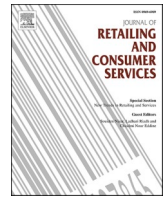




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From overt to covert: Exploring discrimination against homosexual consumers in retail stores

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ABSTRACT

This research examines discrimination against homosexual consumers in several stores located in a Colombian shopping mall. Further, this research assesses retail conditions in Colombia, which is dealing with conflicts arising from issues related to its legalization of same-sex marriage. In the past, homosexual consumers experienced overt discrimination from retail employees typically in the form of finger pointing, negative stares, laughing, and refusal of service. This research reveals that overt discrimination against homosexual consumers seems to have abated across several indices, primarily in terms of waiting time for assistance from employees. The data reveal that gay male and lesbian couples remain susceptible to covert discrimination by retail employees, compared with their heterosexual counterparts, typically in the form of negative glances, refusal of service, and laughter. This research reveals that homosexual consumers may not realize the full value potential of marketplace exchanges, despite the waning of overt discriminatory practices by retail employees.

1. Introduction

Fisk et al. (2018, p. 835) coined the term “service inclusion” to describe an “egalitarian system that provides customers with fair access to a service, fair treatment during a service, and fair opportunity to exit a service.” Although many retailers and employees endeavor to provide customers with quality services (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 2018), quite often, many customers experience inferior service. That is, many consumers who enter marketplaces with disabilities, stigmatized conditions, same-sex partners, or alone often fail to obtain the maximum value inherent in marketplace exchanges (Bianchi, 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

Despite the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in June 2015, as well as in several other countries, many homosexual consumers still report confronting discrimination in retail outlets. For example, Minton et al. (2017) note that some gay male and lesbian consumers experience exclusionary practices, as some bakeries, florists, and photographers often refuse to provide them with services. Although courts in several U.S. states are weighing the legality of service providers’ right of refusal based on religious doctrines and fundamentalism (Minton et al., 2017), many homosexual consumers remain at risk for experiencing exclusionary practices from service providers despite equal

rights protection from governmental institutions.

However, in general, academic investigations into homosexual marketplace discrimination outside the United States and Western Europe are non-existent. This is unfortunate because Latin America is currently at the forefront of the expansion of rights for homosexuals and same-sex couples (Corrales, 2020; Dion and Díez, 2017). That is, same-sex marriage is now legal in five South American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Guiana, and Uruguay. Despite the liberalization of these governments’ social policies toward homosexuals, however, a conservative backlash, fueled by Evangelical and Pentecostal religious leaders and organizations, continues to threaten the progress of LGBT rights and policies throughout Latin America (Corrales, 2020). Further, a research void exists into how the divide between governmental liberalization and religious conservatism may affect homosexual consumers in Latin America, as their achievements in equality rights may lose ground during their interactions with retail employees. Thus, by exploring how homosexual Colombian consumers experience service in retail outlets and unpacking their sources of disadvantage, which can then potentially be addressed and corrected, this article contributes to the transformative service research paradigm by attempting to improve consumer welfare (Ostrom et al., 2015).

This research breaks new ground in the retailing domain by

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exploring discrimination against homosexual consumers in a Colombian shopping mall. As noted, Colombia legalized same-sex marriage in 2016 (Wilson and Gianella-Malca, 2019); however, the country continues to contend with conflicts between gay rights and morality issues arising primarily from religious organizations (Dion and Díez, 2017). Thus, this article explores the extent to which gay male and lesbian couples receive equal service treatment by retail employees in stores located in a Colombian mall. Further, the buying power of the homosexual and non-binary consumer market in the United States is estimated to be more than \$1 trillion (Schneider and Auten, 2018). This figure is even larger when including global locales. Therefore, the gay and lesbian market is too lucrative for retail organizations to ignore. Management must understand the homosexual experience in their retail outlets and strive for inclusivity and equality (Boyd et al., 2020).

The plan for this article is as follows: First, we discuss the history of homosexual discrimination in retail outlets to unpack its longevity and resultant impact on gay consumers, including physical violence and death. It is important to note that historical evidence of homosexual consumers outside the United States is sparse and that most homosexual consumer studies focus solely on gay men rather than also considering lesbians (Ro and Olsen, 2020). Second, we turn attention to discussing the state of gay rights in Colombia and to understanding cross-cultural differences between the United States and Colombia. Third, we put forth research questions based on Walters and Curran's (1996) study and empirically explore service experiences, such as customer wait time and customers' perceptions of employee assistance, employee's comfort level during the transaction, and their overall shopping experience, among Colombian gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual couples in retail stores. We conclude with theoretical and managerial implications and research limitations.

2. Understanding marketplace discrimination against homosexuals

Beyond recent examinations of exclusionary practices associated with events such as gay weddings (Minton et al., 2017) and transgender issues related to restroom access (McKeage et al., 2018), by and large, academic research investigations into discrimination experienced by homosexuals consumers in retail outlets was non-existent in the past decade, despite recent popular press stories about newsworthy flare-ups. That is, at the end of the 1990s, researchers began discussing the unfairness that homosexuals often confronted in retail stores. In their definitive study, Walters and Curran (1996) showed that employees were significantly less responsive to assisting gay male and lesbian couples than heterosexual couples. They explored how long heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples needed to wait for assistance or for acknowledgment from sales associates in 20 different retail settings. They found that the average time for employees to approach lesbian couples was 4.18 min, 3.51 min for gay male couples, and 1.22 min for heterosexual couples. Walters and Curran also found that homosexual couples were often recipients of covert forms of discrimination from employees, which included behaviors such as staring, laughter, pointing, indirect discussions, and rudeness. None of the study's heterosexual couples reported confronting such bias during their experiences in the same retail outlets. In addition, the study revealed that some store managers were oblivious to or overlooked the blatant delivery of poor service (e.g., extending wait times, lack of responsiveness, and ridiculing) that their employees provided to same-sex couples.

In a follow-up study, Walters and Moore (2002) concluded that retail employees and store management often disregard an organization's commitment to equal treatment among all customers and deliberately fail to adequately serve homosexual customers fairly. Indeed, exclusionary practices toward homosexual consumers were so widespread in the marketplace at the beginning of the millennium that gay male consumers purposefully sought out welcoming service establishments by looking for accepting social (e.g., gay employees) and physical (e.g.,

rainbow flag) symbols (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007).

Since the new millennium, a growing number of countries in North America, South America, Western Europe, and Asia have legalized same-sex marriage (Masci and Desilver, 2019). Yet, despite receiving equal rights, many homosexual consumers who reside in countries that have legalized same-sex marriage continue to perceive marketplace discrimination. For example, Ro and Olson (2020) found that many gay men and lesbian consumers sense hostility in hospitality settings while few heterosexual consumers report being victims of marketplace discrimination. We speculate that these feelings of being unwelcome in retail contexts that have instilled gay rights may stem not from overt frontline employee behaviors, such as refusal of service, but rather from more covert frontline employee behaviors that encourage homosexual consumers to take their business elsewhere. In the following sections, we turn attention to exploring homosexual consumers' marketplace experiences in the U.S. and in Colombia.

2.1. The U.S. Perspective

The U.S. marketplace has never truly been welcoming to all consumers, especially those who enter with socially stigmatizing attributes. Studies show that small retailers, fast-food restaurants, and gasoline stations often do not abide by the mandated operational procedures of the Americans with Disabilities Act, failing to design physical facilities that accommodate customers with disabilities (Edwards et al., 2018; Fisk et al., 2018). Other investigations show that some retail employees may ignore corporate human resources policies that promote inclusivity by lodging verbal insults at customers, refusing to provide service to customers (Anderson et al., 2013; Fisk et al., 2018), or engaging in food adulteration tactics that may be injurious to a customer's health. Today, many U.S. court systems are debating whether retailers can legally refuse to serve homosexual customers. For example, recent U.S. court cases suggest that though retailers must serve homosexual customers, they can legally deny their requests for customized services (e.g., messages on a wedding cake; Ibarra, 2020).

Marketplace discrimination against homosexuals, especially in bars and restaurants, has existed in the United States since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of urbanism (Aldrich, 2004). Indeed, the concentration of many men in port cities (e.g., New York City, San Francisco, Seattle) after World War II led many bars and dinner clubs that catered to homosexuals to flourish (Branchik, 2002). However, homosexual customers remained at risk of experiencing police raids and arrests through the 1960s (Poindexter, 1997), as U.S. states did not begin decriminalizing homosexuality until 1961 (Carter, 2009).

Beginning in the 1970s, many U.S. companies began to realize the spending potential of the homosexual market and began targeting gay and lesbian consumers (Branchik, 2002). Although the rise of HIV/AIDs in the 1980s caused many U.S. corporations to reduce their marketing initiatives to homosexual consumers (Bérubé, 2003; Branchik, 2002), by the 1990s, the positive outlook on HIV/AIDs rejuvenated the gay community, encouraging corporations to pursue the "queer dollar" (Ginder and Byun, 2015, p. 821) in advertising and film (McLaughlin and Rodriguez, 2017).

As the 20th century came to an end, U.S. states were beginning to recognize same-sex civil unions, and in 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized in all 50 states. Yet, despite receiving legal equality from the governments, homosexuals continue to be victims of hate crimes and to experience discrimination in retail outlets (Walters and Curran, 1996). The violent murder of Matthew Shepard, outside a local bar in Wyoming in 1998, attests to the reality that though homosexuals have been granted legal rights from local, state, and federal governmental institutions, many in the populace retain negative attitudes toward homosexuality that often manifests in verbal and physical attacks on homosexuals in retail settings.

2.2. The Colombian perspective

Although homosexuals in Colombia have received legal protections from the government, they remain susceptible to social (e.g., families, co-workers) and institutional (e.g., health care, education, religion, armed forces) discrimination, and as such, many experience mental health problems and engage in health risk behaviors (e.g., drug consumption, unprotected sex; [Nieves-Lugo et al., 2020](#)). At the social level, research indicates that younger, wealthier, and more educated Colombian women are more likely than others to support their homosexual child and to approve of same-sex couples' rights ([Andrade-Rivas and Romero, 2017](#)). Thus, it is not surprising that many Colombians residing in rural areas report feelings of isolation and fear of being recognized as homosexuals and a need to relocate to richer, urban areas, such as Cartagena and Bogota ([Nieves-Lugo et al., 2020](#)).

Although empirical studies on marketplace discrimination against homosexuals do not exist, popular press suggests that gay men often experience verbal and physical violence from other customers in Colombian shopping malls ([Rueda, 2019](#)). Thus, the legal situation for Colombian homosexuals mirrors that in the United States in the sense that both countries provide their homosexual citizens with legal protections and permit same-sex marriage. The institutional discrimination against homosexuals is more acute in Colombia than it is in the United States. Furthermore, the overall situation of homosexual safety in Colombia is more problematic than that in the United States, as the murder rate against transgender and gay men in Colombia remains steady, despite the country experiencing an overall reduction in its murder rate ([Moloney, 2018](#)).

2.3. Theoretical insights

Although retailers require employees to deliver fair and equal treatment to all consumers ([Zeithaml et al., 2018](#)), quite often this does not occur, especially for homosexual consumers ([Minton et al., 2017](#)). As discussed, [Walters and Curran \(1996\)](#) timed sales associates' responsiveness to gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual couples in 20 different retail outlets and empirically demonstrated the extent to which sales associates purposefully delayed service to homosexual consumers (see also [Walters and Moore, 2002](#)).

[Walsh \(2009\)](#) draws on social identity theory to posit that service providers who do not share a common sexual orientation identity with their customers or do not develop an ensuing connectedness with them may express disdain by exhibiting discriminatory behaviors. Conversely, adopting evolution theory [Rosenbaum and Walsh \(2012\)](#) suggest that employees' discriminatory behaviors may be due to an innate desire to promote in-group members and ensure their success, albeit at the expense of out-group members. For example, they found that employees who belong to stigmatized groups may be biologically driven by a form of in-group altruism to provide resources or benefits not available to other customers (e.g., gift, discounts) to like-customers, despite jeopardizing their employment by doing so.

In addressing out-group biases, [Rosenbaum et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that customers and employees who share social incompatibilities due to differences in ethnicity or religion are susceptible to experiencing actual or anticipated negative outcomes. For example, they found that many Arabs living in Israel receive inferior service from Druze employees, while Israeli Jews are often terrified of working with Arab employees out of fear of possible terrorism. Perhaps when heterosexual service providers interact with homosexual customers in service settings, social incompatibilities lead gay customers to experience discomfort, regardless of whether they are actually victims of employee discriminatory actions.

In recent publicized cases of bakeries' refusal to sell wedding cakes to homosexual couples, the concern is not with the selling of the tangible good itself but with the provision of customized services. [Lawrence \(2019\)](#) suggests that some bakers may view their provisions, such as

cake decorations, as their acceptance of gay marriage, which is prohibited by their religion. In the extreme, defenders of bakeries that refuse service to same-sex couples often claim that the message on a cake (e.g., "Best wishes to Mike and Sam") is equivalent to writing or speaking words, while proponents tend to claim that religious doctrines do not exist for icing or cake decorations. Indeed, the courts will ultimately need to decide whether a retailer can refuse service from its interpretation of religious doctrines and in what manner it may do so.

3. Research questions

Given the paucity of empirical research on homosexual discrimination in Latin American retail outlets, despite recent strides in gay rights and same-sex marriage, we aim to explore the topic by drawing on [Walters and Curran's \(1996\)](#) study and answering three research questions.

RQ1: Are there significant differences in the time (in minutes) it takes heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples to receive service from retail employees?

RQ2: Do perceptions of heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples differ in terms of (a) the level of assistance offered by retail employees, (b) the level of a retail employee's comfort level during a sales transaction, and (c) the overall in-store shopping experience?

RQ3: To what extent do heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples indicate similarities or differences regarding their in-store experiences?

Both RQ1 and RQ2 duplicate questions that [Walters and Curran \(1996\)](#) investigated. For RQ3, we opted to interview all informants about their in-store experiences, whereas [Walters and Curran](#) interviewed retail managers about their store policies. The reason for this change is that nearly 25 years after [Walters and Curran's](#) study, we did not expect any manager to tolerate egregious discriminatory behaviors by employees. Furthermore, interviewing all informants helped us better understand their descriptive and emotional perceptions of their in-store experiences that cannot be ascertained solely through quantitative measures ([Zeithaml et al., 2018](#)).

4. Method

4.1. Confederates

The confederates used in this study consisted of three men and three women. All six confederates were undergraduate business students enrolled at a major research university in Latin America. All received remuneration for their participation in the study, and the study was not part of a college course. The confederates confirmed that they were comfortable acting as a part of a heterosexual or homosexual couple who would be portrayed as leisurely shopping. The confederates were all Caucasian and ranged in age from 21 to 27 years. Note that the confederates were not asked to disclose their sexual orientation. The study also employed an observer, who was a doctoral candidate in marketing at the same university as the confederates.

Ten independent raters judged the physical attractiveness of each confederate on a 10-point scale (1 = very unattractive, 10 = very attractive). Neither the male ($M = 7.83$, $SD = 0.95$) nor female ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 0.61$) confederates differed in attractiveness. The confederates were instructed to wear innocuous clothing (e.g., jeans, nondescript apparel) during the study and to refrain from wearing any apparel or accessories that would overtly signify a proclivity toward homosexuality (e.g., rainbow flag pins) or be deemed offensive. The confederates also did not use cologne or wear watches or handbags, to minimize any factors that could influence an employee's behavioral responses during a social interaction.

4.2. Participating retailing stores

Before the start of the study, managers from 20 retail stores, which were all located in an open-air lifestyle center in Colombia, were contacted by one of this study’s authors and asked to participate in a study called “Experiences of Mystery Shoppers.” The managers were informed that six residents, the study’s confederates, would enter their stores as customers over an eight-week period and would rate the store on various criteria, including salesperson behavior and customer relations. Managers were assured that the names of their stores would not be published without their consent. Furthermore, each store manager was debriefed by one of the study’s authors after the investigation was completed, and the study was approved by both a university Institutional Review Board and mall management.

All stores met the required criteria. First, a store manager/owner needed to agree to participate in the study and to sign a consent form permitting the confederates to enter the store. Second, each store needed to rely on employee–customer social interactions; as such, large department stores and stores relying on self-service were excluded from the study. Table 1 provides the retail store type and number of stores.

We collected data from the beginning of June to the end of July 2018. Store visits were held on Saturday afternoons, and we attempted to evaluate each retail store at approximately the same time. For example, a straight couple might visit retail store X during the first week on Saturday at 2:00 P.M. Next, we would assign a lesbian or gay couple to the second and third weeks at approximately the same time. Because Saturdays tend to be busy days at the Colombian mall, we believed that limiting the study to a consistent day, during a non-holiday peak season, would allow us to evaluate how frontline employees choose to allocate their time among competing customers and interruptions. Thus, this research collection method enabled us to minimize variance in the study that may stem from couples interacting with different sales associates or shopping during weekday evenings, when there was light customer traffic in the mall.

4.3. Procedure

We randomly assigned confederates to portray either a homosexual or a heterosexual couple. One male and one female confederate were randomly assigned to portray the heterosexual couple, and the remaining two men and two women portrayed the gay and lesbian couples, respectively. Another participant acted as an observer in the store before the couple entered the store, during the time inside, and after the couple left. Each couple reported on their experiences in 20 stores.

The observer entered each of the retail outlets several minutes before the confederate couple and, under the pretext of shopping, made an unobtrusive check of the stores to ensure all were open and appeared as busy as they did on other site dates. This procedure helped ensure that no store had attracted an inordinate number of shoppers who could

interrupt the typical ratio of sales associates to shoppers (e.g., mark-down events, holiday shopping seasons). During each couple’s visit, the observer was responsible for ensuring that the couple followed the prescribed behavioral procedures accurately. These included clocking the time sales associates took to approach and offer help to the couples (i.e., timing began when a confederate couple crossed the threshold of the store and ended the moment the couple was approached by a sales associate) and observing and recording comments the sales associates made after the couples left each store.

One of the study’s authors trained all six confederates to follow the same behavioral procedures. Each couple was instructed to walk into each retail outlet holding hands and displaying the same affectionate behaviors, regardless of pairing (e.g., talking to each other, smiling). Confederates were instructed to identify the nearest sales associate, make eye contact, walk past him or her, and, if possible, begin browsing through the store. If a sales associate approached the couple and asked how he or she could help, the observer stopped the clock, and one of the confederates said he or she was looking for something “new.” Generic greetings such as “welcome to store XX” given to all customers as they entered the store were not considered a helping response. The time limit for each retail outlet was set to 6 min. If the confederates did not receive help within 6 min, they were instructed to leave the retail outlet.

As each confederate couple left the retail outlet, the observer casually walked toward the sales associate who had helped the couple to listen to any comments he or she made about the couples. The observer made a written record of the comments immediately after departing each retail outlet. Then, the confederate couples met with the observer in the mall, answered questions about their experience in each outlet, and provided verbal insights into their overall experience in the outlet. One of the study’s authors, who is fluent in both English and Spanish, translated the couples’ verbal insights.

4.4. Measures

All the measures employed in this study mirror those Walters and Curran (1996) used. As noted previously, the observer was responsible for recording the number of seconds it took for a couple to obtain assistance from a sales associate. The observer also asked the couples a series of questions immediately after they departed each store. The confederates did not discuss their individual store experiences until after completing the checklist of questions. First, the couples were asked to confirm that they had followed the prescribed behavioral script and that the sales staff had witnessed them as being part of a couple (e.g., couples remained together during their time in all stores). Second, the couples indicated the perceived level of assistance a sales associate provided (1 = ignored/no offer of help; 2 = greeting only; 3 = some assistance; 4 = engaged and sincere interest offered) and their impression of whether the store’s employees seemed comfortable with their presence in the store (1 = uncomfortable; 2 = nonchalant/neutral; 3 = comfortable). Finally, the couples rated their overall experience in each retail store (2 = positive; 1 = neutral; 0 = negative). All couples reached agreement on their evaluations. A limitation is that sales associates could have appeared comfortable with the confederate couples’ presence in the store but still did not provide them with personal assistance.

4.5. Data analysis

4.5.1. Time

To explore RQ1, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance to evaluate the relationship between the average time (in minutes) it took a sales associate to approach a confederate couple and the couple’s sexual orientation. The independent variable, sexual orientation, included three levels: heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian. The dependent variable was measured in minutes. The analysis was not significant ($F(2, 57) = 2.47, ns$). More specifically, the average wait time to obtain service from a sales associate was 5.80 min ($SD = 2.04$) during the heterosexual

Table 1
Retail store type and number of stores participating in the study.

Store type	Number of stores
Beauty care	3
Fashion (apparel)	1
Home décor	3
Jewelry	1
Leather goods	1
Menswear/shoes	2
Optometry	1
Pet store	1
Shoe store	1
Sporting goods	1
Travel agency/products	1
Videogames	1
Women clothing/shoes	3

couples' in-store experiences, 5.05 min ($SD = 1.50$) for the gay couples' experiences, and 4.65 min ($SD = 1.35$) for the lesbian couples' experiences.

Whereas Walters and Curran (1996) found that retail sales associates waited on heterosexual couples significantly faster than gay male and lesbian couples, nearly 25 years later, all consumers in the current study, regardless of their publicly displayed sexual orientations, experienced essentially the same waiting time for service. However, in terms of all confederate in-store experiences, we found a general lack of responsiveness by retail sales associates to customers, regardless of their sexual orientation.

4.5.2. Assistance

We conducted a two-way contingency table analysis to evaluate whether the level of assistance provided, from the couples' perspective, significantly differed among the three couple types. As previously noted, many confederate couples were ignored across the board by the sales associates or simply received a generic greeting. That is, when comparing couples' experiences in 20 stores, results reveal that during 8 heterosexual experiences (40%), 10 gay male experiences (50%), and 5 lesbian experiences (25%), the confederate couples reported that they did not receive any assistance from a retail employee. Overall, the statistical results showed no relationship between the level of assistance a salesperson provided and a couple's sexual orientation (Pearson $\chi^2(6, N = 60) = 5.94, ns$; see Table 2), thus addressing RQ2a.

Note that all the confederate couples reported frustration and anger regarding the lack of personal attention they received in the stores; however, some couples were indifferent about the lack of help and perceived it as commonplace and expected in Colombian shopping malls (see Fullerton and Taylor, 2015).

4.5.3. Employee comfort

To address RQ2b, we conducted a second two-way contingency table analysis to evaluate whether the level of sales associate comfort, from the couples' perspective, significantly differed among the three couple types in the 20 retail outlets. The statistical results showed no relationship between the level of perceived employee comfort and couple type (Pearson $\chi^2(4, N = 60) = 5.77, ns$). When discussing the confederate couples' in-store retail experiences, data obtained from 9 (45%) heterosexual experiences and 10 (50%) gay male experiences revealed that the sales associates behaved nonchalantly during both couples' types experiences; overall, indicating a laissez-faire attitude among these employees toward working with customers. Furthermore, data obtained from 10 (50%) lesbian in-store experiences revealed that the confederate lesbian couple sensed that sales associates were comfortable with their presence in the stores, while only 7 (35%) heterosexual experiences and 4 (20%) gay male experiences recorded sensing employee comfort. Table 3 presents the results. Overall, Colombian sales associates seem to be overlooking the importance of engendering feelings of comfort when they work with their customers during in-store service encounters (Lloyd and Luk, 2011).

Table 2 Results of contingency table analysis regarding assistance in 20 retail outlets.

	Level of assistance received from the couples' perspective			
	Ignored/no help	Offer to assist	Some assistance	Engaged and sincere interest offered
Heterosexual couple	8 (40%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	5 (25%)
Gay male couple	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	6 (30%)
Lesbian couple	5 (25%)	3 (15%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)

Table 3 Results of contingency table analysis regarding employee comfort in 20 retail outlets.

	Overall perceived comfort level among employees		
	Uncomfortable	Nonchalant/neutral	Comfortable
Heterosexual couple	4 (20%)	9 (45%)	7 (35%)
Gay male couple	6 (30%)	10 (50%)	4 (20%)
Lesbian couple	6 (30%)	4 (20%)	10 (50%)

4.5.4. Overall customer experience

To probe RQ2c, we performed a third two-way contingency table analysis to evaluate whether the overall in-store experience, from the couples' perspective, significantly differed among the couple types. The statistical results showed no relationship between perceived employee comfort and couple type (Pearson $\chi^2(4, N = 60) = 6.47, ns$). When discussing the 20 in-store experiences, data obtained from 7 (35%) heterosexual in-store experiences, 10 (50%) gay male experiences, and 4 (20%) lesbian experiences, revealed that the confederate couples reported overall positive in-store experiences. Although the differences among the couples' in-store experiences were not statistically significant, it is worth noting that data obtained from 9 (45%) lesbian experiences showed the confederate couples reporting negative in-store experiences, which was higher than comparable data reported from the 6 (30%) gay and 4 (20%) heterosexual experiences. The results, reported in Table 4, indicate that many Colombian consumers have poor in-store experiences, which may be a factor that drives them to seek other shopping alternatives, including traveling to the U.S. (Ceballos et al., 2018).

5. Results: descriptive insights

Table 5 provides humanistic insights into understanding heterosexual and homosexual in-store experiences. The findings reveal that no gay male or lesbian couple reported being physically harmed or verbally insulted in any store; rather, their negative in-store experiences stemmed from an employee's poor responsiveness and lack of empathy or care. Heterosexual couples also reported negative or neutral in-store experiences, which also stemmed from their perceiving mediocre employee responsiveness and a lack of product knowledge. Of the 20 retail outlets used in this study, only one jewelry store provided all three couple types with a positive experience.

Thus, despite recommendations from retail academics and pundits that brick-and-mortar stores provide customers with positive experiences during the "purchase stage" of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), many consumers, especially those from minority or stigmatized groups, report neutral or negative in-store experiences (Ekpo et al., 2018). An explanation for disengaged retail associates may be that because e-commerce has become a dominant retail option, managers no longer stress the importance of the professional sales role in many brick-and-mortar stores (Rapp et al., 2015). Thus, retailers may inadvertently be encouraging experiential mediocrity, as employees often receive low salaries and more qualified employees seek careers outside retail.

Table 4 Results of contingency table analysis regarding in-store experiences in 20 retail outlets.

	Perceived in-store experience		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Heterosexual couple	7 (35%)	9 (45%)	4 (20%)
Gay male couple	10 (50%)	4 (20%)	6 (30%)
Lesbian couple	4 (20%)	7 (35%)	9 (45%)

Table 5
Understanding heterosexual and homosexual couples' views of their in-store experiences.

Retail store type	Heterosexual couple experience	Heterosexual reasons for the experience	Gay male couple experience	Gay male couple reasons for the experience	Lesbian couple experience	Lesbian couple reasons for the experience
Beauty care	Positive	Responsiveness	Negative	Sales associate refusal of service	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness
Beauty care	Neutral	Cash register and information system broken	Neutral	Normal service	Positive	Responsiveness and empathy
Beauty care	Positive	Responsiveness	Positive	Responsiveness and assurance	Negative	Negative glances
Fashion	Negative	Ignored	Negative	Ignored	Negative	Lack of responsiveness
Home décor	Neutral	Ignored	Negative	No service	Positive	Responsiveness and empathy
Home décor	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Positive	Negative glances	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness
Home décor	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Negative	Empathy	Negative	Negative glances
Jewelry	Positive	Responsiveness	Positive	Ignored and was brunt of employee laughter	Positive	Responsiveness
Leather goods	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Negative	Empathy	Negative	Negative glances. Refusal of service
Menswear/shoes	Positive	Responsiveness	Positive	Empathy	Neutral	Ignored
Menswear/shoes	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Positive	Responsiveness and knowledgeable	Negative	Negative glances
Optometry	Negative	Ignored	Neutral	Normal service	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness
Pet store	Neutral	Lack of product knowledge	Positive	Responsiveness and empathy	Neutral	Normal service
Shoe store	Positive	Responsiveness	Positive	Responsiveness	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness
Sporting goods	Negative	Ignored, negative glances	Neutral	Normal service	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness
Travel agency	Negative	Ignored	Positive	Responsiveness	Negative	Spoken to like a man
Videogames	Positive	Responsiveness and knowledgeable	Negative	Negative glances	Positive	Responsiveness and knowledgeable
Women's clothing/shoes	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Positive	Responsiveness and empathy	Negative	Negative glances
Women's clothing/shoes	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness	Positive	Responsiveness and empathy	Negative	Ignored
Women's clothing/shoes	Positive	Responsiveness	Neutral	Mediocre responsiveness and knowledge	Negative	Negative glances

5.1. Rudeness

Despite the findings thus far about the lack of overt discrimination against homosexual consumers in the marketplace, the results reveal that these consumers are still more likely than heterosexual consumers to report experiencing negative behaviors from retail employees. For example, a lesbian couple reported that they perceived negative glances from sporting goods employees:

The salesman greeted [us] because he was looking at us, he did not approach us. He looked at us ugly [with a negative facial expression] from afar.

Similarly, gay male couples reported experiencing negative behaviors from employees, which included refusal of service (beauty care shop), negative glances (home décor, leather goods, and video games shops), and being the brunt of employee laughter (home décor shop). A gay male couple explained how a beauty care sales associate walked away from them:

We were approached by a female and male associate. The female associate was very dear. But when the male sales associate realized that we were a couple, he made a bad face and turned around. He did not attend to us.

Another gay male couple reported being laughed at in the home décor store:

They [sales associates] did not want to attend to us at first. When we were attended to, we noticed that it was almost due to obligation to do so. The guys at the cash registers were making fun of us.

The observer confirmed this negative experience of this gay male couple. He described viewing this interaction in the home décor store as follows:

At the time of entering the store, it is evident that no salesperson wanted to attend to them [gay male couple], and they avoided visual contact with them. Finally, a female sales associate approaches them, but with mischief and mockery.

When we compared the observer notes with the confederate couples' commentary, in two instances the gay couple sensed a positive social interaction; however, the observer noted that when the gay couple left, employees acted negatively. For example, the gay male couple described a positive experience in the women's clothing store:

We were first received by a woman, but then a man. The man was very dear, kind and smiling. Very good service. Showed us a lot of products.

However, the observer noted that the sales associates' behaviors changed when the gay couple left:

When the couple left, the sellers laughed about the situation. They said it was funny that two gay guys entered the store.

Although we did not explore customer-to-customer interactions in this study per se, despite the gay male couple reporting a positive experience in a shoe store, the observer also noted the impact of their presence on other customers:

The employees gave them [gay couple] normal attention. But a family that entered with their young children. Once they noticed that there was a gay couple in the store, they left immediately.

Similar to their gay male counterparts, lesbian couples reported experiencing undesirable behaviors from sales associates, including negative glances (beauty care, home décor, leather goods, and women's clothing/shoes stores), refusal of service (leather goods store), and being spoken to "like a man" (travel agency). For example, a lesbian couple reported a negative experience in the home décor store:

The seller's attention was good, but the atmosphere of the place was very uncomfortable. Many employees were watching us.

In the shoe store, while a sales associate delivered good service to a gay couple, the lesbian couple reported a negative in-store experience from a female associate: "We felt very uncomfortable with the looks from the saleswoman." Moreover, the observer noted that this female associate brought him into the incident:

The seller did not attend to the [lesbian] couple. I looked at the girls for a moment and the saleswoman looked at me with a disparaging nod towards the couple.

Finally, although none of the gay male couples reported being treated like women by sales associates, in two instances the lesbian couple reported being spoken to like a man (travel agency) and being mistaken for a man (menswear store). The lesbian couple explained:

There were two saleswomen, the first ignored our presence. The second saleswomen did attend us well, however, I was mistaken for a man.

5.2. Empathy

RQ3 queries about the extent to which heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples indicate similarities or differences regarding their in-store experiences. As Table 5 shows, a consistent finding among all the couples is that positive in-store experiences primarily stem from employees who are responsive and display product knowledge. A portion of the study's behavioral script asked confederate couples to inquire about new products; thus, the couples' consideration of employees' product knowledge in their assessment of overall experience is understandable.

A major difference that emerged in how homosexual confederate couples judged their in-store experience versus how their heterosexual counterparts did so was the importance they attached to empathy. Zeithaml et al. (2018, p. 91) define empathy as "caring, individualized attention that the firm provides its customers," which Bove (2019) believes is fundamental to reducing anti-social and discriminatory concerns that vulnerable customers often bring with them into service encounters. In this study, empathy was primarily expressed as sales associates' display of kindness and warmth. A gay male couple noted how they received empathy from a pet store associate:

The seller was very attentive, respectful and warm during the service she gave us.

Similarly, a lesbian couple spoke about receiving empathy from a beauty care employee:

The seller was very kind. [She] gave us information about services and made us a price quote [for services].

In contrast with the homosexual couples, although the heterosexual couples primarily based their in-store experiences on sales associates' responsiveness and product knowledge, they discounted receiving empathy from the associates. This finding implies that the employees who displayed empathy toward the homosexual couples may have felt a "connectedness" with them from shared personal identities (Walsh, 2009) or personal proclivities (e.g., familiarity with gay family, friends, or colleagues). This finding may also stem from the homosexual couples being sensitized to responding to personal care and attentive overtures from sales associates (Bove, 2019).

6. Discussion

By exploring discriminatory practices toward homosexual consumers in a Colombian shopping mall, this study addresses contemporary research priorities in the retail domain, including enhancing consumer

service experiences, understanding services in a global context (Ostrom et al., 2015), and exploring how services may be more inclusive and welcoming of all consumers (Fisk et al., 2018). Despite recent investigations into service providers that deny services to homosexual consumers because of conflicts with their religious principles (Lawrence, 2019; Minton et al., 2017), in-depth empirical explorations of the topic of homosexual discrimination in retail outlets have essentially ceased in the past decade. Furthermore, extant articles on the topic (Walsh, 2009; Walters and Curran, 1996) are based on homosexual experiences in Western industrialized countries. However, the beginning of the millennium has witnessed significant improvements in the lives of LGBT people in many parts of the world, including South America (Meyer, 2016). Thus, this article on homosexual retail discrimination in Latin America addresses several research voids on the topic.

Initial investigations into homosexual discrimination in retail outlets have revealed the extent to which gay and lesbian consumers are often overtly mistreated by employees (Walters and Moore, 2002), primarily in retail (e.g., mattress stores) and service (e.g., banking, insurance, restaurants, health care; McLaughlin et al., 2010) outlets. In the past, researchers discovered that homosexual consumers experience overt discrimination from employees typically in the form of verbal harassment, finger pointing, negative stares, laughing, and refusal of service, unbeknownst to or overlooked by management (Walters and Curran, 1996).

This field experiment reveals that in the context of a Colombian-based lifestyle shopping center, overt discrimination against homosexual consumers seems to have abated, if measured by time required to receive assistance from a sales associate. In contrast with Walters and Curran's (1996) study, which found that heterosexual couples were assisted, on average, within 1.20 min of entering a retail store, 2.50 min faster than gay couples and 3.0 min faster than lesbian couples, our results showed that all confederate couples were assisted within the same time frame of approximately 5 min. Notably, all the couples left a retail store after waiting for service, and some couples never received attention from a sales associate.

A series of contingency table analyses reveal that confederate couples report receiving the same level of assistance from an employee and had the same perception of employees' comfort level regardless of whether the couple was reporting either a heterosexual or homosexual in-store experience. Further, the results showed that all the couples also had the same perceptions of their overall in-store shopping experiences. Therefore, this study reveals that in the context of Colombia, which continues to contend with debates about the legalization of same-sex marriage and religious doctrines (Dion and Díez, 2017), overt discrimination against homosexual consumers in retail stores appears to be non-existent. This does not mean that marketplace discrimination against homosexual consumers does not happen. In our study, 20% of gay male couples' in-store experiences and 30% of lesbian couples' in-store experiences were negatively affected by sales associates who looked at them in a negative way, ignored their presence, or laughed at them.

6.1. Theoretical implications

Understanding why employees would discriminate against customers and put their jobs in jeopardy by failing to follow organizational operational procedures remains a theoretical mystery (Ekpo et al., 2018). Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) attempted to address this situation by drawing on evolution theory. They explained that in some instances, an innate behavioral response may encourage service providers to demonstrate altruism to customers who are like themselves and express disdain toward out-group members, which may put their employment at risk. If discrimination tendencies were part of a person's genetic narrative, diversity training would be pointless, as frontline discrimination would be commonplace.

This work also reveals the extent to which vulnerable customers

value empathy from frontline providers (Bove, 2019). Although it may seem trite to do so, we urge retailers to hire for diversity and to make service excellence a priority by ensuring that superior customer care becomes a standard operating procedure and that discriminatory behaviors toward customers are thwarted (Gorry and Westbrook, 2011). Indeed, this work reveals a dearth of human kindness in the homosexual marketplace experience; despite recent investigations that show the extent to which homosexual male employees often extend kindness and a keen sense of professionalism to female customers in retail stores (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

The reality is that no single theory may fully explain why sales associates would put their jobs at risk and blatantly exhibit rude behaviors to homosexual consumers. Furthermore, in some cases, customers may fear working with employees because of social incompatibilities; however, their fears tend not to be justified by actual acts of employee rudeness. In these instances, customers may avoid patronizing retail stores merely because of perceived personal social incompatibilities with employees (Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

6.2. Managerial and societal implications

This research reveals that discontinuity in service experiences may exist in physical retail outlets because of employees failing to assist many customers, both heterosexual and homosexual, who enter their stores. Quite often, retail employees claim that their roles have been reduced to “checkout clerks” and “floor sweepers” (Rapp et al., 2015, p. 360) as a result of online shopping and showrooming (i.e., obtaining information in a physical store and purchasing online). Yet, given that several confederate couples in our study were ignored in retail stores, perhaps employees are partly to blame for showrooming, as many may be overlooking opportunities to engage with customers to encourage in-store purchases (Ekpo et al., 2018).

On the one hand, the finding that both the homosexual and heterosexual couples experienced the same waiting times and tendency to be ignored in retail stores illustrates less discriminatory behaviors. On the other hand, homosexual couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to attribute poor in-store service experiences to employee rudeness. This is unfortunate because the combined spending power of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States (i.e., Q+ represents people who do not define their sexual orientations, and gender identities, as anything other than non-straight and non-binary) is nearly \$1 trillion, which is in line with the buying power of both the African American and Hispanic communities (Schneider and Auten, 2018). Physical retailers that want to survive in a highly competitive environment must confront employee biases and treat homosexual discrimination in the same manner as any other type of discriminatory behavior.

From a societal perspective, we encourage researchers and practitioners to understand that covert discriminatory behaviors lodged by employees against homosexual customers in retail stores, such as negative glances and laughter, are not benign. Rather, these negative experiences severely affect homosexual and questioning youth as they destroy their assumptions of benevolence, meaningfulness of the world, and sense of self-worth (Noelle, 2002). Similarly, public health researchers have shown that vulnerable consumers (e.g., homosexuals, African Americans) who experience discriminatory practices in retail outlets often realize psychological distress and mental health disorders (McLaughlin et al., 2010). That is, research reveals that perceived discrimination negatively affects gay men’s mental well-being and self-esteem, making them susceptible to self-harm and suicidal ideations (Almeida et al., 2009; Meyer, 2016).

The findings of covert discrimination buttress the work of Fisk et al. (2018) and Ekpo et al. (2018), who conclude that exclusionary practices exist in retail settings and that they limit consumers’ ability to realize the full value inherent in marketplace exchanges. The only way for managers to truly cease exclusionary practices in their organizations is to renounce them when they emerge. That is, we encourage retail

managers to make concerted efforts to eliminate the spreading of overt and covert discriminatory actions from employees to customers by developing and enforcing a comprehensive zero tolerance policy. At the same time, we encourage retail organizations to invest in diversity training and for senior management to exemplify behaviors that mirror service inclusion of all customers.

6.3. Research limitations

A recently published meta-analysis of homosexual consumer research reveals that most academic studies on the topic, to date, have been conducted in the United States (Eisend and Hermann, 2020). Although this study attempts to break this bias by investigating homosexual and heterosexual Colombian consumers, it does so by drawing on Walters and Curran (1996) study on the homosexual shopping experiences, which is rooted in the context of the U.S. Given that Colombian culture is dominated by long-rooted traditions that differ from the U.S., including the practice of Catholicism and a commitment to the traditional family lifestyle, with children living at home until marriage, (Baruch College, 2020), perhaps, it is understandable as to why homosexual consumers may still be experiencing discrimination in the Colombian marketplace.

We encourage future researchers to explore Latin American consumer behavior in its own context; especially among consumers in countries that have legalized same-sex marriage including Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico (certain states) and others that recognize same-sex civil unions, such as Chile and Ecuador. Further, given that this study took place in Colombia, a country that recognizes same-sex marriage, the findings do not generalize to other countries in which homosexuality remains a crime punishable by death (e.g., Brunei, Iran) or imprisonment (e.g., Uzbekistan). Indeed, in some countries, homosexual consumers must remain incognito when they enter retail outlets.

In terms of the sample, the confederate couples in this study were all undergraduate students, so it is possible that many couples were ignored by sales associates because of their young age; however, ignoring any customer is not organizationally sanctioned. Additionally, because the experiment occurred in the same 20 stores over three weeks, it could be that employees realized that a possible study was taking place; however, the findings do not show any type of improved behavior. Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on discriminatory practices toward homosexual consumers in the context of Colombian retailing. Although the days of overt discrimination against homosexual consumers seem to have waned, many homosexual consumers still experience covert discriminatory behaviors from employees.

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