheric variables of the retail servicescape that have been observed by parents to pose a challenge to their autistic children's in-store shopping experiences.
5. To propose how fashion retailers may implement inclusive retail strategies related to the retail servicescape to improve the retail experience of ASD families.

Retail Customer Experience

Customer experience definitions within extant literature are both numerous and diverse (e.g. Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Schmitt, 1999; Verhoef et al., 2009). This study draws on a specific part of the entire customer experience; the retail experience, which Bustamante and Rubio (2017) define as the ‘subjective internal response to and interaction with the physical retail environment’ (p. 887). They conceptualise the in-store retail experience to include cognitive, affective, social and physical dimensions; the cognitive component referring to mental activity, such as thoughts and reflections, the affective experience meaning emotions provoked by marketing stimuli and the social dimension (in a retail context) consisting of customer–customer and customer–employee relationships. They also find that ‘responses to sensory stimuli ... are physical and thus closely linked to the physical well-being an individual experiences in a specific environment (energy, vitality, comfort/discomfort)’ (p. 887). The physical element makes reference to physiological responses to the environment, demonstrating an appropriate conceptualisation when exploring the experiences of disabled populations.

Retail Servicescape and Atmospheric

This study draws upon the widely adopted conceptualisations of ‘servicescape’ and ‘atmospherics’ by Bitner (1992) and Turley and Milliman (2000), respectively. The ‘servicescape’ – a term coined by Bitner (1992) – refers to the ‘built environment’ or the ‘manmade, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment’ (p. 58). Turley and Milliman (2000) describe ‘atmospherics’ as ‘facility-based environmental cues’ (p. 193) and identify 57 variables that are classified into five dimensions of the retail servicescape; External variables, General Interior variables, Layout and Design variables, Point-of-Purchase and Decoration variables and Human variables.

The present study specifically draws upon a modified, fit-to-context version of Turley and Milliman (2000) classification of atmospheric variables put forth by Alexander and Kent (2016) shown in Table 10.1.

ASD in a Retail Context

ASD is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder involving social and communication deficits as well as repetitive and restricted behaviours (ICD-11 for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics, 2021). Additionally, abnormal sensory responses are a characteristic trait of autism in young children, with research reporting up to a 90% incidence rate (Leekam, Nieto, Libby, Wing, & Gould, 2007). For children who experience sensory hypersensitivity, loud and impulsive sounds, bright lights, the touch of others’ or one’s own clothes and/or strong smells – stimuli often found in retail establishments – can make ‘the body react as if being attacked or bombarded, resulting in such physical symptoms as headaches, anxiety, panic attacks or aggression’ (Pellicano, 2013; Williams, 1994, p. 43). Despite these acute responses, autism has yet to receive much scholarly focus in a retail context. The activity of shopping has only been sporadically mentioned in anecdotal, parent-reported studies and books regarding a variety of autism-related topics. Among the sparse findings available in academia, shopping is generally depicted as a difficult and stressful experience for parents with autistic children who have been observed to demonstrate difficult behaviours, meltdowns and tantrums when in retail environments, such as shopping malls and grocery stores (Bevan-Brown, 2010; Kissel, 2010; Neely-Barnes et al., 2011; Nichols, 2018; Seepersad, 2016).

Table 10.1 Retail Atmospheric Variables.

External Variables	General Interior Variables	Layout and Design Variables	Point-of-Purchase and Decoration Variables	Human Variables
Exterior signage	Flooring and carpeting	Space design and allocation	Point of purchase displays	Employee characteristics
Entrances	Colour scheme	Placement of merchandise	Signs and cards	Employee uniforms
Exterior display windows	Lighting	Grouping of merchandise	Wall decorations	Crowding
Height of building	Music	Work station placement	Degrees and certificates	Customer characteristics
Size of building	P.A. usage	Placement of equipment	Pictures	Privacy
Colour of building	Scents	Placement of cash registers	Artwork	
Surrounding stores	Width of aisles	Waiting areas	Product displays	
Lawns and gardens	Wall composition	Waiting rooms	Usage instructions	
Address and location	Paint and wallpaper	Department locations	Price displays	
Architectural style	Ceiling composition	Traffic flow	Technology	
Surrounding area	Merchandise	Racks and cases		
Parking availability	Temperature	Waiting queues		
Congestion and traffic	Cleanliness	Furniture		
Exterior walls		Dead areas		

Source: Alexander and Kent (2016). Adapted from Turley and Milliman (2000). ASD

AQ2 Though the topic of interest remains in nascency, autism literature has nevertheless managed to evidence the challenging retail experience for the autism and autism-affected populations with relation to the retail servicescape. Despite such clues, there is an absence of academic discourse regarding this phenomenon. This study's exploration of the addressed research gap gives rise to preliminary insights on how the autistic and autism-affected populations could be more effectively accommodated in fashion retail settings, opening up new directions for research and ultimately benefitting both the autism-affected community and retailers alike. The following research questions ensue and direct the onward study.

- RQ1:** What is the unique in-store retail experience for parents when shopping in fashion stores accompanied by their autistic child?
- RQ2:** Which atmospheric variables of retail servicescapes have been observed by parents to pose a challenge to their autistic children's in-store shopping experiences?
- RQ3:** How can fashion retailers adapt their stores to accommodate the needs and be more inclusive of their autistic family customer segments?

Methodology

The research undertook an interpretivist approach as the study aimed to explore, generate new empirical insights and contribute to a nascent area of academic research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Furthermore, as the topic of interest involved exploring a unique population's retail customer experience – a concept marked by subjectivity – an interpretivist paradigm was deemed appropriate in order to capture novel insights.

In line with the interpretivist approach, the research was conducted in an inductive manner, seeking to build theory by capturing each unique retail experience through narrative enquiry (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013; Hyde, 2000). The study was conducted in a cross-sectional time frame and consisted of two stages. The first stage involved a review of relevant secondary resources, including academic literature, managerial publications and media sources, which gave rise to the research questions. This stage was followed by primary data collection, which consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 parents of autistic children (aged 3–18), residing in the UK, who have shopped in a physical fashion (clothing and footwear) store with their child(ren). The interviews drew upon the in-store customer experience dimensions offered by Bustamante and Rubio (2017) as well as atmospheric variables classified by Turley and Milliman (2000). Raw, transcribed data were systemically coded and key themes were identified and analysed against existing research.

During primary data collection, as with any research study, a number of ethical considerations were made, especially as the research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to minimise risks to participant physical and psychological well-being were made by adhering to proper social distancing measures as well as through careful wording of interview questions and prompts to reduce potential emotional trauma.

Findings: Retail Experience of Parents with Autistic Children

Cognitive Experience

Parents detailed having to conduct a risk or usability assessment of the retail environment prior to entering the retail store. Following a speedy evaluation, participants recounted planning their course of action depending on store conditions as well as their child's predicted response behaviours to the different characteristics of the retail setting. For example, a respondent recalled multiple instances of arriving at a shop and having to turn back, knowing that a certain, unexpected aspect of the environment would trigger a negative reaction in her child.

Though this phenomenon has yet to be observed among other parents of autistic children in academic research, Baker, Holland, and Kaufman-Scarborough's (2007) study on how disabled consumers perceive retail servicescapes as 'welcoming' demonstrate similar findings. In their study, participants with visual, auditory, mobility and cognitive impairments also indicated that store environment cues were taken into account when deciding whether to stay or leave. Past and present research have suggested that retailer-controlled environmental variables can be determining factors for approach or avoidant behaviours among disabled or disability-associated consumers.

Affective Experience

Shopping trips were generally marked by different negative sentiments for parents. Stress and anxiety plagued the majority of respondents. In addition, feelings of

frustration, loneliness, panic, dissatisfaction, depression, embarrassment and guilt were also reported by select respondents. Though research on the mainstream market has regarded shopping as a pleasurable activity (Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), the negative emotional insights voiced in this study suggest otherwise. The need to consider the distinct retail experiences of overlooked consumer groups and develop inclusive retail strategies are further highlighted.

Social Experience

Respondents shared mixed anecdotes regarding the social aspect of their shopping experiences – some positive and some negative. While helpful and understanding, shop assistants contributed to positive experiences, staff who were impatient and even ridiculed a parent and her young autistic son contributed to upsetting experiences. As for experiences with fellow shoppers, parents sometimes found themselves subject to rude comments and strange stares from other customers.

These reports echoed a reality faced by other parents of autistic children – similar comments, stares and negative reactions from other shoppers were shared by participants in works by Gray (2002), Mason and Pavia (2006), Neely-Barnes et al. (2011) and Seepersad (2016). Autism awareness appeared to be a moderating variable of the parents' social experiences. It is suggested that 'a perceived lack of understanding' among the mainstream society represents the reason behind distress experienced by the disabled and disability-associated community in public spots (Mason & Pavia, 2006, p. 1018).

Physical Experience

Previous research has not only highlighted stress among parents of autistic children as an emotional experience, but also as a physical experience (Seepersad, 2016). Several participants of the present study recounted being in a rather poor physical state during and following shopping trips with autistic children. These parents reported tension, exhaustion and headaches.

A unique finding in terms of physical experience from this research involved an interviewee experiencing 'transference' – or feeling the same – as their child in response to certain stimuli in the physical environment. In this case, the parent's child was quite sensitive to noise so she too, felt bothered by loud noises. Such an insight might suggest that the primary task in creating positive retail experiences for parents of autistic children may be to meet the needs of the child. How the retail environment and atmospherics could play a role in this task are examined the following section.

Retail Atmospheric Variables: Challenges and Improvements to be Made

External Variables

A mix of responses were recorded with regard to observed tendencies and attitudes towards a retail environment's external variables among the autistic children. The majority of respondents reported indifference or positive reactions in their children in response to signs, displays and certain configurations of shops. However, in contrast, one parent observed that her autistic daughter found television screens in the exterior display windows to be a sensory challenge. Uncertainty of what the screen was going to display next prompted the distraught child to squint or look away. Though this

finding may stand alone in the current research, it echoes Grandin's (2011) insight that constantly changing sight cues pose a sensory challenge for some autistic individuals.

General Interior Variables

Several internal elements of a retail servicescape received considerable attention and were highlighted through overlapping responses by respondents.

Opinions on lighting and music yielded mixed responses. In terms of lighting, contrary to previous discussions on autistic sensitivity to bright lighting (Lipsky, 2011; Notbohm, 2005; O'Neill, 1998; Pellicano, 2013; Schaaf et al., 2011), all but two of the present sample's children were not observed to demonstrate visual sensitivity with bright store lights. Unrelated to the visual sense that lighting primarily affects, one respondent's child was bothered by the constant buzzing noises produced by certain types of light fixtures, concurring with insights offered by O'Neill (1998) and Notbohm (2005).

Noise and auditory sensitivity in their children were commonly discussed by participants in this study. Too many or too loud of noises were reported to cause upset in some children. In line with existing insights, loud music was frequently acknowledged as a source of auditory discomfort for some autistic children (Notbohm, 2005; Willey, 2014). Quieter and calmer music was advocated for.

P.A. usage or tannoys were also noticeably disliked by some children, echoing Grandin's (2011) findings. Background noises – though not a general interior variable offered by Turley and Milliman (2000) – were discussed by a couple of respondents as auditory irritants. These included the previously mentioned lighting buzz, beeping tills, clashing trolleys, footsteps, jangling coins, echoes and even humming air conditioners. Taking these insights into account, a modified version of Turley and Milliman (2000) classification of atmospheric variables including 'Background Noise' under the General Interior Variables category would be appropriate for further research.

Layout and Design Variables

The research suggests that accommodations made to the layout and design of a retail environment have potential to improve the shopping experience of parents and their autistic children. Betts and Patrick (2006) included that parents with autistic children 'may appreciate the feeling of having more space' (p. 89). This sentiment is echoed in the present study as parents noticeably expressed a dislike for shops that were disorganised, packed with product and difficult to navigate. One parent voiced her worry about being unable to locate her child who often ran off. Another respondent observed her autistic son to 'work better' in spacious stores and sought out uncrowded shops with larger changing rooms.

A few participants touched upon placement and grouping of merchandise, voicing a desire for easy-to-wear and boys clothing to be quickly identifiable. It may be worth noting for childrenswear retailers that the majority of autism diagnoses tend to be in males (Loomes, Hull, & Mandy, 2017). Clear grouping of merchandise according to product category and size was proposed by a respondent whose autistic teenager required clarity in product layout when choosing clothing for himself.

Autism-friendly play areas were suggested by one parent to keep her child entertained without disrupting the shop. Third places such as cafés in shops were also positively

discussed as a parent recounted her children behaving better when promised a treat from the in-store café after their shopping trip. As third places have also yet to be included in Turley and Milliman (2000) framework, inclusion of the variable under the Layout and Design category may be another appropriate modification for future studies.

Point-of-Purchase and Decoration Variables

In addition to layout and design variables, research indicates that improvements made to point-of-purchase variables could also improve the in-store experience for parents of autistic children. Several participants recalled their children reaching for merchandise that was displayed at arm's length, creating a difficult experience for the parents who tried to deter these behaviours. Merchandise – namely sweets and 'small goodies' – placed on shelves leading up to the tills or on the checkout counters also resulted in stress for parents with children who had a tendency to reach for, play with, or even unintentionally leave the store with these items in their pockets. Parents desired for retailers to reconsider the display height and methods (using display boxes) of their merchandise.

A fashion retail point-of-purchase variable that may be worthy of consideration is mannequins. Though scantily mentioned in autism literature and this study, mannequins have been highlighted as a source of fear (Dawn Prince-Hughes, 2004) or fascination for one participant's son who managed to disassemble a mannequin, negatively affecting their retail experience. Subsequently, an adaptation of Turley and Milliman (2000) framework to include 'mannequins' under the Point-of-Purchase and Decoration variables category is proposed for use in future-related research.

Human Variables

A considerable spotlight was placed on employee characteristics and staff training among respondents when discussing how retailers could better accommodate autistic families. Calls for autism (and general disability) awareness were emphasised by participants who cited employee characteristics as a differentiator in their shopping experiences. Autism awareness training as well as characteristics such as compassion, patience and support were valued and desired by the parents.

Similarly, past research by Baker et al. (2007) has found that disabled consumers' perceptions of welcome depended heavily on service personnel. It has been clear that an anticipation of needs is valued whereas impatience and inappropriate assumption making by shop staff make for negative in-store experiences.

Conclusions, Implications and Future Research

The present study aimed to achieve a more detailed understanding of the servicescape-linked in-store retail experience of parents who shop with their autistic children for fashion. Ultimately, it sought to initiate conversation among scholars and retail businesses alike. The study makes a number of theoretical contributions. The findings add to the nascent field of inclusive retailing, experiential retailing and ASD disabilities, by providing evidence regarding the servicescape-related retail experience through the lens of an autism-affected customer. The findings contribute to our greater understanding of vulnerable populations in a retail context and signals the need to advance discussion regarding such consumer groups and inclusive retail

design. Additionally, research insights give rise to an adapted version (Table 10.2) of Turley and Milliman (2000) retail atmospheric framework that would better suit further research in related areas.

Practically, the study offers several operational retailer implications. As anticipated, a store’s interior variables that directly affect the senses, such as lighting and music, received notable attention from study participants. This research also revealed new understandings regarding autism-affected consumers’ responses to a store’s external, layout and design, point-of-purchase and human variables. Findings yielded a number of physical retail environment-related suggestions for retailers to consider, ranging from lighting choices to product display heights to autism awareness staff training – contributing to a more comprehensive set of actions retailers may take to better cater to this marginalised population. The complete list of recommendations, categorised according to Turley and Milliman (2000) atmospheric variables are outlined in Table 10.3.

This research also triggers a more strategic call to action for the retail industry to fundamentally realign and dedicate more attention towards equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies and practices more broadly. Notwithstanding its novel contribution, the study is bound by time, scale, geography and sector. The small sample size

Table 10.2 Retail Atmospheric Variables.

External Variables	General Interior Variables	Layout and Design Variables	Point-of-Purchase and Decoration Variables	Human Variables
Exterior signage Entrances Exterior display windows Height of building Size of building Colour of building Surrounding stores Lawns and gardens Address and location Architectural style Surrounding area Parking availability Congestion and traffic Exterior walls	Flooring and carpeting Colour scheme Lighting Music P.A. usage Scents Width of aisles Wall composition Paint and wallpaper Ceiling composition Merchandise Temperature Cleanliness <i>Background noises</i>	Space design and allocation Placement of merchandise Grouping of merchandise Work station placement Placement of equipment Placement of cash registers Waiting areas Waiting rooms Department locations Traffic flow Racks and cases Waiting queues Furniture Dead areas <i>Third places</i>	Point of purchase displays Signs and cards Wall decorations Degrees and certificates Pictures Artwork Product displays Usage instructions Price displays Technology <i>Mannequins</i>	Employee characteristics Employee uniforms Crowding Customer characteristics Privacy

Adapted from Turley and Milliman (2000).

Table 10.3 Retail Recommendations for ASD Inclusive Retail Environments.

Category	Subcategory	Recommendation
External Variables	Exterior Window Displays	Limit the use of TV screens in window displays
General Interior Variables	Lighting	Ensure environment is adequately light through the use of non-buzzing and non-fluorescent lighting
	Music	Use calmer, lower volume music
	P.A. usage	Minimise P.A. usage
	Background noise	Minimise background noises
Layout and Design Variables	Space design and allocation	Spaciously designed environment
	Placement of merchandise	Place boys' clothing and easy wear clothing in easily accessible areas of the store
	Grouping of merchandise	Maintain clear grouping of merchandise (product type, sizing and colour)
	Waiting areas	Childcare facilities with sensory toys and autistic-friendly carers
	Third place	Inclusion of a third place (e.g. café) that could provide a reward for children
Point-of-Purchase and Decoration Variables	Product displays	Move easy destructible items into product displays Minimise products displayed at young children's heights
	Mannequins	Limit the use of mannequins
Human Variables	Employee characteristics	Implement regular staff training regarding disability awareness and diversity (EDI)

and snowball sampling strategy prevents results from being generalised to the autistic and parents of autistic children population as a whole. Larger, similar studies could be taken in other regions and countries to compare and contrast ASD customer experiences in-store. Moreover, a focus on interviews raises concerns regarding misinterpretation, subjectivity and diminished participant recollection, which could be countered through reinforcement methods, for example, *in situ* observations during accompanied shops (Alsaawi, 2014; Healy et al., 2007). Further, given unprecedented retail change, accelerated by the global pandemic, and the increasing attention given to EDI, there is a need for more nuanced conceptualisations and empirical studies to address the lacuna in scholarly research on PWD, particularly autistic people and retailing. Our study therefore contributes to the burgeoning critical conversation on inclusive retailing within a fashion context.

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AUTHOR QUERIES

- AQ1: Please provide reference for citation (Williams, 1994).
- AQ2: Please check is this meant to say 'autistic' or 'autism'?
- AQ3: The following citations (Alsaawi, 2014; Healy et al., 2007) are not provided in the ref. list. Please check.
- AQ4: Reference (Williams & Bishop, 1994) not cited in text. Please check.