

## Literature Review

### Consumerism, The Marketplace, and Disability Studies

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#### Introduction

In a society that may require marketplace involvement to shape meaning, significance, and value, it is crucial to analyze its strategies to understand how different populations engage with and relate to it. Existing groups, particularly individuals with intellectual disabilities, remain excluded or misrepresented in consumer narratives. There is limited research concerning intellectual disabilities in general thus, this literature review will evaluate existing research regarding the significance of the marketplace and its mechanisms through a disability studies lens with eventual aims to apply it to the intellectual disability population.

#### *The Marketplace & The Consumer(s)*

Within a political economy framework, the marketplace (including consumerism and its devices) can be understood as a driving force in shaping socio-political structures, thus assuming an intrinsic value to the role of the consumer. Across academic disciplines, this is understood to be a feasible and realistic assumption. For the consumer, markets act as an exchange site where individuals can utilize their unique agency to exercise individual choice and control, which correlates with participation in a capitalist society (Bhogal-Nair et al. 514). Moreover, the option of purchase in a capitalist society aids personal autonomy and improvement by providing a landscape where individuals can enhance their human capital, hence empowering consumers (Shankar et al.). In essence, it is theorized that the marketplace permits individuality by providing a platform where consumers can satisfy their individual needs, whether health-related, entertainment, or personal betterment. In the discipline of postmodernism, the marketplace and consumption practices, primarily through evolving technologies, are becoming central to the social construction of identity (Bocock) and control consumers' interests and distastes, constructing societal perceptions (Firat and Venkatesh 254). Additionally, the marketplace has been found to determine definitions of social roles to further its economic goals (Firat & Venkatesh), thus contributing to societal exclusion at large (Bhogal-Nair et al. 519).

Research on the concept of consumer normalcy (Baker) expands the discussion to include how the marketplace defines what it means to be an active consumer and why this is important. Consumer normalcy is a relatively new concept in consumerism research, understood across four key dimensions: marketplace participation, expressing individuality, demonstrating control, and achieving equality (Baker 37). Meeting these four criteria defines what it means to be an active consumer within the marketplace. According to Baker's paper, participation in the marketplace (i.e., shopping) is a critical part of a consumer's daily life (38) and is essential for social involvement. Furthermore, since marketplace engagement is considered a driving force in modern life (Miller et al.), realizing consumer normalcy through marketplace inclusion becomes a sought-after yet standard condition.

*The Disabling Marketplace: The Social Model of Disability & Consumer Vulnerability*

With the notion of consumer normalcy in mind, marginalized groups excluded from the consumer narrative are increasingly being discussed. Growing research turns to the idea of the "disabled marketplace" to examine marketplace exclusivity. This perspective is rooted in the literature concerning the social model of disability and consumer vulnerability. During the 19th century, disability was viewed through a medical model, focusing on individual conditions while overlooking social and environmental influences, which consequently reinforced discrimination and marginalization (Imrie 263). Disability had been understood as an ontological fact about an individual rather than an outcome of constructed social and political positions (Elcessor et al. 5). This approach was reframed through a social constructivist perspective establishing the social model of disability (Finkelstein), which claims that society itself disables impaired individuals (Zainuddin et al. 421). More specifically, as emphasized by further studies, the social model of disability understands disability as a result of social conditions or environmental factors, such as society and market structures or attitudes, which disable individuals as the means for participation are exclusive to specific capabilities (Zajadacz 192). In its evaluation of the market, this social model claims that barriers in the marketplace disable individuals, not an individual's impairment or differing abilities (Higgins et al. 371). This approach has pioneered new frameworks and concepts for evaluating disabilities within a political economy context.

Through the social disability model lens, an increasing body of research regarding disability, marketplace accessibility, and representation has been developed, including the

"Disabling Marketplace" literature (Zainuddin et al. 420). The marketplace is challenging for the disability population to navigate as standards for consumption cater to "the abled-bodied experience"(Bhogal-Nair et al. 518). Several studies have examined how the marketplace is "disabling," for example, narrow shopping aisles affecting individuals with wheelchairs (Scarborough 490), complicated content-heavy websites affecting the visually impaired (Liu et al. 7), and social barriers such as infantilizing and ignoring (Higgins et al. 372). The marketplace is not exclusive due to inherent or intentional discrimination. Instead, as one study found, implementing accessibility is perceived as constraining towards foundational market aims. The efforts towards increasing accessibility may interfere with marketplace priorities at both the micro and macro levels, perpetuating exclusion for consumers with disabilities (Grewal and Sluis 67).

This literature intersects with the emerging term "consumer vulnerability" which refers to the restrictions certain groups face in accessing market environments and controlling vital resources, significantly limiting their ability to participate in the marketplace and subjecting them to the risk of harm (Hill and Sharma 10). Harm induced by consumer vulnerability can be measured in a consumer's adoption of coping strategies, learned helplessness, or feelings of dehumanization, which in turn hinder individual agency and control (Baker et al. 8). Parallel with the consequences of harm, it was observed in capitalist societies, corners of the population who do not contribute to the marketplace may be considered as outsiders and can be marginalized or even criminalized in extreme scenarios (Spitzer 643-646). In relating this term to the "disabling marketplace," barriers in accessing the marketplace would shape forms of consumer vulnerability. While Baker et al. originally stated that consumer vulnerability is typically a temporary condition imposed by the marketplace, in the reality of disability, consumer vulnerability can be a constant condition (Dias de Faria and Moreira Casotti 2247). This shift highlights how the marketplace perpetuates vulnerability for disabled consumers, turning a temporary issue for most into a chronic challenge for those with disabilities.

Consumer vulnerability and the "disabling marketplace" span beyond physical limitations of participation but also encompasses representation through product development, advertising, and other forms of media (Bhogal-Nair et al. 524). The majority of research has been conducted on disability representation in marketing and advertising which symbolize a social or public space that reinforces ideas related to social structure (Kearney et al. 6). Advertisements as

"socio-political artifacts" (Schroeder and Zwick 24) signify conceptions of both the self and society (Kearney et al. 6). Historically, marketing has been found to reinforce stigmas and inequalities that sustain marginalization and obstructive perceptions of the disability population (Dias de Faria and Moreira Casotti 2247) while advertising specifically has represented disability through the spectacle of humor, exaggerated or unrealistic inspiration, or as pity (Timke). Although research acknowledges positive change in this regard, as of literature conducted in 2020, ableism remains prominent in advertising and promotional campaigns (Houston and Haller 1). This could result from marketplace mechanisms promoting ideals as a motivation for increased revenue (Bhogal-Nair et al. 524). Regardless of intention, if the marketplace is representative of broader socioeconomic and political discourse, the revenue incentive may discourage the marketplace from enhancing disability accessibility (Bhogal-Nair et al. 528).

### *Intellectual Disabilities (ID)*

The literature on the intellectual disability (ID) population is notably limited, particularly within the realms of consumer behavior and marketplace research. While there is a growing body of work on consumers with physical disabilities, those with intellectual disabilities remain significantly underrepresented (Dias de Faria and Moreira Casotti 2248). Although the social model of disability serves as a foundation for understanding disability at large, its application to intellectual disabilities is considerably narrow. This may be attributed to the unique and often permanent psychological or cognitive impairments tied to intellectual disabilities, which complicate the notion that only structural or societal barriers are responsible for the marketplace challenges faced by this population (Shakespeare 13-14). This admitted, the social disability model approach is generalized to the ID community, providing a strong base for future discussion.

Social inclusion research is notable in this space as it highlights significant barriers the ID population faces in accessing ingredients of consumption, such as a lack of workplace access, poor literacy, limited community activities, and restricted independence (Abbott and McConkey 281). A large-scale study in the UK involving over 10,000 intellectually disabled youths revealed a strong correlation between intellectual disabilities and poverty (Emerson and Hatton), which further magnifies consumption barriers (McClimens and Hyde 141). Another found barrier unique to this population is their assumed reliance on support staff or family, making it difficult

to analyze their individual consumption patterns and assess them as "passive consumers" (McClimens and Hyde 138). Relating to broader consumerism research, the ID community is constructed "by what they are not, by what they do not do, and by what they cannot afford" (McClimens and Hyde 140-141). With consumption being associated with identity and value, those with IDs may possess incongruences between their aspirations and ability to participate in the marketplace (McClimens and Hyde 137).

Qualitative research (2017) conducted in Brazil stands as the first and only study to explore consumer experiences by directly interviewing individuals with intellectual disabilities, with a specific focus on those with Down Syndrome and their families. The study provides insights into the consumption experiences of this demographic, and all findings place individuals with Down Syndrome as vulnerable consumers (Dias de Faria and Moreira Casotti 2252). Overlapping with the disabled marketplace and consumer vulnerability research, significant barriers interfering with the consumption process were recorded, such as a lack of inclusive products, negative interactions with in-store staff, mobility restrictions, non-inclusive advertising/media, and overall stigma received from co-consumers. Consequently, working and obtaining consumer normalcy was perceived as unattainable (2256). The study also revealed that individuals with Down Syndrome desired autonomy in product choice and demonstrated awareness of advertisements and their societal implications. Television, particularly advertisements, were interpreted through the lens of an "ideal world," where beauty standards and cultural norms were sought after. Additionally, the participants expressed an inclination to purchase products that would enhance their ability to consume independently, driven by a desire for social inclusion and acceptance (2258, 2261). This research fills a significant gap between disability studies, vulnerable consumers, and the general marketplace, and offers several options for future research, such as exploring other intellectual disabilities and the ways market mechanisms relate to this population.

### Conclusion

The research highlighted throughout this literature review demonstrates an evolving discussion around the marketplace and the disability community. However, the term "disability" is often used as an overarching label, which fails to capture the diverse identities and complexities encompassed within it. The vast majority of current research centers on physical

disability. Intellectual disability is frequently overlooked in these discussions, despite their distinct positioning in social and economic challenges. As a result, much of the current literature does not adequately address the unique needs or lived realities of individuals with intellectual disabilities, limiting its relevance and applicability. The studies presented in this review provide a strong foundation for more targeted research that explores the specific experiences of the intellectual disability population. Potential areas of research include, but are not limited to, intellectual disability representation in marketing and media, individuals with intellectual disabilities' perceptions of advertising, and models for intellectual disability consumer engagement.

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