

The Disabling Marketplace: Towards a Conceptualisation

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Since the 1990s, a growing body of research investigating markets, consumption and disability has developed (i.e., Kaufman-Scarborough 1999, 2001; Baker 2006; Baker et al. 2001, 2002; Pavia and Mason 2012, 2014; Mason and Pavia 2006, Navarro et al., 2014; Beudaert et al. 2016, 2017; Beudaert 2018; Echeverri and Salomonson, 2019; Kearney et al. 2019; Husemann Zeyen and Higgins 2023). This research has shaped and informed the concept of 'marketplace accessibility', which refers to the creation, maintenance, and experience of a barrier-free market environment that consumers living with impairment can access and participate in independently, stress-free, and with dignity (Baker et al. 2002; Balabanis et al. 2012; Kaufman-Scarborough 1999, 2001). This body of work largely draws from the social model of disability (Imrie, 1997; Shakespeare, 2004; Goodley, 2017), attributing marketplace in-access and disability exclusion to social and environmental barriers. Thus, barriers in society disable, not a person's impairment. One advantage of the social model lies in its ability to offer valuable understanding of the "material inequalities" encountered by disabled individuals (Goodley 2017, 11).

However, this social model dominance has led to a mostly micro-level understanding of disability, markets, and consumption. Here research has concentrated on investigating discriminatory practices by market participants, such as service providers and retailers, which disable consumers, as well as the adaptive strategies (i.e. coping strategies) employed by disabled consumers to address these discriminations. This micro-level focus fails to acknowledge the macro-structural ideologies, beliefs and assumptions that underpin, and perpetuate, discriminatory and coping practices. In other words, research on marketplace accessibility falls short in acknowledging the role of 'ableism' in marketplace in-access and

disability exclusion. Ableism refers to “ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume ablebodiedness, and by doing so construct persons with impairments as marginalised, oppressed and largely invisible ‘others’” (Chouinard, 1997, 380). Notable exceptions include Downey and Catterall (2006, 127) who note the marketplace barriers that restrict disabled consumers are instances of ableism enacted to prevent disruptions to “the day-to-day activities of non-disabled citizens”. Kearney et al. (2019) uncover how misrepresentations of impairment within advertising perpetuate ableism. And, adopting a psycho-emotional model of disability (Reeve, 2012), Higgins (2020) highlights how ableist structures entrenched within marketplace settings can emotionally disable not only consumers with impairment but the rich network surrounding them (i.e., their family, friends, spouses, and carers) causing both those with and without impairment to, at times, self-exclude from the marketplace. Together, these studies begin to discuss macro-structural ableist ideologies prevailing in markets and consumption, and their role in perpetuating discriminatory practices and marketplace in-access.

With this special issue, we seek to build on, and expand, marketing and consumer research on marketplace accessibility by systematically bringing together what we know about micro-level disabling practices and the role of macro-structural ableist ideologies in perpetuating those practices. To do so, we propose the concept of *the disabling marketplace*, which *refers to how market participants’ discriminatory practices that are grounded within, and perpetuated by, ableist marketplace structures can deprive, delimit, and disable a consumer’s agency and power.*

In the following we outline how this special issue contributes to our current understanding of the disabling marketplace. To do so, we categorise each article within two themes: (1) discriminatory marketplace practices, and (2) ableist marketplace structures. For each theme we briefly outline the current literature on disability, markets, and consumption, and show how the articles in this special issue contribute to this body of work. Lastly, we

develop a future research agenda to encourage and inspire the growth of knowledge, and indeed the hopeful and eventual eradication of, the disabling marketplace.

Discriminatory Marketplace Practices

Due to a social model perspective (Imrie, 1997; Shakespeare, 2004; Goodley, 2017), marketplace accessibility research attributes marketplace in-access and disability exclusion to environmental and social barriers. Environmental barriers refer to physical inaccessibility (e.g., lack of ramps), whilst social barriers refer to the ‘unwelcomeness’ (i.e., infantilizing and ignoring behaviours) often experienced by disabled consumers. In response, disabled consumers often engage in coping and adaptation strategies (Pavia and Mason, 2012; Echeverri and Salomonson, 2019). These strategies inadvertently responsabilise disabled consumers to overcome marketplace barriers, as a means of conforming to consumer normalcy (Baker, 2006). In sum, drawing from the social model of disability, consumer researchers have focused on exploring discriminatory practices of market participants which disable consumers as well as disabled consumers’ coping, adaptation, and often self-discriminating practices to deal with those barriers.

Three of our special issue papers explore, expose, and make calls to expel discriminatory practices which disable consumers in the marketplace. Salomonson and Echeverri in exploring interactions between disabled consumers and service providers highlight the role of embodiment in triggering experiences of vulnerability. Drawing from a qualitative data set in the context of mobility and public transport services, they unpack three ‘disabling marketplace interactions’ – the invisible, the invading and the ignoring body - which together capture vulnerability as embodiment in practical day-to-day situations (Pavia & Mason, 2014). Consumers in their study, for example, experience vulnerability when service providers, without permission, come physically close and enter the consumers’ private space.

As such, this study shows that discriminatory practices can generate barriers that are not ‘just’ environmental or attitudinal but also embodied.

Zainuddin, Randle, Gordon and Dolnicar investigate both the enabling and disabling features of marketplaces. Drawing upon value theory and analysing a longitudinal qualitative data set in the context of the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the authors show whether markets are enabling or disabling depend on several marketplace characteristics. Those characteristics include the goods and services provided, the level of support, but also the people assisting with provision of services and the structures by which the marketplace operates. In line with Higgins (2020) and Husemann et al. (2023), this study offers practical guidance for policy makers and service providers on how to decrease discriminatory marketplace practices; that is, on how to best modify products and services to reduce value destroying features and strengthen value creating features in marketplaces.

De Vos, Qesja, Lipnicka and Harris explore the experiences of disabled students in an online higher education programme. Drawing from in-depth interviews, the authors uncover how higher education experiences can be improved for disabled students by addressing structural barriers, social interactions, internalised oppressions, and by enhancing student-customer orientation dimensions, and respect. Higher education institutions can significantly improve their disabled students’ online learning experiences by providing tangible digital products and multi-sensory offerings. As such, this study supports, and adds nuance to, Husemann et al. (2023) by showing that when service providers emphasize the role of respect in service provision, and indeed adopt a pro-active approach to reducing disabling barriers, they can decrease feelings of internalised oppression within their customers, and thus improve accessibility and reduce discriminatory practices in the marketplace.

Ableist Marketplace Structures

Prior to the term disability, the accepted socio-cultural term used was handicap. It was/is a derogatory term stereotyping persons with impairment as incapable and therefore as both socially and economically unproductive members of society (Oliver, 1990). Still today, the terms ‘disabled’ or ‘disability’ refer to a loss or lack of ability. In other words, one is unable in some way (i.e. impaired) and therefore disabled in totality, and thus depriving those with impairments of a sense of power, agency, and value in society. Yet, just as we are all susceptible to vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005), we are all likewise susceptible to disability. After all, we are all “temporarily able-bodied” (Goodley, 2017, 2). Disability studies highlight how disability is the only marginalized characteristic a person can acquire at any point in their lives. Despite this reality, entrenching and oft antiquated etymological and ableist notions still reinforce and refract socio-political structures including consumer culture, and ultimately perpetuate inequity, inequality, and vulnerabilities in our marketplace.

As outlined earlier there is little, but growing work, exposing the cruel and dangerous realities of ableism within consumer culture. Indeed, Higgins and O’Leary (2023) in their investigation of parent-carers to children with life-limiting conditions, argue that ableism only exists in coexistence with disability. Without the norm of ableism there is no disability. The final three papers in our special issue point towards this negative coexistence between ableism-disability and begin to ask is there something we as researchers and/or the marketplace can do to begin rupturing such coexistence?

Beudaert, Mason and Nau outline how although once progressive, the social model has stagnated. As Beudaert and his colleagues outline in focussing on external environmental barriers, the social model has failed to recognise the role and positionality of the body in disability, leading to an impairment/ disability dualism and the “disappearance of the body from disability discourse” (2024, 4). This failure inadvertently enacts ableism, as we see the impairment not the person beneath that impairment. They thus, encourage us to adopt more

collaborative and creative methods and approaches of research that do not merely capture or give voice to disabled people, but emplace them directly at the core of everything we do.

Bhogal-Nair and colleagues (2024) suggest that the marketplace needs to change – not the disabled consumer – and can do so by adopting a Capability Approach which simply defined believes “the path to human welfare should concentrate on the actual capability of individuals to achieve their well-being rather than solely on their right or freedom to do so” (2024, 4). In short, we as researchers and marketers must shift our focus to see the person and what they can do, not their impairment and how it delimits them. They propose three ways towards this capability focus; *reimagining and seeing ability over disability, shaping the market to deliver conversion opportunities, and developing policies to support this reimagined ability focus*. This latter focus of ‘reimagined ability’ echoes with the final poetic piece in our special issue.

Takhar draws on bioethicist Chris Kaposy’s work to develop her poem ‘Aneuploidy’, which situates the reader directly within the structural debates of ableist-genetics. Her poem posits two highly ethical and ableist questions: i) should impairment be eradicated? and ii) what would a world without impairment look like? With science and technological improvements, and genetic procedures becoming ever-more consumable, will ableism “pronounce a terminal sentence upon nascent, foetal heart[s]” or will society and our marketplace “embrace the immeasurability [and] the extreme living” of disability?

We appreciate the road to an ableist-free marketplace and society is not an easy one to navigate. Nonetheless, we believe this special issue offers the beginning of a roadmap towards such a destination, positing what will/ could be the future for ‘The Disabling Marketplace’.

The Future of ‘The Disabling Marketplace’

We see two main avenues for future research. First, research on the disabling marketplace needs to consider the body and embodied experiences to move beyond the social model. To this end, we require more inclusive, immersive, and participatory approaches to marketing and consumer research. Most importantly, we need to consider multi-modal methods that enable participants with diverse disabilities to partake in research (Zeyen & Branzei, 2023). Furthermore, throughout the research project, we need to consider axiology, as well as our own positionality vis-à-vis disability experiences. Methodological innovation will allow us to gain deeper insights into the lived experience and embodiment of disability.

Secondly, we propose that future research should concentrate on dismantling the disabling marketplace. While this special issue has identified underlying structures supporting disabling practices through prevailing ableist norms, we assert that further research is crucial for transforming marketplaces into accessible and inclusive spaces. We suggest considering the disabling marketplace as a system, using system theory's iceberg model (Monet and Gannon, 2015). Addressing all levels, including observable “above the surface” events as much as “below the surface” patterns, structures, and mental models (such as ableism), is necessary for meaningful change. To tackle disabling practices, research should not only focus on events but also explore patterns and structures. Questions about the distribution of disabling practices among different disabled groups in various sectors (i.e. patterns) and the impact of laws, regulations, welfare systems, consumption behaviours, and service provider’s internal policies (i.e. structures) need attention. We further advocate for research that examines the interplay between ableism and other cultural mental models to understand their collective impact on structures, patterns, and events within the disabling marketplace. In essence, we call for research at different levels of the disabling marketplace system, emphasising the dynamic influences between them. This includes investigating how radical shifts towards disability-inclusive marketplace practices affect the lower layers of the iceberg and how changes in

mental models translate into new regulations, organizational practices, and on-the-ground events.

Traditionally, with concept development you wish for your concept to endure, to become immortalised. We do not seek this. Rather we see our concept of ‘the disabling marketplace’ as an affirmative call to action, which we hope mobilises researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to work together to create and perpetuate an ‘Enabling Marketplace’. As such, we hope in time our concept and the need for it diminishes, becomes irrelevant and obsolete for then this special issue will have been the catalyst to change we envisioned, igniting the actors surrounding marketplace systems to take responsibility and establish genuine, transformative access.

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