

Shoppers with Disabilities: A Study on Experiences, Behaviours and Needs

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ABSTRACT

This article was a part of a study on Daily Living of Persons with Disabilities in Urban Area. The aim of this article was to present the experiences, behaviors and needs of persons with disabilities to do shopping in their day-to-day living. A purposive sampling method was used to select thirty persons with disabilities (fifteen were visually impaired and fifteen were physically or mobility impaired) who lived in the Bangkok Metropolitan area. A semi-structure interview was used to conduct an in-depth interview with all participants. Data collected were then analysed using content analysis. Results showed that shopping behaviours and needs of shoppers with visual impairment, and shoppers with physical or mobility impairment in this studied were similar. Both groups had experiences in both general and online shopping. Whilst many went shopping in department stores, supermarkets, local markets, and convenient stores; online shopping alleviated their disability and provided greater convenience and independence. While some participants in this studied tried to do shopping by themselves, others preferred to request for supports from family members, friends, or salespersons. Major barriers faced by both groups in doing shopping were related to accessibility issues; i.e., inaccessibility of shopping information, such as product labels, price tags, sales promotion brochures for shoppers with visual impairment and; physical environment accessibility, such as narrow shopping spaces, too high shelves, lack of ramps for those with physical or mobility impairment. Another barrier due to lack of experience or understanding of salespersons and entrepreneurs on how to interact and provide support for shoppers with disabilities.

Keywords: Shopping, Persons with disabilities, Daily living

1. INTRODUCTION

Shopping was one of many common activities a person, with or without disability, performed in everyday life. (Baker, Holland and Kaufman □ Scarborough, 2007) But for persons with disabilities, The activity of going shopping in the daily living might be something which needed more planning than persons without disabilities. This was because factors such as physical environment, infrastructure, services; as well as attitudes and understanding of those related might pose as barriers and had effects on shoppers with disabilities. (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2002; Swaine et al., 2014).

Many research were conducted related to persons with disabilities and shopping. In 1996, Burnett surveyed 690 shoppers with and without disability (304 were disabled and 386 were nondisabled) regarding the decision criteria both groups used to make in their shopping. Results indicated the significant difference between shoppers with and without disabilities; i.e., shoppers with disability considered shopping efficiency, shopping convenience, sales personnel and store environment to be more important criteria than did shoppers without disability.

Another study focused mainly on the compliant assessment of the physical environment of 3 shopping centers in the Southwest of the U.S. to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The study found that not all parts of the shopping centers were compliant to the guidelines of the ADA. Thus, shoppers who were wheelchair mobile could not expect the physical environment of the shopping centers to be fully accessible and might possibly face physical barriers. (McClain, 2000)

Another recent study carried out by Swaine et al. (2014) interviewed 15 persons with disabilities, 15 rehabilitation professionals and 9 shopkeepers regarding the facilitators and barriers of shopping malls used by persons with disabilities. Results indicated that interactions of shopkeepers and persons with disabilities, and the mall's design for mobility and wayfinding were the most important factors that could be facilitators or barriers for persons with disabilities to be able to use the mall inclusively just as others, as well as to feel that they were welcome.

Kostyra et al. (2017) did a study focusing on factors determining food shopping by persons with visual impairment. Results indicated that persons with visual impairment did

shopping for their food both in general stores (supermarket and local grocery) as well as online stores. Assistant from salespersons, products with braille labels, scanners that help to read printed labels and the permanent shelves for products were factors mentioned frequently by participants with visual impairment as factors that facilitate their food shopping.

The study by Rochette et al. (2017) focused on the importance of the knowledge and self confidence of shopkeepers when interacting with persons with disabilities by carried out a quasi-experimental research providing a training to shopkeepers. Results indicated that the shopkeepers had greater knowledge and self confidence to interact with persons with disabilities before they received the training.

Literature reviewed here were studies being conducted in other countries. According to Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), regarding persons with disabilities being able to live independently and being a part of the community, persons with disabilities must be able to participate in the facilities available to general population on an equal basis. (United Nations, 2006) Shopping was considered as an important activity for all; and was an activity that could facilitate social participation of persons with disabilities in the community. (Swaine, 2014) In order to meet this goal, the researchers considered that it would be important to study the experiences, behaviours and needs of persons with disabilities regarding shopping. Nonetheless, there were hardly any Thai studies to focus on this issue. Therefore, it was essential to carry out this study in order to use the knowledge to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities.

2. METHODS

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants through disabled people organizations (DPOs). The criteria were: (1) participants had to be eighteen years old and above; (2) had a visual impairment or physical or mobility impairment; (3) lived in Bangkok Metropolitan Area namely Bangkok, Nakornpathom, Nonthaburi, Samutprakarn, Patumthani and Samutsakorn provinces for at least six months; and (4) were member of the Thailand Association of the Blind or the Thailand Association of the Disabled. There were fifteen persons with visual impairment (blind and low vision) and fifteen persons with physical or mobility impairment (wheelchair users and non-wheelchair users) participated. A

semi-structure in-depth interview was used to interview all thirty participants at the time and place convenient to them. All participants were provided with the details of the study and were asked to sign the informed consent and granted the permission for the conversation to be recorded before they were interviewed. The interviews were recorded with the digital voice recorder and were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then analyzed using a content analysis. The researchers manually coded the transcriptions in the word processor. The two researchers coded a transcription separately. After that the coded transcription was compared to find the consensus before the rest of the transcriptions were coded.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed that each person with disability often had experiences, behaviours and needs regarding shopping that were quite common due to similar types of disabilities such as those with visual impairment faced difficulties reading printed product labels, price tags, sale promotion brochure, or product details; whereas those with physical or mobility impairment had a hard time trying to access the physical environment of stores or reaching products on high shelves. The results could be categorized into two main themes as; i.e., (1) Shopping Accessibility; and (2) Support from family, friends and salespersons.

3.1 Shopping Accessibility

3.1.1 General and Online Stores

Regarding the channels in which shoppers with disabilities did their shopping, it was found that they shopped both through general and online stores. Shoppers with disabilities went shopping in the local markets, convenient stores, supermarkets, hypermarkets and department stores. This finding was similar to mobility disabled shoppers in the study by Burnett (1996) who also found that the mobility disabled shoppers shopped at various types of stores.

On the other hand, some participants found the use of online shopping alleviated their disabilities as well as provided greater convenience and independence. This finding was in consistent with the studies of online retail shopping behaviours of consumers with disabilities which found that web-based technology's had a potential to facilitate shopping independence for consumers with disabilities since shopping in e-space could remove many

such physical barriers (Jones, Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006); as well as provided more convenience, better and cheaper price (Childers and Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, 2009).

“I went [to a department store] some times to buy fresh food that I couldn't find in [an online store].” (Shopper with physical or mobility impairment, 37 years old)

“For grocery shopping, I felt more comfortable shopping at the supermarket myself although I normally shopped online...for fresh food, I preferred to go to the store because I can choose.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 35 years old)

“For consumer products, I shopped online and they delivered to my house...for example, a pack of diaper was very big, I couldn't carry it myself.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 39 years old)

“[Online shopping] was very convenient because I knew all the products list without having to wait for someone to read them out for me e.g., if I wanted to know a bag of an instant noodle weighted how many grams, how much did it cost, how many bags were in each pack, how many flavours there were...no one would read everything out for me. If I were to ask everything, that person might get annoyed. [Online shopping] made me feel at ease because I could check everything, chose what I wanted to buy and put them in a basket.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 51 years old)

“I bought cosmetics through online shops.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 40 years old)

“Recently, I used online shopping quite a lot...I would shop through [name of an online shop] and then they delivered products and collected money at home or I could use my credit card to pay...and I knew exactly when and what time they would deliver the products.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 51 years old)

3.1.2 Information Accessibilities

Results indicated that the shopping barriers reported by participants in this study related mainly to accessibility issues; i.e., information accessibility and physical environment accessibility. For shoppers with visual impairment, the main barrier would be the difficulties to see products labels, price tags, or sales promotion brochures etc. This finding was in

accordance with shoppers with visual impairment in the U.S. who mostly went food shopping alone also found it difficult or impossible to read labels. Therefore, they recommended that labels should be provided in braille, larger font size or readers of the labels. (Eliza Kostyra et al., 2017) Similarly, persons with disabilities and rehabilitation professionals in the study by Swaine et al. (2014) regarding the facilitators and barriers in shopping mall suggested that prices of the products should be placed where they can be seen easily.

“The problems when I shopped were sometimes I couldn’t find what I want or sometimes I couldn’t read the price tags so I had to look very close. But sometimes there were so many people and I didn’t dare to look so close, especially, products at the bottom shelves – the price tags would be almost on the floor. If I were to bend down to look, I felt embarrassed. I would take a photo and zoom to see...Also, some products were on the high shelves, I couldn’t look very closely.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 23 years old)

This problem of barrier in accessing to information for shoppers with visual impairment did not occur only in general stores shopping but also sometimes on some online shops due to the lack of descriptions of the products posted on the websites. Unlike in the stores where shoppers with visual impairment could touch and feel the size, shape, texture and other details of the products before they made the decision whether or not to purchase the products, photos of the products posted on the online shops meant nothing to shopper with visual impairment unless they were described. This finding was similar to what was found by Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough. (2009) who studied the opportunities for online shoppers with disabilities and reported that consumers with disabilities purchased products or services on the internet less than consumers without disabilities. The researchers suggested that this might due to the fact that consumers with disabilities might experience barriers when attempting to make online purchases, although they may use the Internet to find and evaluate information.

“I used [name of online shop]. It’s quite accessible but I couldn’t see the pictures e.g. a towel – I couldn’t see the design of the towel. But it’s O.K. that there’s a product code for me to call to ask the call centre. I told them I’m blind and asked them to describe the photos for me... [on the web] there’re only product codes, prices,

promotions but not other descriptions of the products such as colours and designs.”

(Shopper with visual impairment, 29 years old)

3.1.3 Physical Environment Accessibilities

When went shopping in a general stores, different shoppers with disabilities would behave differently regardless of their disabilities. For shoppers with visual impairment, the physical environment did not pose as much a barrier as those with physical or mobility impairment. Physical access to the stores such as the width of the aisles, the height of the shelves or stairs in front of the stores caused barriers for the participants with physical or mobility impairment in this study, just as those in other countries. (Jones, Childers, and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006; Baker, Holland and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2007; Swaine et al., 2014) Therefore, participants with physical or mobility impairment indicated they had to ask someone else to buy what they want whereas others would go to certain stores where they could access the stores to shop by themselves.

“Some [convenient store] did not have a ramp. I couldn't access. If I went with my friends, I would ask them to buy for me. But if I was alone, I wouldn't buy and come back to the [convenient store] near my place that had a ramp.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 18 years old)

“...A convenient store in the gas station that had a ramp and even floor where I could wheel inside to shop and choose by myself.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 45 years old)

A participant with physical or mobility impairment did not only choose which stores to go shopping but also chose where she would live because of the stores in that place was accessible and barrier-free for her.

“I could enter [convenient store] because it's big and accessible. This was the reason why I chose to live here although it's quite expensive but it's cheaper than I had to hire personal assistants because I could access a convenient store, restaurants and a laundry by myself.” (Shopper with physical or mobility impairment, 39 years old)

However, different person reacted differently. Some preferred to request for the support service of the sales persons whilst others preferred to walk around the store to select and pick up products themselves. This finding was in accordance with the study of food shopping

experiences of persons with visual impairment by Eliza Kostyra et al. (2017) which found that persons with visual impairment reported that most of the time they shopped alone and did not ask for help from sale staff very much.

“I would walk carefully using my cane because I am the one who liked to touch the products. After I touched then I would ask because if I went to the shop and told the staff I want this and this, I wouldn't know the details.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 29 years old)

Nonetheless, for shoppers with visual impairment. A few participants found convenient stores near their house or workplace too small. They would not dare to walk around by themselves, afraid that they might knock something down and damage the products.

“I asked the salespersons to fetch what I wanted for me because I was afraid if I walked around by myself, I might knock something down.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 63 years old)

The behaviours and needs of shoppers with disabilities were affected by the access and barriers of information, technology and physical environment they interacted with. Different types of disabilities (in this case visual impairment and physical and mobility impairment) faced different types of barriers. Nonetheless, the experiences of shoppers with disabilities experienced in this study; i.e., the physical environment of the stores, the accessibility of information and the services of salespersons, were in consistent with those identified by customers with disabilities in the study by Baker, Holland and Kaufman (Scarborough 2007) who studied the welcoming/unwelcoming experiences of customers with disabilities while shopping in retail stores.

3.2 Support from family, friend and salespersons

3.2.1 Family and Friends

Just as other shoppers, family members and friends had influences towards the decision made to purchase some products by shoppers with disabilities. For example, a blind lady chose to purchase some clothes according to her niece's advice.

“My niece helped me to see...I don't know...sometimes I touched and felt that the fabric was very good, but my niece told me, ‘Auntie, if I said nothing that meant it's not beautiful, but if I cheered that meant it's beautiful.’... Then if I tried the clothes on and she said it looked weird, I wouldn't buy it.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 40 years old)

Results from the interviews with participants in this study showed that while some shoppers with disabilities tried to shop by themselves, others preferred to ask for support from salespersons, families and friends, as well as other customers. This finding was similar to other studies related to the shopping activity of persons with disabilities which found that persons with disabilities shop both alone as well as shop with family, relatives and friends (Burnett, 1996; Kostyra et al., 2017).

“[When chose products] I didn't know what were the brands. Sometimes I had to ask a customer who was nearby...or a salesperson who was around.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 60 years old)

“I sometimes shopped by myself but I must ensure that there wouldn't be anything too heavy otherwise I would have to make an appointment with my younger sister to help me carry.” (Shopper with physical or mobility impairment, 46 years old)

“I used to go shopping with my partner but couldn't buy many things because both of us were disabled. So we bought what we could manage and asked the department store staff to carry things for us to the taxi stand.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 45 years old)

3.2.2 Salespersons

As for salespersons, it was expected that they should be ready to provide services to customers. However, sometimes it was quite difficult to request for their support due to the number of customers in the stores and the shortage of salespersons. As a result, shoppers with disabilities would ask other customers to help, waited until the salespersons finished their services with other customers or went shopping during the time they knew there were

not so many people. These experiences were similar to the experiences of shoppers with visual impairment who did food shopping by Eliza Kostyra et al. (2017) which found that shoppers with visual impairment who shopped alone often had to wait for a long time for help from store employees, particularly where the support from shop assistants was limited. Thus, shopping could become a time-consuming and an irritating experience.

“Many times I went shopping [in the supermarket] and requested for an assistant but many times they did not have enough staff. We needed to understand them. So I tried to shop by myself and asked other customers.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 35 years old)

“I chose to go during daytime because during morning and evening there would be so many customers.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 39 years old)

“I chose... hmmm... this convenient store did not have many customers... their counter turned this way if I wheeled my chair there, they must see me and I would call them. But for the shop that were very crowded, I would sit and wait and ask other customers to help buy what I want for me, but after explaining my situation to them [other customers].” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 42 years old)

In addition, participants in this study reported that many salespersons did not have awareness about persons with disabilities, resulting in the lack of knowledge on how to interact appropriately with customers who had a disability. This finding was in accordance with the study of online retail shopping behaviours of consumers with disabilities in America which found that service personnels were too poorly trained to offer useful assistance. (Jones, Childers and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006) Thus, it was necessary that these salespersons should be trained on how to interact and provide appropriate supports and services to customers with disabilities. Findings of the study about the training of shopping mall employees to improve their knowledge about disabilities and perceived self-confidence in interacting with persons with disabilities indicated that a short 3 hours group training providing knowledge on how to welcome customers with disabilities and a simulation for the employees to feel what it was like to be able to accomplish daily living activities when disabled proved to be effective in increasing knowledge levels and self-confidence of shopping mall employees in interacting with this consumer group. (Rochette, 2017).

“In the beginning, they [salespersons] did not know...I heard they whispered... but after I went there many times, they got to know me...and approach to offer helps.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 29 years old)

“Sometimes I asked them [salespersons] what were these products. They would told me it's this and that, couldn't you see?” (Shopper with visual impairment, 23 years old)

Participants indicated that it took some times for salespersons to get to know them and how to provide them with appropriate support needs. Therefore, many participants reported that they continue to use the same retail stores, partly because that certain stores were close to where they lived or worked and partly because salespersons would remember them, became more at ease and offered support needs.

“The salespersons remembered me. At first, they would tell me where the products were but I told them I couldn't see. Then, they would help me.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 63 years old)

“I would train the salespersons [in the place I live] knew when I come to shop, I would ask them to put the products in my backpack. Then, they would remember every time I come, after I pay for the products, the salespersons would put all the products in my backpack for me.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 39 years old)

A part from providing support in picking up products, these salespersons were the main source of information such as promotions for shoppers with visual impairment.

“They [salespersons] could tell a lot of details and I could ask many questions such as what are the promotions now.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 29 years old)

“Sometimes I didn't know what promotions they had. What these stamps could buy or if I bought this product how many stamps would I get. The old salesperson would tell me all these promotions.” (Shopper with visual impairment, 60 years old)

A few shoppers with physical or mobility impairment indicated that they sometimes had to hire a daily personal assistant to help them shop.

“If sometimes I want to go clothes shopping, I would hire a personal assistant that I knew...for 200-300 Baht to go shopping with me at the [fashion department store]...to try on shoes and clothes.” (Shopper with physical and mobility impairment, 39 years old) These experiences presented in this section were similar to customers with disabilities in the U.S. who also needed support and received different services from different salespersons when they went shopping (Baker, Holland and Kaufman □ Scarborough, 2007); or went out to purchase different services such as in the restaurant (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2002).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Shopping in the daily living was important for the lives of both persons with and without disabilities. Findings presented in this study indicated that the experiences of Thai shoppers with disabilities were similar to shoppers with disabilities in other countries. They still faced barriers that could result in inconveniences and difficulties in shopping. However, many things could be done to improve shoppers with disabilities' experiences in shopping. One important factor was to provide training or educate the service personnels to have awareness and know how to interact and provide service support appropriately to customers who have disabilities. (Baker, Stephens and Hill, 2002; Baker, Holland and Kaufman □ Scarborough, 2007; Rochette, 2017) Moreover, the improvement of access to information in the online shopping and Reducing barriers to access shopping places would allow shoppers with disabilities to be able to shop more independently. This study provided retailers, online and traditional, with experiences, behaviours and needs of a group of consumers whom often not being considered of, in the hope that they would improve their services and access to better include this group of customers.

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