

# When sellers' behaviour goes bad: Linking customer discrimination and customer's visible characteristics

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## Abstract

Do sellers treat their customers differently in the marketplaces of wealthy vicinities in Lahore, Pakistan? This paper details how customer discrimination is linked with customer's visible characteristics, such as: clothing, accessories, age, gender, and other personal attributes. Two studies have been sequentially conducted: observational field study and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The findings support the association of customer's visible characteristics and discriminatory service delivery. Customer discrimination in Pakistan is neither racial nor gender-based; rather, it is associated with wealth, and the formal and modern visible characteristics of the customer. It highlights various forms of discrimination in levels of service delivery including delay, denial, neglect, and differentiated quality of products. It also demonstrates open discrimination against customers, including emotional, psychological, and physical abuse. Standards of business ethics are rarely implemented by retailers in Pakistan because the government exercises no control on the service quality of private retail organisations. International interventions to train the sales staff to be cordial, courteous and cooperative with all people in the shopping centres may improve the quality of customer service delivery in the main cities of the country.

**KEYWORDS:** business ethics, customer discrimination, formal dressing, service delivery, visible customer characteristics

## Introduction

The quality of customer-seller interaction determines the extent of customer satisfaction, ethical standards implementation, and priority service delivery (Donaldson 1986). Customer perceptions and experiences are used as a primary source of assessing the quality

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of customer services (Parrett 2011) and helps devise action plans to improve the standard of retail services (Harris et al. 2010). Customer service refers to the assistance, help, and guidance provided at the time of purchase to facilitate the buyer in order to achieve customer satisfaction (Turban et al. 2002). Sometimes, customers perceive that the services being provided in a marketplace are in favour of a group of customers sharing certain socio-economic attributes (Stead & Zinkhan 1986; Ford 1996); this is known as “customer discrimination”.

The term customer discrimination refers to the neglect, exclusion or differential treatment of an individual or a group of customers in marketplaces because of sharing common characteristics (Hersch 2008). This discrimination can vary in its intensity and forms (Walsh 2009). Klinner and Walsh (2013) delineated the levels in discriminatory service provision as degradation and denial. However, its forms can also be avoidance, refusal, psychological or physical abuse, critical gaze, insulting remarks, and service-related discrepancies in various retail contexts (Feagin 1991; Harris 2003; Rosenbaum & Montoya 2007).

Customer discrimination contradicts the conception of customer-centred services, by denoting the implementation of ethical standards in business and failing to guarantee high-quality services to all customers alike (Klinner & Walsh 2013). In addition to profitability, the concern for ensuring customer-centred service delivery is growing among modern retail organisations in order to fulfil the social requirements of all segments of customers without any discrimination (Basu & Palazzo 2008; Ford 1996). However, the retailers in the main cities of Pakistan are perhaps unfamiliar with their social responsibilities towards customers.

Customers are the very reason for a retail firm to exist and the success of a retail organisation relies on customer satisfaction and retention, which can be achieved if the customers perceive the behaviour of sales staff to be ethical (Roman 2003) and the retail organisation itself a discrimination-free environment for all segments of customers (Walsh 2009). Ethical standards are met when consistent customer services are provided to all (Bojei et al. 2013), while discrimination in service delivery makes firms lose valuable customers. The customers experiencing neglect may never come back to that specific retailer (Hymowitz 2005) which is why such unfair treatment of customers is not done for any objective reason (Plous 2003).

In the major cities of Pakistan, one can easily make numerous observations of security guards sitting at the doorsteps of hotels or luxury shopping malls, opening doors for those who enter, saluting, and welcoming people by saying ‘Sir/Madam.’ This courteous and respectful behaviour is not for all customers. It is reserved for some “special customers” who are helped from the entrance to exit, whose car is parked for them, and whose shopping bags are carried to their car. Likewise, at petrol stations, it can often be observed that a customer in a luxury car is received with greetings and served positively. In contrast, a person riding an economy motorbike and wearing inexpensive clothing is treated poorly by the same sales personnel. The characteristics of “preferred” and “neglected” customer are determined later in this article.

Existing empirical research in business, management, and social psychology indicates discrimination of customers in service delivery (Ainscough & Motley 2000; Walsh 2009). Literature supports the association of discriminatory service provision and visible customer characteristics (Peluchette et al. 2006; Walsh 2010), including clothing (Kahle & Kennedy 1989; Tavormina 1986), race (Ainscough & Motley 2000), wealth (Lloyd & Luk 2010), gender (Peluchette et al. 2006) and age (Ford 1996). Researchers found customer discrimination in diverse retail contexts, including restaurants (Parrett 2011; Rosenbaum & Montoya 2007), departmental stores (Simon et al. 2009; Stead & Zinkhan 1986) and brand outlets (Ainscough & Motley 2000). However, service providers may not necessarily belong or share the characteristics of the group being favoured.

Sales staff assess the economic well-being of a customer by visible characteristics, including clothing, accessories, gender, disability, obesity, age, race, body language, accent and other personality attributes before providing good or bad quality services (Ainscough & Motley 2000; Ford 1996). Studies showed a strong association of being well respected with good clothing (Guttman & Mills 1982; Kahle & Kennedy 1989), making the expensive clothing an expression of status and wealth (Lloyd & Luk 2010). Time-based differentials depict contrasting empirical research on gendered customer discrimination. Stead and Zinkhan (1986) reported perceived inferior service delivery by women, while recent studies demonstrated positive female customer satisfaction with service delivery (Ainscough & Motley 2000).

Unfortunately, the findings of this research are not comparable to any recent empirical study on discriminatory service delivery in elite marketplaces of Pakistan. Hence, the triangulation of study findings is ensured by the use of observational field study and semi-structured interviews in order to understand the linkage of customers' visible characteristics and discriminatory customer service delivery.

## **On the research settings and methods**

This paper is based on a descriptive account of customer discrimination in the novel context of market places in wealthy and prestigious vicinities of Lahore, Pakistan. To address the lack of sufficient literature from Pakistan, this research paper aims at understanding the situations of consumer-seller interaction where seller evaluates a buyer's economic wellbeing from the visible quality of apparel and other personality attributes before providing customer services on a discriminatory basis in marketplaces located in wealthy vicinities of Lahore, Pakistan.

The specific foci of the research are to describe how discriminatory service delivery is related to visible characteristics of customers in marketplaces of Lahore, and to describe the patterns of customer discrimination and consequent emotional reactions of customers.

The methodology of this research has been reviewed and approved by the Institution Review Board, University of the Punjab.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, a sequence of ethnographic studies – observational field study and semi-structured face-to-face interviews – were conducted. Observational field study and informal conversations were carried out in the first phase

of the study. The interview guide for the second phase of the study was prepared using observational data and deductive codes.

To illustrate the type of customers given priority by the sales executives of local and international brands, the photographic material was included as well. The photographs are taken in contexts similar to those of the research settings of this study. The “rich customer” is one who shops regularly, shows modern, formal and wealthy-seeming visible characteristics, higher familiarity with the environment, and knows the product well (Slapian et al. 2015). In contrast, the “ordinary customer” has a very low frequency of visiting marketplaces of wealthy vicinities, shows inexpensive visible characteristics, and is uncomfortable with the environment. The sampling and data collection process was emergent as the data guided where and whom to sample next. The data collection continued until saturation and thematic analysis is used for data analysis.

### ***Observational field study***

The observational study was carried out to record incidents of discrimination in its natural flow. The group of interest were the people who often, usually, or routinely afford to visit departmental stores, brand outlets, luxury shopping centres, bazaars, beauty salons, restaurants, and petrol stations. Over the period of one year, we recorded 478 incidents of customer discrimination and priority service provision. The observational field study (began on 5th May, 2012 and ended on 23rd May, 2013) was conducted in 16 selected retailers.

Two researchers carried out observations as customers in the evening rush hours (between 4 PM to 10 PM). In departmental stores, we acted as shoppers and interacted with the sales staff on cash counters. The customers chose products to buy from the shelves and sought the help of sales executives available in different sections of the store. The amount of purchase and the visible characteristics of the researches were changed on every visit in order to reflect different socio-economic statuses. In restaurants, the researchers sat near the billing-and-order placing counter, and could easily observe and listen to the customers and sales executives. The observations were recorded immediately afterwards.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

The research settings of observational field study were used to identify research participants for Study 2 – the semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of 144 customers was approached when exiting in the parking areas. The researchers presented a brief introduction of the study objectives and sought the consent of willing customers for participation. The interviews were conducted at times and places suitable for the participants. Each semi-structured interview spanned from 20 to 40 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded with informed consent. Ethical considerations were ensured throughout the data collection. In the situations in which recording was not possible the researchers took notes immediately. Reflexivity was addressed in order to minimise the effects of research and researcher on the study participants. The females in the shopping centres and beauty salons were interviewed by a female researcher while a male researcher talked to men.

## **Interview guide**

The interview guide comprised questions regarding the profile of the customer, general questions on customer discrimination and key questions. Introductory questions sought the profile and social status information of customers. The researchers asked if the customer had seen sales staff offering priority services to the customers with wealthy and modern apparel. A selected story of customer discrimination observed in field study was told so that respondent may recall any similar incident they may have observed. Also, the respondents were asked to share their views and experiences regarding priority service. Later, they were asked if they themselves had experienced such discrimination or not.

## **Observations**

On 17<sup>th</sup> July 2012, the researchers dressed as customers with ordinary visible characteristics and went to a brand outlet of ladies shoes and accessories situated in Liberty Market, Gulberg Lahore with the purpose of observation. Most of the people go out for shopping in the evenings, especially during summer. We entered the store as ordinary-appearing customers (See Figure 2 and 3). The guard sitting at the doorstep kept sitting holding his gun and did not open the door for the researchers.

During the selection of shoes from the racks, researchers observed the customers and sales staff interacting. In the meantime, a young lady entered the shop with a female child and a female domestic servant. The lady wore modern and stylish clothing with neatly styled, red streaked hair, impressive fragrance, and a branded handbag. This time, the security guard rushed to open the door as he saw them coming from the glass door of the shop.

Within a short time, she became the centre of attention for all the sales executives, as she spoke in English to her daughter. Two salesmen stopped responding to the customers they were attending previously. All other sales staff quickly approached her to serve and humbly welcomed her. The salesman serving the researchers also went away to bring shoes for the lady. The researchers could easily record the observations. She spoke to a salesman in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan, which is a co-medium of instruction in the education sector and considered as a sign of urbane manners) and ordered him to bring shoes that fit her daughter's feet. One salesman sat down to help the child try on the shoes. The rest of the salesmen stood at a distance and observed the whole act. The domestic worker looked humble and stood behind the lady. The lady made her daughter try all the shoes on the shelves and bought three pairs. When the other customers realised that no one was attending them, they also started looking at that lady and her shopping. The service providers warmly welcomed the trouble of bringing many shoes for her.

In many other situations when a customer with ordinary visible characteristics ordered the sales staff to take out all available shoes for trial, the staff would give harsh looks to make them go away and would not help their child. Similarly, at petrol stations located in elite vicinities, the researchers observed many incidents of customer discrimination. The security guards sat beside the entrance door wearing dark blue uniforms with badges on their shoulders, holding a gun in one hand and opening the door for some customers. An hour-long observation from a safe distance demonstrated the class of custom-

ers being privileged. The researchers wore both the wealthy-seeming and ordinary clothes in order to observe the behaviour of guards on various occasions.

In parking places and fuel stations, customers on small or old cars/motorbikes, with small amounts of money in their wallets and not holding an expensive phone in hand were poorly welcomed and served by the sales staff. At petrol stations, we observed a case of an ordinary-looking student riding a motorbike who drove to the tuck shop associated with the petrol pump after getting fuel on a summer evening. He was carrying books and seemed to be coming back from university. He parked his bike in front of the tuck shop's door. The security guard of the petrol pump was sitting by the door and shouted at the boy: 'Parking is not allowed in front of the shop's door take it somewhere else right now.' The boy replied: 'I'll get a bottle of water in a minute... I am not feeling well... it's headache... please, just a minute.' The security guard became hostile and insulted the customer. The boy took the bike away and then walked into the shop. Meanwhile, a luxury car came and was parked at the same place in front of the door. This time security guard kept silent. The man in that car appeared rich. He went into the shop and made purchases without any disturbance.

The service providers in parking lots provide tokens for the car park and help people guide their cars out on leaving. It was observed that they helped the people in luxury cars in a careful and respectable manner. Similarly, men working at parking spaces (of various restaurants and shopping centres) voluntarily opened the door of luxury cars only for seemingly rich ladies. The majority of them spoke in the Punjabi language for dealing with people in old and small cars. They used what is perceived as a civilised style of speech (in Urdu most of the time), and hand movement was careful when they were serving the people in luxury cars and modern attire. When it came to choosing among two or more cars for taking them out of the parking space, their priority was big, new, or luxury cars.

For all incidents, careful notes were made without letting the people know that they were being observed. The number of customer discrimination observations were recorded to be the highest in brand outlets. In Pakistan, national brands for clothing and accessories are approached by elite and upper-middle-class customers with varying frequency of visits (See Table 2). In contrast, the international brands with few outlets across the country are mostly visited by elite class customers perhaps because of the price of the product and familiarity of the brand.

## **Participants**

### ***Social demographic characteristics of participants***

Data on the social and demographic profile of 144 purposively selected customers was recorded. Details presented in Table 1 demonstrate that most of the participants were aged from 18 to 35. The researchers recorded the experiences and opinions of customers from all age groups. Only a few of the participants completed less than the secondary level education. However most of the respondents were highly educated. Overall, 60 participants completed higher secondary education and 49 attained different levels of university education. Family income in most cases was above 60,000 Pakistani rupees (€ 500 EUR).

Among 144 subjects, 93 were urban residents. The number of females exceeded male counterpart who participated in this study.

*Table 1: Sample Demographic Characteristics (N=144)*

Characteristics	Frequency
<b>Age</b>	
Minors (less than 18)	9
18 to 35	73
36 to 60	48
61 and above	14
<b>Education level completed</b>	
Illiterate	2
Primary	3
Middle	8
Secondary	22
Higher secondary	60
University <sup>1</sup>	49
<b>Household Income <sup>2</sup></b>	
Less than 10,000	11
10,000 - 25,000	24
25,000 < 60,000	43
60,000 and above	66
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	64
Female	79
<b>Place of residence</b>	
Urban	93
Rural	51
<b>Agree to the incidence of PSD <sup>3</sup> in markets of posh localities?</b>	
Yes	136
No	8

<sup>1</sup> inclusive of undergraduate, graduates, post graduates  
<sup>2</sup> income is in PRs. US 1 \$= 101.79 PRs.  
<sup>3</sup> priority service delivery

## Visible customer characteristics

The thematic analysis generated two distinct categories of customers: rich customers with visible characteristics indicating wealth, and ordinary customers with common visible characteristics (see Table 2). The perceived rich customer frequents the expensive and prestigious marketplaces and shows formal, modern and wealthy-seeming personality attributes. In contrast, the ordinary customer shows an informal, traditional and common people like personal attributes with rare visits to expensive and prestigious marketplaces. This unusual visiting frequency is associated with unease, confusion and trouble faced by ordinary-appearing customers. The lack of confidence evident in body language and facial expressions helps the service providers to provide unfavourable services and guidance while openly discriminating against ordinary customers.

Qualitative inquiries revealed that the sales staff, waiters, beauticians, parking valets and security guards in luxury shopping centres, hotels, beauty salons and fuel sta-

tions in expensive and prestigious localities of Lahore city treated luxuriously dressed customers in a friendly manner. Most of the participants confirmed that if they were not dressed expensively, the service providers and shopkeepers would not serve them appropriately. Almost all the women participants reported that seemingly rich and modern women were given preference over the rest (Lloyd & Luk 2010). However, women got priority over men in all kinds of retail situations (see Table 3).

Table 2: Classification of customers and visible characteristics

Categories and related inductive codes								
Segregation of customers	Clothing & accessories	Personality	Language / accent	Rural / urban background	Knowledge of product	Acquaintance with environment	Domestic servants	Motor vehicle/ car
Customer with wealthy visible characteristics	Modern Western Fashionable Expensive New Brand Designer	Bold Impressive Awe-inspiring Arrogant Confident Authoritative Carefree Assertive	English Mix of Urdu and English Urban accent	Urbane Rich influential rural landlords	High	Easy Routine Comfortable Habitual	Guards Gunmen Governess Driver Housemaid	Luxury New Dirt free
Customer with ordinary visible characteristics	Inappropriate Inexpensive Simple Common	Unattractive Ordinary Shy Hesitant Confused Humble Uncertain	Local language in typical accent	Referred as 'paindu' (villager)	Low	Awkward Confusing Mystifying Unusual	None	Small Old Dirty

Table 3: Customer discrimination, priority service and level of service

	Level of service	Priority service/ Open discrimination
Customer with wealthy visible characteristics	Advantaged Good service VIP treatment Quick service Help willingly Advice Serve the best	Approval Friendly speech Humble Respectful Responsive
Customer with ordinary visible characteristics	Discriminated Poor services Bad treatment Long waiting time Unwilling to help Denial to serve Unenthusiastic Degrading and insulting language Disrespectful	Critical gaze Hostile speech Rude Insulting remarks Avoidance Humiliation



Much research has regarded clothing as the basic trait used to judge an individual's personality (Kahle & Kennedy 1989; Tavormina 1986) since clothing is perceived to be the symbolic representation of one's social identity (Inglessis 2008). The observational field study and semi-structured interviews identified fashionable, branded, expensive, new, Western, and modern as basic elements defining impressive dressing associated with the upper class. A man (aged 37) said: 'Salesmen respect the expensive dress one wears, not the person himself ... all the respect one gets is for the wealth that a person has to show with an awe-inspiring attitude.'

Branded national dress for both men and women depicts good economic status and impresses the salesmen. The formal dressing that is mainly modern and Western does not reveal only a high social status but also indicates respectable and higher professions, such as bankers, doctors, engineers, civil servants, and professors. It is noteworthy that in Pakistan, the professions are associated with various levels of respect. Higher income and top service level jobs are associated with higher social acceptability and respect. Consequently, the men in Western two-piece suits or branded clothing were given preference over men in national dress (shalwar kamiz). Most of the respondents told that the national dress of Pakistan is a symbol of 'ordinary and common people' and sales executives gave priority to men in Western clothing. A young man (23-years old) said:

When you wear branded clothes, carry new, expensive and unique accessories like ... branded wrist watch, sunglasses, purse, and mobile phone ... talk and walk arrogantly ... the sales executives in posh marketplaces and restaurants give you a VIP-like treatment ... the person who looks like confused and a first timer is in trouble.... This is very common in our society ... there should be any way through which your wealth and status are projected before the people serving you in big places ... they will talk politely ... would help you...

## **Gender**

Women wearing modern designer outfits were served respectably by the salesmen. In contrast simple, inexpensive, ordinarily dressed women (three-piece printed suits with the typical style of kamiz, shalwar and doptata) were treated in an unfavourable manner. Carrying expensive and branded handbags, cell phones, jewellery, and other accessories complimented the attire. Hence, the more expensive one appeared the more respectable was the treatment given by the service providers (See Figure 1):

We have to dress up properly ... according to the latest fashion when going to grand hotels, shopping centres, and beauty salons ... so we get respectable treatment ... I have seen many times that the fashionable and modern women are warmly welcomed by waiters and other service providers in places to eat ... and the ones who look wealthy don't have a long waiting time (Female, 27).

In contrast to men, women are reported to be more positively served (Ford 1996). However, when all customers are women, the most expensively dressed woman

is preferred over others. Female (age 44) said: ‘In a rush, the salesmen attend the stylish and modern women first. ... We are simple ... are not bold and confident like them ... for this we face neglect.’

### ***Knowledge of the product***

Knowledge about the product or services, previous experience of usage, and expressions of being used to the luxurious environment significantly determined the worth of a customer. Highly aware customers were positively served in fixed and negotiable price contexts, irrespective of the amount of their purchase.

### ***Ru’b: an awe-inspiring presence that frightens and displays rank or dignity***

Ru’b is an impression of awe-inspiring personality that generates fear among low-status people and inherits a power of controlling others’ behaviour. It is usually associated with elites and is depicted through wealth, attitude, body language, gait, dressing and overall personality in the context of Pakistan. A wealthy personality has an inherent power that makes lower-middle and lower classes consciously and unconsciously reserve respectable treatment on a priority basis for their seeming rich. It is important to note here that the sales staff, waiters, security guards and other service providers at shopping centres, fuel pumps, and parking lots come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but do not respect the customer of similar status. This concept was frequently mentioned by the respondents. The rich, modern, Western, and expensive visible characteristics of a customer have an element of Ru’b that attracts sales staff and gets priority services.

### ***Language, eye contact, and confidence***

Dressed in expensive and modern outfits with sophisticated mannerisms, and speaking the English language, a customer, especially a woman, gets priority over all others. Similarly, the national language Urdu is preferred over speaking Punjabi (provincial language). Modern women are confident, speak loudly and assertively, which compels salesmen to serve them before others. The ordinary-appearing women frequently regarded eye contact, bluntness, and confidence as personality traits of rich and modern women.

### ***Domestic servant***

In Pakistan, rich women frequently take their domestic servants with them when shopping to carry items and care for the children. Such women are positively welcomed by almost all sales executives.

### ***Rural appearance***

The customer with an urban background is preferred over the ones with a rural appearance, unless the paindu (villager) appears to be an influential person of the village. The rural background is assessed according to speaking the Punjabi language with a typical

accent, wearing outdated and conventional shalwar kamiz (national dress of Pakistan for men and women) and with no grooming or urbanised manners. If a seemingly rural person rides a big luxurious car, has a servant or driver with him and carries weapons for security, he is respected like a VIP in service provision.

## **Age**

Young women are served on a priority basis, in contrast to all men and women of other ages. However, the selection criterion is not always age; rather, it is the expensiveness of a customer's visible characteristics that influence the salesman. Elderly customers are not offered the privilege to have their shopping bags carried to the car or having the door opened for them. Previously, helping the aged was highly valued in Pakistani culture. However, wealth is the most privileged criterion today. Children are also not positively viewed in luxury markets. A woman said that her son feels it as a 'threat to his ego' because the shopkeepers do not attend him when he goes to the shop with little cash in hand.

## **Conservative and secular orientations**

A few respondents with conservative ideologies said that they prefer sadgi (meaning simplicity in dressing and lifestyle) and considered luxurious appearance to be a symbol of self-glorification. The majority of such respondents reported that they were not positively treated in luxury market places.

## **Priority service delivery and customer discrimination**

Almost all of the respondents shared similar experiences in this regard. They said that the salesmen at different fuel pumps behaved appropriately with people on new and luxury cars making large amounts of purchases. Greetings bracketed with 'sir' are also reserved for rich customers. A student (male 21) said: 'You have to be ready to insult the service provider before he thinks you are an ordinary person and insults you.'

Customers with modern and seemingly wealthy visible attributes were served in short time and offered good quality products irrespective of the amount of purchase. On the contrary, the ordinary looking customers experienced delayed service provision (see Table 4). Salesmen tried to get rid of ordinary-looking customers and were unwilling to help, guide and show them good quality products (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Seller's attitude towards customers with modern and seemingly wealthy visible attributes may be regarded as friendly, dutiful, submissive, helpful, committed and modest. In contrast, customers with ordinary characteristics faced open discrimination by the sales staff that can be characterised as offensive with rude behaviour and insulting remarks in the presence of others.

Table 4: Percentage of Customers' experiencing priority service delivery

Quality of visible characteristics	Patterns of customer experiences	Extent of reportage
Wealth	Rich customer is preferred over all others in most of the retail situations taking place in giant retail organizations located in high-class areas of Lahore city.	94%
	Wealth is the most important aspect of customer that is judged by the salesmen to distinguish between customers and adopt discriminatory behaviours.	93%
Gender	When customers of both genders are present, the salesmen give priority to women.	89%
	In all women customers, the most rich and modern woman is served first.	91%
	In girls wealthy appearing customer is respected, irrespective of the nature of purchase.	94%
Age	Age is not associated with priority service provision.	94%
Nature of purchase	The customer with big amount of purchase is sometimes respected.	60%
Dressing	In a queue of men, man in English formal dress is preferred over all others wearing national dress	80%

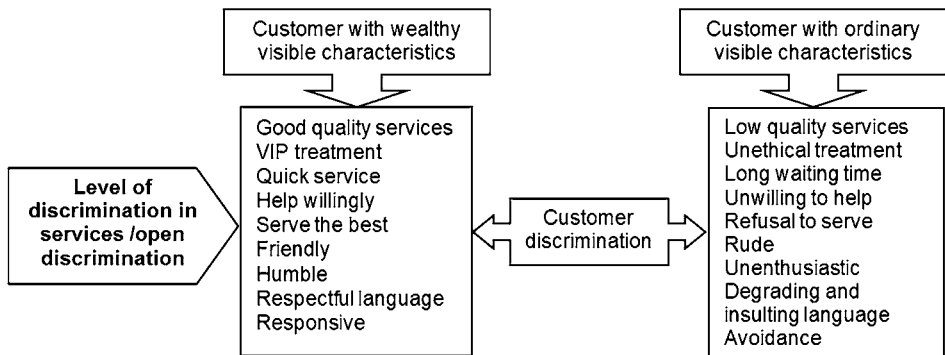


Figure 1: Classification of customer and forms of discrimination in service delivery

### Consequences of customer discrimination

Discriminatory retail service delivery affects customers' self-presentation in retail situations (Tseñlon 1992). High social acceptability associated with wealthy-seeming appearance is forcing individuals of diverse educational and occupational attributes and ideologies to modify their apparel style in order to obtain respectful treatment in marketplaces. The individuals who otherwise consider formal dress as a waste of time and prefer to show with implicit personality attributes in markets where they are unknown to the people in the crowd, do feel compelled to dress formally when visiting luxury retailers (See Table 5).

*Table 5: Consequences / emotional responses to customer discrimination  
 (codes of observations and interviews)*

Helplessness	Prompt response	Never come again	Show wealthy visible characteristics
Weeping	Negative words	No reaction	Adopt modern apparel
Frustration	Stay calm	Never mind	Resist change and hate lifestyle of advantaged group

In the words of a respondent (male, 39): ‘The simple-appearing people are highly disrespected in Pakistani society. It seems obligatory that people modify their dressing patterns with modern ones... to ... get acceptance and respectable treatment in marketplaces.’

Snyder (1974) regarded “self-monitoring” as the tendency to control the impression of the self. Extending upon this construct, Kim and Johnson (2010) distinguished a high self-monitor as a person who modifies behaviour to look appropriate in a certain situation and have a higher probability of coming back to the markets. In contrast, low self-monitors are weak in this tendency of modifying behaviour and prefer to keep their personal attributes.



*Figure 2: Sales representative guiding a customer in a department store in Lahore*



*Figure 3: Sales associate dealing with a rich and modern female customer in a brand outlet for home accessories*

Research participants and observational data demonstrated various emotional reactions to perceived discrimination in marketplaces, such as helplessness, frustration, disadvantaged, prompt responses, no reaction, reluctance to return to the marketplace, or return with rich and modern visible characteristics (Matthews 2006; Walker & Smith 2002). In an extreme case of discrimination, a female customer started weeping and ran out of the shopping centre after being insulted by a retailer. Prompt responses reported by the study participants were immediate negative reactions or patience. Alternatively, some people said that they never bother about the behaviour of sales staff, as they rarely visit marketplaces in wealthy and prestigious localities.

## **In conclusion**

The findings of the sequential study support the association between visible customer characteristics and discriminatory service delivery. Researchers found evidence of customer discrimination in all research settings: restaurants, beauty salons, luxury shopping malls, brand outlets, petrol stations, department stores and bazaars in wealthy and prestigious vicinities of Lahore. The customers who frequented elite marketplaces rarely and showed ordinary visible characteristics did experience discrimination by salesmen while the customers appearing wealthy, modern and formal were preferred.

Data analysis demonstrated two forms of customer discrimination: open discrimination (cf. Harris 2003; Rosenbaum & Montoya 2007) and discrepancies in the level of services (cf. Walsh 2009). Discrimination in levels of service included degradation, poor quality products, longer waiting time to be served, unenthusiastic serving, use of abusive language, and refusal to serve. Open discrimination against customers included psychological, emotional, and physical abuse.

People perceive that their social status is embedded in what they wear and show in the public domain (Arnold & Chapman 1992). Empirical research showed that the visible characteristics (attire, gender, age, status, accessories, knowledge of the product, and race) were assessed for developing an idea of customer's wellbeing before providing discriminatory services (cf. Goldsmith et al. 1990; Wise 1974). Some context-specific attributes such as language, presence of domestic servant, rural background, and attitude of ru'b were also frequently reported by the participants of this study.

Moreover, the economic status of a customer was assessed by the visible characteristics in order to determine the quality of service provision (cf. Chang, Hodges & Yurchisin 2014). In short, the customers characterised as rich were formally dressed, which was meant to obtain respect and acceptance in society (cf. Slepian et al. 2015). Formal dressing indicated social distance and a work status of modern institutions. In contrast, the casual style was associated with familiarity (cf. Lukavsky, Butler & Harden 1995). The attitude of rich customers could be characterised as authoritative, disrespectful, assertive, and rude towards the sales staff.

Managerial control is negligible in the business firms of developing countries, which is paramount in determining standardised customer service delivery (Boing, Nygaard & Silkoset 2010). In Pakistan, where government has no control over the internal environment and quality of services provided business organisers should discourage the shirking and irresponsible staff. Employees should be trained to provide depersonalised and ethical service to all, irrespective of the inconvenience a customer may inflict by returning or exchanging goods, taking longer time in deciding, or making no purchase at all (Gountas & Gountas 2007). A senior marketing official of a local brand told the researchers:

No matter the sales staff come from low-income families with secondary level education completed in most of the cases, we train them well to be able to provide services in line with the needs of customers coming from elite class. In Pakistan, branded clothing and accessories are mainly demanded by elites so their retention is a key focus of the marketing departments of all brands in the country.

This approach needs to be changed to incorporate the ethical standards of service delivery and accommodate respect for all customers alike (Hymowitz 2005). Making environments friendly for all may boost the sales and reduce the level of hesitation among customers who rarely shop in prestigious vicinities of the major cities. A middle-aged customer who works as a bank manager reported:

Respect in our society is not on what one achieved with personal ability ... The standard is not our education ... mannerism or simplicity.... What is respected by the people is good and expensive clothes, rich-like attitude, expression of power and showing off ... so to get respect in big markets I try to dress up appropriately and use an authoritative tone when communicating with the sales representatives ... Otherwise, they assume you are nothing and take you for granted.

Staff should be encouraged to build social relationships also with customers who are low self-monitors (Kim & Johnson 2010; Snyder, Gangestad & Simpson 1983). In the present research, researchers found that most of the customers who participated were high self-monitors. On the realisation of being discriminated against in the prestigious markets, customers reported having changed their dressing style to look appropriate and get a respectable treatment by the salesmen (Matthews 2006). In contrast, the customers who were low self-monitors avoided visiting elite-class marketplaces (cf. Snyder 1974). International retail organisations conduct personality assessment tests to hire customer-oriented sales staff (Javalgi et al. 2006; Saxe & Weitz 1982). Investing time in stable and permanent customers seems a sensible decision but to acquire new customers, firms should meet the ethical challenges as well (Ligas 2004).

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## **Povzetek**

Ali prodajalci na tržnicah bogatejših sosesk v pakistanskem Lahoreju obravnavajo svoje stranke različno? Prispevek opisuje, kako je diskriminacija strank povezana z njihovimi vidnimi značilnostmi kot so oblačila, dodatki, starost, spol in druge lastnosti. Zaporredno sta bili izvedeni dve študiji, opazovanje z udeležbo in polstrukturiran intervju. Ugotovitve potrjujejo povezanost vidnih značilnosti kupca in diskriminatorno zagotavljanje storitev prodajalcev. Diskriminacija strank v Pakistanu ni niti rasna niti spolna, ampak je bolj povezana z bogastvom ter formalnimi ali modernimi vidnimi značilnostmi kupca. Prispevek analizira različne oblike diskriminacije na ravni zagotavljanja storitev, vključno z zavlačevanjem, zanikanjem, zanemarjanjem in diferencirano kakovostjo izdelkov. Kaže tudi na odprto diskriminacijo strank, vključno s čustveno, psihično in telesno zlorabo. Trgovci v Pakistanu le redko vpeljujejo standarde poslovne etike, saj vlada ne izvaja nadzora nad kakovostjo storitev zasebnih podjetij. Mednarodne intervencije za usposabljanje prodajnega osebja z vidika prijaznosti, vljudnosti in sodelovanja z vsemi ljudmi v nakupovalnih centrih bi lahko izboljšale kakovost zagotavljanja storitev za stranke v glavnih mestih v državi.

**Ključne besede:** poslovna etika, diskriminacija strank, formalno oblačenje, zagotavljanje storitev, vidne značilnosti strank

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