Designing Stigma-free "Service Gifts" for Vulnerable Consumers – Evaluating the Suspended Coffee Concept in the Context of Cultural Services

Vulnerable consumers often lack access to services impeding them from participating in everyday services (Fisk et al., 2018), such as a visit to the hairdresser or a theatre performance. Exemplary reasons for this lacking access are financial constraints preventing consumers to acquire services (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009) or more apparent features of services like entry stairs making it impossible for wheelchair users to participate in a service encounter at all (Edwards et al., 2018). One way to address economic vulnerability from a service provider perspective is to offer "service gifts" to vulnerable consumers. Based on Tang et al. (2020) we define service gifts as value offered through a service provider without the expectation of direct compensation. This can include free tickets, additional benefits (e.g., a beverage), or reduced prices. Usually, service gifts are used by service providers to gain a deeper connection with consumers and thereby establish a stable relationship (Roster, 2006). Research concerning service gifts shows that in a business-to-consumer context they lead to firm-beneficial outcomes such as consumer delight (Barnes et al., 2021) or an increase in store visits (Bodur & Grohmann, 2005). An increasingly popular example of such a service gift is the concept of "suspended coffee", originating in Italy, where consumers in a café give away an extra coffee that can be taken over by a consumer who cannot afford the coffee themselves (Buscemi, 2015). In this concept, the service gift is provided by other consumers through the service provider and serves to enable vulnerable consumers to participate in the gastronomic offer and thus in social life. Service providers offering service gifts in the form of suspended coffees have found that these service gifts are often not widely taken up by vulnerable consumers (e.g., Wagner, 2022; Scherff, 2018). One reason for vulnerable consumers' hesitation to receive service gifts, might lie in the design of the service gift and receiving process. The design of service gifts might, although well-intended in the first place, lead to perceptions of stigmatization and vulnerability. For example, vulnerable consumers are often required to disclose their indigence to receive service gifts, leading to perceptions of stigma (Baumberg, 2017). How stigma leads to decreased access to free services and how providers can address this has only been studied concerning health services. These studies, for example, identify stigma in connection to potentially infectious diseases as an access barrier to free healthcare services (Jacobs et al., 2012), show that previous stigmatization from healthcare staff leads to fewer healthcare services being accessed and thereby poorer quality of life (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011) and illustrate coping mechanisms employed by patients to deal with stigma inducing illnesses like keeping the illness a secret or actively educating

others about the illness (Yow & Mehta, 2010). What has not been considered is how stigma can act as a barrier for vulnerable consumers to receive service gifts and how service gifts can be designed to prevent stigmatization.

We argue that the potential to cause perceptions of stigma might be inherent to the design of the encounters between vulnerable consumers and providers of service gifts during a vulnerable consumer's journey to receive a service gift. In line with Wünderlich et al. (2019), who have shown that channel design strategies alleviate or strengthen vulnerability perceptions, we aim to identify strategies to alleviate stigma perceptions at such critical encounters. In particular, we strive to identify critical encounters of the Suspended Coffee concept and evaluate alternative stigma-free designs of such encounters. For this purpose we applied the Suspended Coffee concept to the context of cultural services such as theatres, museums and cinemas. In the theatre context, for example, a non-vulnerable consumer would buy an additional ticket as a gift for a unknown vulnerable consumer. The service provider passes on the ticket to a vulnerable consumer who can visit the theatre for free.

With our research we aim to answer the following research questions: 1) Which encounters during a vulnerable consumer's service gift-receiving process do they perceive as stigma-inducing? 2) Which design elements of such encounters cause these perceptions? 3) Which design alternatives for such encounters prevent the stigmatization of vulnerable consumers?

To answer these questions, we conducted two studies in the context of cultural services. Study 1 was an exploratory qualitative interview study with service providers (n=12), employees of a welfare organization (n=11) and vulnerable consumers (n=38) in which we identified three critical encounters, in which the particular design of the encounter led to perceptions of stigmatization: 1) Accessing the service gift, 2) being surrounded by other service consumers and 3) consuming the service gift. Our findings show that stigmatizing encounters with service gifts negatively impact vulnerable consumers' perceived access to cultural services. While the first encounter occurs in the pre-purchase phase, the second and third can be assigned to the consumption phase. Based on the findings from the interview study, we developed a stigma-free design option to reduce the stigma triggered by the three encounters discussed. This design was implemented in three cultural institutions (theatre, cinema, and museum). The design was then evaluated through another interview study, which we are currently still evaluating. The evaluation will be completed in May so that the final results can be presented at the Rostocker Dienstleistungstagung 2023. Our research contributes to the field of transformative service research by examining the impact of stigma in the design of

service encounters on service accessibility from the perspective of vulnerable consumers. This will allow service providers to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by this group of consumers. In addition, our second study will propose stigma-free designs for service gifts that can be used by both service providers and public agencies to improve the participation of vulnerable consumers in services.

References available upon request.