

# The moments of truth: A qualitative exploration of service interactions between employees with disabilities in the food service industry, and their customers

Tin Doan<sup>a</sup>, Shelagh Mooney<sup>b</sup>, Peter B. Kim<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Employees with disabilities (EWDs)  
Customers  
People with disabilities (PWDs)  
Service interaction  
Restaurants  
Cafés

## ABSTRACT

This research, using in-depth qualitative interviews, aimed to disentangle the meanings of service interactions perceived by both employees with disabilities (EWDs), and their customers, based on their own experiences. The interviews were conducted with a total of twenty participants including ten EWDs and ten customers from foodservice organizations (e.g., restaurants and cafés) in Vietnam. The findings of the thematic analysis revealed that EWDs perceived service interactions with customers as opportunities to provide services characterized by 'total attentiveness', 'impressing customers', and 'social connection', while their customers perceived the interactions as both opportunities for 'genuine hospitality', and 'contributions to social change'. The implications of the findings are important for hospitality researchers and practitioners alike.

## 1. Introduction

Although employees with disabilities (EWDs) have been part of the hospitality workforce for several decades, they still encounter various challenges that hinder them from performing their work to the best of their abilities (Ingamells et al., 1991; Vashishth et al., 2021). For instance, one of the most significant barriers is negative attitudes towards people with disabilities (PWDs) (Bellucci et al., 2023; Gröschl, 2007). From the employer perspective, concerns range from doubts about the EWDs' ability to work effectively in customer-contact positions to create positive service interactions (Gröschl, 2007; Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2014; Liu et al., 2023), to whether their presence as frontline staff will negatively affect the organization's image and customer acceptance (Sá et al., 2017). Kalargyrou et al. (2018a, 2018b) also noted that stereotypes about PWDs influence the intergroup social interactions of both employees and consumers. In the hospitality industry, where personal appearance, interpersonal and customer service skills of frontline employees are particularly important (Fang et al., 2020), EWDs draw unfavorable judgments relating to visible disabilities and/or their ability to communicate with customers as part of a team of employees working in frontline service positions (Haynes, 2012; Sá et al., 2017).

Therefore, although a job offer for a customer service position in the

hospitality industry is an exciting opportunity for PWDs, they often hesitate to accept such offers due to such challenges and barriers. Hospitality service encounters have unique characteristics; the production, distribution and consumption processes occur simultaneously and interactively between service providers and customers (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Svensson, 2006). During these processes, the perceptions of customers and EWDs directly influence the outcome of the service experience (Kalargyrou et al., 2018a, 2018b). Regarding the service continuum and service cycle, Svensson (2006) noted that the quality-of-service interaction results from the congruence of customer and employee perceptions about the service experienced. Hospitality literature reveals that the physical appearance of employees is a critical element in how customers conceptualize their service experience (Kim and Baker, 2019). For example, in the context of food service businesses employing people with visual disabilities, the behavioral intentions of EWDs in service interactions can be influenced by the customer's attitude and awareness of disabilities. In addition, EWDs may encounter accessibility issues (e.g., with communicative tools and/or stairs), and be unable to carry out some services demanded by customers due to their impairments.

Consequently, it is imperative to understand how customer-contact EWDs perceive interactions with their customers. Despite this, few studies have investigated the ways in which EWDs perceive the nature

\* Correspondence to: 423 WH Building, 49 Wellesley St East, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.

E-mail addresses: [tin.doan@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:tin.doan@northumbria.ac.uk) (T. Doan), [shelagh.mooney@aut.ac.nz](mailto:shelagh.mooney@aut.ac.nz) (S. Mooney), [pkim@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pkim@aut.ac.nz) (P.B. Kim).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2023.103602>

Received 11 August 2022; Received in revised form 3 September 2023; Accepted 9 September 2023

Available online 23 September 2023

0278-4319/© 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

and quality of their service interactions with customers (Liu et al., 2023; Song and Park, 2023). Another gap in the literature lies in the fact that there is limited empirical evidence on how hospitality services provided by EWDs are perceived by customers. Previous studies have often focused on the perspectives of employers, managers, or co-workers when evaluating the job performance of EWDs. The perspectives of two of the main actors in the service encounter, i.e., the views of the employees and the customers, have been neglected (Liu et al., 2023). Where so many negative views on employees with disabilities coalesce, it is important to fairly appraise the quality of service provided, in order to dispel any misperceptions that it may be deficient.

The purpose of the study was not merely to compare the service offered by an employee with a disability, with that of one without a disability, but also to explore any specific personal advantages or benefits that employees with disabilities believed they could offer to enhance the service experience for the guest. The customer is the only person fully cognizant of the service quality at the time of delivery, and therefore, it was essential to measure customer satisfaction with the specific service experience delivered at the time. Evidence of the quality service provided by EWDs to customers, could lessen the risks perceived by employers who are considering taking on employees with disabilities. In this way, PWDs might provide an overlooked pool of service talent for a food service industry that struggles to attract and retain employees. Additionally, hiring a diverse range of employees, including those with disabilities, would better reflect the changing requirements of an ageing population, as well as respond proactively to the need for businesses to be seen to be socially responsive and exert a positive influence on the communities in which they are embedded (Christou et al., 2019).

Likewise, creating an inclusive workplace for EWDs is important for foodservice businesses, due to legislation relating to employment quotas in cases where businesses have a large number of employees; depending on jurisdiction, they may need to meet “mandated requirements for the number of workers with disabilities employed in the organization” (Santuzzi et al., 2022, P. 485). Increasingly, anti-discrimination legislation has moved from a ‘tick box exercise’ to a focus on the successful integration of EWDs into the workplace and promoting their wellbeing. In sum, these factors provide a compelling case for including employees with disabilities in hospitality workplaces. Although advances in legislation indicate the significance of disability issues in employment, there are further considerable research gaps on how to integrate workers with disabilities, or indeed the right ways to conduct relevant studies, compared to research on other marginalized groups (Santuzzi and Waltz, 2016). Therefore, this study was designed to address the core elements of service encounters and to investigate the quality-of-service interactions between employees with disabilities and their customers. Its primary purpose was to explore the perceptions of EWDs and their customers about service interactions in the context of foodservice businesses. To fulfil this aim, the study paired EWDs with their specific customers to explore each party’s perspective on the meanings and delivery of the service interactions. To understand the contextual elements of such service encounters, the next section gives an overview of salient factors.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Hospitality research of employees with disabilities

As observed previously, employment opportunities for PWDs are limited due to negative stereotypes about them and the biased perceptions of employers. While employment legislation may prevent discriminatory practices against PWDs, and some few employers might display favorable attitudes and politically correct responses, quiet rejections still occur (Paez and Arendt, 2014). Doan et al. (2021) found that hospitality organizations highlighted three key concerns when considering the employment of PWDs; the PWD’s capability to provide effective customer service, customer acceptance, and fears associated

**Table 1**  
Previous empirical studies with EWDs in the hospitality industry.

Studies	Investigated issues	Sources of data
Bengisu and Balta (2011)	Employment policy, corporate social responsibility	Experts and professionals (without disability)
Feerasta (2017)	Sheltered employments, personal attributes to employment	Two Individuals with disabilities and managers
Gröschl (2007, 2012)	Employment barriers, Human resources management	Multiple stakeholders, including EWDs
Houtenville and Kalargyrou (2014)	Workforce diversity, employer’s attitudes	Managers (without disability)
Kalargyrou et al. (2018b, 2020), Kuo and Kalargyrou (2014)	Customer attitude, service quality	Customers (experimental)
Kalargyrou et al. (2018b), Kalargyrou and Volis (2014)	Hiring practices, diversity management	Company policies/ reports
Madera et al. (2020)	Customer evaluations, service quality	Customers (experimental)
Hui et al. (2021).	Employment barriers, work performance, attitudes	Managers and employees (without disability)

with training issues and the cost of accommodating specialized needs.

The persistence of the medical model of disability may be responsible for these concerns. In this model, disability is conceptualized as a medical issue or bodily impairment or handicap. One result of the medical approach is that PWDs have tended to be segregated as an abnormal or ‘special’ group. Consequently, PWDs are often excluded from participating in community activities. Reflecting societal oppression, evidence suggests that hospitality employers and managers hold the same negative attitudes about PWDs (Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2014; Jasper and Waldhart, 2013; Paez and Arendt, 2014). Employers tended to underestimate a PWD’s abilities, focusing instead on what they believed a PWD was *unable* to do (due to their disabilities), even though Groschl (2012) found that these negative judgments were inaccurate. Sa et al. (2017) revealed that hotel managers worked to recruit employees with less severe disabilities, to achieve the required quota percentage of EWDs, rather than considering them a pool of talented individuals worth attracting. Employees with disabilities were further discriminated against by being intentionally assigned insignificant jobs devoid of opportunities to interact with customers (Madera et al., 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

In contrast to the medical deficit model, the social model of disability reconceptualizes disability (Oliver and Barnes, 2010). Rather than considering disability to be a medical problem, the social model reframes the causes of disability as stemming from attitudinal, physical, and informational barriers (McKercher and Darcy, 2018; Randle and Dolnicar, 2019); PWDs are viewed as an integral part of a diverse society. Studies in the hospitality industry based on the social model concluded that there is an inspiring shift in favorable attitudes and employment practices, with hotels, restaurants, and cafés offering job opportunities to PWDs as social responsibility initiatives (Kalargyrou et al., 2018a, 2018b). The hospitality consumer market also reflects a positive attitude toward services performed by EWDs (Feerasta, 2017; Gröschl, 2012; Madera et al., 2020). However, as Darcy et al. (2022) argue, the industry is still far from achieving fair representation of PWDs within the mainstream workforce.

Participation in paid employment facilitates the integration of PWDs into their communities, as well as benefiting their physical and mental health, therefore, there is a profound need for more transformative change at societal, organizational, and individual levels on how disability is perceived (Bellucci et al., 2023). In the hospitality setting, a ‘diverse workforce’ is listed as one of the top priorities of many businesses to respond to the talent shortage and provide superior services

across a range of markets. Tackling the social issue of disability discrimination in employment can enhance the participation of PWDs in the workforce (Doan et al., 2021; Jasper and Waldhart, 2013). Yet, as shown in Table 1, previous empirical studies about EWDs in the hospitality context have been conducted incorporating data from either employees and managers, or potential (i.e., hypothetical) customers, rather than from EWDs.

## 2.2. Service interactions between EWDs and their customers

When reflecting on how to create a more inclusive culture for potential employees with disabilities, the service encounter where interpersonal interactions between customers and their service providers take place could serve as a platform to transform negative attitudes about the work abilities of EWDs (Bitner et al., 1990; Kim and So, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). For example, Daruwalla and Darcy (2005) indicated that hospitality organizations can intervene to change social and individual attitudes toward disability. Their study suggested that the more opportunities for customers to have contact with EWDs can improve customer attitudes and acceptance of the employees. Furthermore, positively interacting with customers can empower EWDs to work and strengthen their confidence to live independently.

Typical service encounters enable dual interaction, during which customers experience the service provided and compare it with their prior expectations. At the same time, service providers aim to achieve their business goals through the provision of these services (Bitner et al., 1990). Therefore, as Bordoloi (2014, p91) explain, encounters provide a ‘moment of truth’ wherein the delivery of services may result in either the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of customers, and the consequent success or failure of the business. The interactions between customers and service employees are significantly influenced by the level of engagement the actors inject into the service delivery process, and therefore is of great interest when considering the successful achievement of business objectives (Weeks, 2015).

In the case of EWDs’ service encounters, the customers’ prior perceptions of the service experience with such employees can determine their behavior when they interact with EWDs, and their subsequent evaluation of service received. Customers with negative attitudes toward PWDs will be uncomfortable interacting with them and may not judge the service quality fairly (Kalargyrou et al., 2020; Poria et al., 2021). Conversely, if customers have a positive attitude and are open to enjoying the service provided by EWDs, their evaluation of the service interaction will be favorable (Vashishth and Jhamb, 2021). However, all service encounters are characterized by dimensions of intangibility and subjectivity (Weeks, 2015) and the actual moments of service interactions may change a customer’s mindset and shift their attitudes in a different direction (Knežević et al., 2015). Nevertheless, as previously observed, empirical evidence on understanding how both EWDs and their customers expect, and perceive, the service interactions in a real-life setting, such as food service is lacking. Therefore, this study investigated the perceptions of both EWDs and their customers, at the time-of-service interaction to gain a detailed picture. In organizational behavior studies, the concept of employee perceptions is subject to various interpretations and linkages (such as organizational culture, or climate) depending on the specific context. In this study, because the focus was on individuals in the service interaction, ‘perception’ was understood to be the process whereby the individual creates meanings and interpretations from what is happening around them, in that environment and at that time (Katsaro et al., 2014).

Understanding how perceptions about the service interaction may differ between EWDs and their customers is worth consideration by service organizations. Chung-Herrera et al. (2004) suggest that customers and service employees share perceptual similarities when the overall service experience is positive yet show divergent views when the overall experience is negative. According to Dedeoğlu and Demirer (2015), hospitality employees rated their service performance at a

**Table 2**  
Profile of participants with disabilities and customers.

	EWDs		Customers
Total	10		10
<b>Disability Type</b>		<b>Nationality</b>	
Blindness or poor vision	2	Vietnamese customers	4
Hearing and speech	4	Expatriates living in Vietnam	3
Mobility	4	International travelers	3
<b>Position</b>		irical studies with EWDs in the hospitality	
Manager	2	Service business	3
Supervisor	3	Teachers/students	2
Entry-level staff	5	Non-Government Organizations	2
		Self-employed/Business	3
<b>Age</b>		<b>Age</b>	
18–30	6	18–30	5
30–45	3	30–45	2
45–60	1	45–60	1
		More than 60	2
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Gender</b>	
Male	5	Male	5
Female	5	Female	5

higher level than customers, according to the differences in perceived values of service quality dimensions (e.g., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). Therefore, acknowledging the differences in perception between customers and employees is essential for effective service management.

In addition, it is important to use appropriate methods to be able to capture the perceptions of customers and employees in the process of service delivery. Previous organizational behavior studies have employed a paired approach to discern the meanings of interactions, as this approach allowed customers to share their stories of a specific service experience, rather than their projected ‘intention to purchase’ decision (e.g., Moon et al., 2019, Van Dolen et al., 2002). In situations where EWDs are providing service, the direct interaction process between their customers and them reveals how perceptions of service delivery unfold for both parties when considering the disability status of the employees. Prior to this study, there was limited understanding as to how the disability status of an EWD influenced their service interactions with customers. Thus, this study addressed the following research question, “How do both EWDs and their customers perceive service interactions?”.

## 3. Methods

To fulfil the aim of the study, a qualitative approach was used to collect data. A series of in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted to gain insights relating to the day-to-day service experiences of EWDs and their customers. Additionally, an emancipatory approach was incorporated to elevate the voice of the EWDs and to allow them to share their insights about research issues (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019). The advantage of an adopting the emancipatory approach is that it enables researchers to take a political stance to empower the voice of disabled employees, in the hope that it may lead to transformative change to their situation (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019).

The study was conducted in the context of the Vietnamese foodservice industry to explore the perceptions relating to service interactions of EWDs and their customers. This particular study location was chosen to extend the literature on EWDs, as previous studies on this topic were often conducted in developed countries. In developing countries (such as Vietnam), the work experience of EWDs has not been well-documented (Mizunoya et al., 2016). The first author, a hospitality professional with lived experience of reduced hearing ability and post-traumatic stress disorder, possessed a valuable network among the industry, NGOs, and research institutions in Vietnam. This personal background and ability to access professional networks greatly enriched



Fig. 1. Research locations – Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Hoi An and Ha Noi.

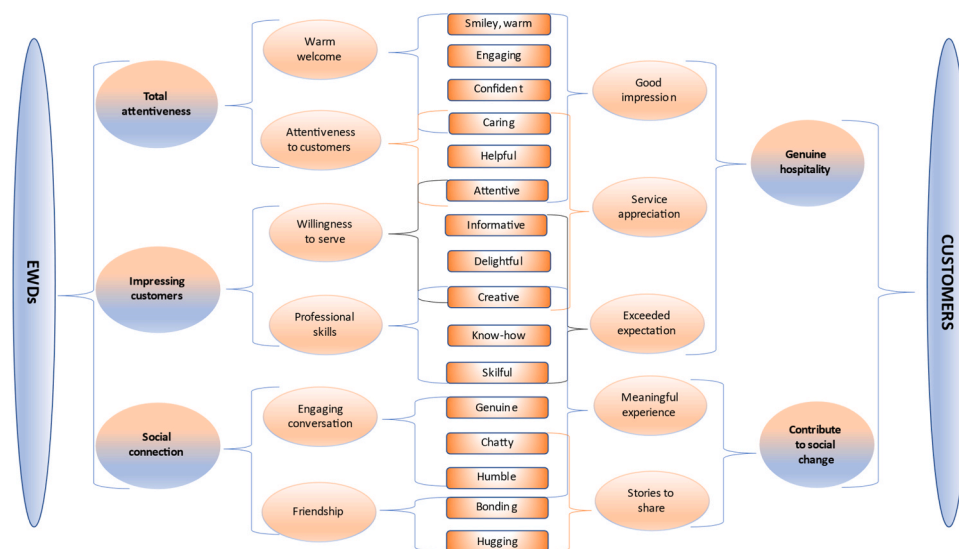


Fig. 2. An interactive model of EWD's and customer's perception of the service interaction.

the study, enabling it to reach the widest possible range of interviewees with disabilities, and their customers, to study the core elements of service interactions in a robust way.

A convenience sampling method was employed to recruit potential research participants. As shown in Table 2, ultimately 10 employees with disabilities (such as impaired mobility, hearing and speech, and vision) were interviewed. Following these interviews, 10 customers were also interviewed, to gain an understanding of their perception of each service interaction. The interviews took place in 10 cafés/restaurants, across four major Vietnamese cities: Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Hoi An, and Ha Noi (see Fig. 1). The four cities are well-known tourist destinations in Vietnam, and the research team had approval for the interviews from the restaurant and café managers. A major challenge encountered when seeking to gain participants, was that managers of the establishments were hesitant to allow interviews to be conducted with their EWDs, and customers, due to the lost time, potential negative publicity, and their unfamiliarity with academic research conventions.

The study adopted the social model of disability, which holds that social and environmental barriers hinder people from inclusion, rather than their biomedical impairment, (Oliver and Barnes, 2010; Randle and Dolnicar, 2019). In this study, the researchers believed that removing social and environmental barriers would enable EWDs to engage in customer service more easily.

The convenience sampling method allowed researchers to invite research participants with different types of disabilities to achieve the research objectives (Kumar, 2014). All 10 EWDs were in customer contact roles/positions, which ranged from restaurant managers to supervisors and frontline staff. The 10 customers interviewed included both local and international customers of the cafés and restaurants in the study locations (Table 2). The first author gained permission from the business owners and managers to attend the café during service periods to talk to customers, while they waited for their bills. The information sheet and invitation were provided and explained at that time. Most customers agreed to be interviewed during their visits, but a few did not. Their decision not to participate may have been due to different reasons, not merely because of a negative attitude but also a very limited time as tourists in the town. In a qualitative study, the 'saturation' of insights is fundamental for identifying the range of thematic issues. With semi-structured interviews, as used in this study, the saturation point where no new insights emerge on the core constructs can be reached in as little as six interviews, if the participants possess relevant expertise of the experiences under scrutiny (Guest et al., 2006). The stage of being able to identify key themes was reached at five employees and six

customers, as per the recommendations of Hennink et al. (2017). The number of interviews was then extended to 10 sets of interviews with matched pairs of EWD and customers to achieve 'meaning saturation' (Guest et al., 2006, p.67). To ensure the process was accurate, each pair of EWD-Customers was coded with a letter and a number in the questionnaire (e.g., E1\_C1, E1\_C2).

Based on the service interaction model (Svensson, 2003) and the conceptual framework of interactive service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001), the key interview questions were developed. These questions were tested in three pilot interviews, one with an employee with a visual disability, and two employees with a mobility disability. The four steps of the EWDs interview guides were applied subsequently until a sufficient number of interviews were reached as suggested by Doan et al. (2021). The first two steps of this interview guide were designed to (1) adjust language expressions to help interviewees better understand the questions, (2) search for information, and (3) recruit study participants. The last two steps were to conduct the interview and reconfirm the interview data for analysis. In the fourteen interviews with EWDs, only three interviewees agreed to discuss the questions in the first meeting, eleven others required more than one meeting to build up trust between the interviewee and researcher. The interviews were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants. Following the interview guide contributed to the avoidance of any possible harm and discomfort for the EWDs and built their confidence and willingness to share their insights with the researcher.

The interview data were interpreted and analyzed following the 6-step procedure of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the process of coding, and following Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative steps of thematic analysis, the first author coded the data manually to identify initial themes, selecting words and phrases that linked with the research objectives, from the translated English transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). These were then transcribed into a MS Word document, after which they were color-coded and highlighted. Following this, using NVivo software, the sub themes were identified by arranging similar code groups together. In the third and fourth stages of the thematic analysis, the data was able to interact with the sub themes, and then the emerging main themes, in repeated review cycles. In step five, the principal themes were again reviewed, organized, and labelled, and in the final stage, presented for reporting as findings. The first and second authors worked together using NVivo to identify the major themes and subthemes, while the third author double-checked all the themes and quotes from the transcripts. It is important to note that at all stages of the coding and theme

identification process, the second and third author cross-checked and discussed the meanings of the codes and themes developed by the first author, to ensure that the meanings and interpretations that emerged during analysis were credible and confirmable.

The interviews with EWDs and customers were conducted in a range of cafés and restaurants, in the four major tourist cities of Vietnam. The authors believe that the insights obtained accurately represented the tourist-oriented business strategies of the cafés and restaurants in which both EWDs and their customers were involved in the same service delivery processes. The pairing approach of the interview method (Kenny et al., 2020) ensured that the 'stories' from both sets of 'actors' in the customer-EWDs interaction shared the same service context were subject to the same interactive influences. This aspect was significant as it consolidated the consistency of the participants' accounts of the same service interaction and optimized the validity of the data.

#### 4. Findings

The thematic analysis revealed significant themes from the perspectives of both the EWDs and their customers on their perceptions regarding the service interaction (Fig. 2). From the interviews it was ascertained that the EWDs perceived service interactions with customers as a rewarding moment for them to demonstrate their total attentive service attitude, wherein they were able to impress customers with superior service, and to establish social connections. The customers highlighted their appreciation of the exceptional service provided and commented on the valuable contribution the experience made to their attitudes (social change) toward PWDs. These key themes are discussed in the following subsections.

##### 4.1. EWDs' perceptions of service interaction with customers

Analysis of the data revealed that EWDs interacted with customers with a strong awareness of their disabilities. They demonstrated proactive behavior in engaging with customers and described their appreciation for the interactive moments with customers. They saw serving customers as an opportunity to have a social connection with them, perceiving these encounters as 'rewards', and 'priceless opportunities'. These chances to meet and communicate with customers at work were perceived by the EWDs to be invaluable, and something they had not previously experienced.

Three main themes emerged from the interviews with employees:

- 1) Total attentiveness
- 2) Impressing customers
- 3) Social connection

##### 4.1.1. Total attentiveness

Working in customer-contact positions brought both excitement and anxiety for the EWDs. They perceived serving customers as the opportunity to have a social connection with customers as 'rewards', and 'priceless opportunities'. The opportunities to meet and communicate with customers at work were invaluable for EWDs as they did not have those before. During the process of interacting with customers, participants explained that they not only performed the tasks they were trained for but took the opportunity to ensure that customers had a memorable experience with them at their restaurant. They spoke of striving to display a genuinely positive attitude and to convey their willingness to serve customers. Their passion to offer 'wholeheartedly sincere' hospitality, and totally attentiveness to customer requirements, were characteristics of their 'care with heart' attitude.

##### 4.1.2. Warm welcome

The idea of 'passionate service' and engagement with customers featured frequently in the interviews with the EWDs, as did a range of

keywords relating to the service encounter interaction sequences, such as 'meet/greet/welcome', 'talk', and 'serve'. Employees believed that the first impressions of the service experienced by customers were based on their warm welcome. They appreciated the customers' presence and wished to make a social connection through their service. One interviewee enthusiastically pointed to the café entrance and explained:

*"I stand there (in front of our cafes) to wave and smile with our guest. They do not know that I can speak but it does not matter. Even I feel that some people like me more than other staff next door as I do not call them or bother them. I welcome them with my smile. Everyone can smile to make each other feel better. I feel very happy if people smile back and [show] interest in looking the menu in my hand."* (Employee 9)

To further emphasize the importance of demonstrating a hospitable attitude, participants highlighted the genuine friendliness and care they wished to convey to customers in every service experience. A bakery supervisor with hearing and speech disabilities, enthusiastically described how he felt during service:

*"I love to make people happy, and I enjoy meeting and serving people"* (Employee 5).

To demonstrate how he communicated friendliness and was able to anticipate guests' needs, another employee described the meaning behind his routine:

*"It is just a small thing, but it means a lot; When we show guests the menu, it should come with a smile first, then we open the menu for them."* (Employee 9)

The intention to offer sincere hospitality stemmed not only from the participants' passion to serve, but from confidence in their ability to serve customers well. However, some participants, while expressing great interest in communicating with customers, also expressed concerns about the potential impact of the visible disabilities they might display. For example, Employee 9 was familiar with the aesthetic norms of hospitality employment and worried about her atypical appearance. She expressed the anxiety she felt when she first started work and, worried that her 'unusual' facial features might create a negative impression on customers, chose to hide during her first few days of employment.

*"At school, teachers and friends always said that cafe owner looks for pretty people. (...) When I got this job here, I wanted to do it, but I was really worried about my short legs and my deformed face. Even I didn't know how to [apply] make up as I never tried it before. I don't think customers will like me. They will have a bad impression about our café."* (Employee 9)

In the above situation, the interviewee mentioned that encouragement from her manager played a vital role in overcoming her fears and developing confidence in her ability to serve customers well. The compliments, "Your smile is beautiful", "You're doing great", and the statement that the manager loved her handwriting, built up the EWD's confidence.

##### 4.1.3. Attentiveness to customers

The second significant aspect of 'total attentiveness' that emerged when participants discussed the key elements of their service interaction, was their attentiveness to customers. Interviewees explained the compensatory strategies they introduced to deal with any employment-related practical limitations associated with their specific disabilities. Employees with hearing and speech impairments, for example, acknowledged the use of non-standard procedures (writing notes, or typing on smart phones) to communicate and record orders. Participants believed that because they had to work differently, they paid exceptional attention to their work and customers to compensate for any perceived or realized disadvantages. This focused attentiveness increased their ability to anticipate customers' needs and provide

prompt assistance. They took this commitment to focus on the job seriously, and it was reflected in various ways, including observing customer behavior to understand their needs, always being ready to offer a service response, and to offer assistance if required.

One disabled interviewee at supervisor level (Employee 2) observed that in her experience, the hardest aspect of training EWDs in service techniques, was how to guide them in observing customer behavior and recognizing customer needs. She found that aspects of professional skills training, such as taking orders, serving food and drinks, or billing, were easy to convey through demonstration (doing tasks, then practicing), but that learning to be sensitive to guest's needs through observation (attitudinal training), was directly related to the attitude of the employee. Employees who displayed strong interest in serving customers were significantly better at observing and serving customers. She offered her insights into delivering attentive service:

*"When you really want to care for customers, you observe them when they are at their table. You will see how their eyes are, their gestures and their reaction with food and drink or difficulty in using chopsticks, you can recognize what they need [and] to offer help, even they have not asked you yet."* (Employee 2)

Furthermore, the attentiveness of EWDs was associated with their awareness of timings and time constraints, such as the availability of staff for customers who needed assistance during service. Participants, especially those with a mobility disability, were also concerned that their service speed, or longer waiting times, would be seen as weaknesses. One such employee, when meeting customers for the first time, proactively informed them of the possibility of a delay when delivering their orders. She believed that this strategy would allow customers to better understand the pace of her service.

#### 4.1.4. Impressing customers – desire to make customers feel special

The EWDs interviewed perceived that the customers' expectations were significantly impacted by the contrast between being aware of the EWDs' disabilities and their ability to deliver exceptional service. In addition to the desire of participants to be extra attentive to compensate for any shortcomings in service due to their disabilities, they considered that their disabilities could attract customers due to distinguished service experiences (e.g., in darkened restaurants). A recurring theme in the interviews with EWDs employed in cafés and restaurants, was that 'customer delight' was their goal for customer service.

#### 4.1.5. The willingness to deliver a unique service experience

The notion of 'willingness to give exceptional service' emerged in the majority of the interviews. Employee 1, employed as a senior bartender for over seven years, stated that he always prioritized customer delight, both in his work and when training junior colleagues. His definition of customer delight was, 'creating a memorable and positive experience for customers that can be replicated'.

*"Customers can have good drinks in many other bars or restaurants, but I want to do something different here. I will show customers how I make the cocktails or a traditional Vietnamese coffee. I will train them how to do it and then they will do it themselves. I can see those customers like it very much."* (Employee 1)

By demonstrating and sharing his extensive knowledge during conversations with customers, this senior bar professional impressed his customers with outstanding experiences. The creation of high-quality beverages and the warm social interactions between the bartender and customers contributed to memorable service encounters.

When discussing key points in the service delivery, interviewees believed that their customers were happier when their needs were proactively recognized. High levels of skill in observing and recognizing customers' needs was expected from all employees as illustrated by Employee 7's observations of customer behavior:

*"I notice foreign customers or women find it is difficult for them to park their motorbikes here. Therefore, I always ask my colleagues to pay attention to the front area of our café. I will run out to help them to park whenever I see a guest to come. I know we do not have to do it as it is not our duty, but I think I should help them."* (Employee 7)

The interviewees spoke of being encouraged by their managers and owners to work confidently and creatively when they served customers. A participant with hearing and speech disabilities explained that he did not have any problem communicating with guests. He explained that using a mobile phone or writing notes supported his advanced skills in recognizing customer requests from their facial expressions or body language. He compiled his notes into a well-known book with 'cool icon drawing' (e.g., smiley faces, heart emoji), in which many customers requested that their own conversation notes be kept as a memento. He was happy that he had created a story that customers could tell others when they left his café. Other enjoyable ways of creating a special service experience mentioned by employees involved hugging, taking photos, and sharing jokes with customers. The findings suggest that creating a unique story to share with customers was a deliberate strategy conducted by the EWDs to delight their customers.

#### 4.1.6. Professional skills and knowledge

The interviews with the EWDs identified that concern about their professional skills was the most challenging aspect of their service interactions. Many EWDs came to their jobs without any vocational training. Many also had a low educational background. Two interviewees were illiterate before being trained at their workplace. Their lack of literacy skills and limited experience made encounters very challenging, and it was an extra layer of difficulty to learn English, Western menu items, and the basics of customer service. Several interviewees in management and supervisory roles shared their common experience, i.e., that it took extensive time and effort to train new EWDs.

*"Training new staff who have no idea about service is difficult, however, to make them feel confident and have "can-do attitude" is even much more difficult. Here we try to ask senior staff to show them and let them practice every day with guests. (...) The good thing is customers are willing to help us to train them. They feel much more confident when they have a customer's compliment. Step by step we have changed their life forever."* (Employee 4)

Most EWDs in this study considered the quality of their service interaction with customers would primarily be evaluated based upon the level of their professional skills. Therefore, they aimed to surprise customers by demonstrating the best customer service skills, especially their ability to communicate in foreign languages (e.g., English, Korean or Chinese). The fact that many participants could communicate fluently in English, surprised customers.

Additionally, EWDs used a variety of skill techniques to entertain their customers. For example, during his interview, one participant showed his excitement when demonstrating how he could hold a tray with three fingers only, as an example of his 'best' skills. Another interviewee (Employee 9) reported that she always tried her best to remember the entire menu, and described the items if customers asked her about food or drinks. Other employees in barista and waiting roles demonstrated their skills through their expertise in creating specialist beverages with attractive decorations. Employee 8 revealed that he remembered the favorite drinks of his regular customers to show how much he cared about them.

#### 4.1.7. Social connections

For the interviewees, the service interaction with customers was perceived as a platform to develop their social connections and establish friendships. EWDs greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet and interact with customers from different countries in engaging conversations. Some customers were regulars with whom EWDs could develop a

close rapport. For many EWDs, 'repeat' or 'regular' customers were viewed as a sign of success and acted as a motivator for high performance at work. Employee 4 mentioned that he would try his best to have a good conversation with customers by asking about their trips and home countries. He learned to speak their languages to cheer them up. He invited his customers to return to his café to experience different drinks. Regarding those repeat customers, Employee 4 said:

*"With some regular customers, I will remember their names and their favorite drinks. I will come to greet them, ask them about how they are doing, and check if they want their favorite drinks or want to try the new ones. (...) They are very happy with me as I care about them. (...) I have a very special regular couple who help me to learn English. If they come here and do not see me at work, they will ask my colleagues about me. I feel they are my actual friends, not my customers anymore."* (Employee 4)

In such cases, the service interaction provided the opportunity to establish a personal social bond with customers.

Warm social connections also occurred between EWDs and customers following service interactions. Some interviewees mentioned that they exchanged their social media details with customers (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp). Virtual connections could result in the exchange of photos or further contact between employees and customers.

#### 4.2. Customers' perceptions of the service interactions with EWDs

The customer interviews uncovered insights into their perceptions of the service interactions with EWDs. The findings indicated that customers appreciated the exceptional service experience that the EWDs provided and considered the service interaction an opportunity to contribute to social change.

##### 4.2.1. Genuine hospitality

**4.2.1.1. Welcoming attitudes made a good impression.** From the customers' perspective, the friendliness of the EWDs provided a special experience. The provision of a warm and comfortable atmosphere established positive impressions in the customers. One interviewee who became a regular customer during a trip to Da Nang said:

*"They look so happy and smiley. They make me feel excited to get inside any time I walk across their café. ... They are the happiest people in this town. I totally feel relaxed and welcomed to spend time here with them."* (Customer 2)

One customer highlighted the difference in being welcomed, rather than being enticed, as is common practice in similar restaurants in the same street of the tourist town of Hoi An.

*"You can see, they smile and wave hand from inside. If you interest, you can get inside to have a look on the menu. I do not feel safe when staff in some restaurants get too close or grab my hands. It is better to get attention of customers in a polite way like this."* (Customer 9)

Another interviewee suggested that the hospitality of the EWDs was demonstrated through their genuine interest in engaging with customers, apparent from with their facial expressions and body language.

*"You can feel the connection with staff here, you feel their warm welcome of you. (...) You will sense a sincere gesture from them like this (Doing the sign language she learned from staff to say thank you). It says all the things they bring to me."* (Customer 7)

Being warmly welcomed and cared for from the beginning of the service interaction made a positive affective impression on customers. This impression of 'genuine hospitality' had a favorable effect on how customers reacted to the service skills of the employees. Some customers additionally believed that their positive response to the friendly welcome given by the EWDs could help improve the confidence of other

EWDs by overcoming their fear of interacting with customers.

**4.2.1.2. Appreciation of the attentiveness and positive attitude.** The customer interviews showed recognition and appreciation of the EWDs' engagement with, and attentiveness to, their customers. One local customer mentioned that the EWDs in the café had created a joyful place for customers to relax and enjoy their visit.

*"We have many things in our life, but we keep complaining. Look how happy these staff are. We need the positive energy. I want to bring my nieces with me to a place like this so she can learn from these staff."* (Customer 10)

The interviews with customers further indicated that they perceived the interactions with EWDs as beneficial opportunities to enjoy genuine hospitality and relax. In some instances, the findings revealed discrepancies between the views of international, compared to local, customers. While some locals commented on the positive attitude of the EWDs, international customers tended to focus on the value of co-creating experiences. Participants shared their acknowledgement in talking and learning about how the EWDs worked at their cafés. For example, one overseas visitor was impressed by the bartender's skills—his ability to speak English, and his passion for making their cocktails.

*"Before coming here, I knew that this place is a social enterprise. I and my husband wanted to have some drinks before we have dinner in town. We never expect that exceptional service from him. Absolutely impressive! We changed our plan to spend more time there for dinner."* (Customer 9)

An added benefit referred to by some interviewees, was their belief that EWDs were more attentive and enthusiastic than other employees when it came to helping customers. In cafés or restaurants that employed PWDs, customers found that they did not experience the issue of being ignored, which was more common in establishments that did not employ PWDs.

**4.2.1.3. Professional skills and knowledge of service exceeded expectation.** One regular Australian customer considered a café staffed by deaf employees to be a second 'family' with whom to share her spare time from teaching English and enjoy her weekend dinner. She mentioned that her favorite coffee was made with low fat milk, which she had found was not popular in Vietnam. She was surprised and delighted when the EWD understood her inquiry and showed her the bottle of her preferred milk before making her beverage. It was the first time in Vietnam, that she had her coffee served as she wished. The personalized and exceptional service exceeded her expectation of EWDs and of the business.

Another participant recalled the attention paid to rectifying a mistake with his bill. He was very appreciative and almost incredulous about the effort taken made by the EWD to give him a refund of the overcharge at his hotel, even though he was unaware of the mistake at the time.

*"A recognized he had made a mistake on the bill when I already left the restaurant and went back to my hotel. Luckily, we chatted a bit when I was there. He then found his way to my hotel and returned the mistaken VND175,000 (~USD8). It was not much but I did not expect that. Incredible!"* (Customer 4)

The exceptional honesty demonstrated by a single employee changed the customer's perceptions of professionalism among EWDs in general, and the customer subsequently became a regular guest.

Regarding EWDs' ability to cope with service problems or challenging situations, the majority of customers commented that they did not experience issues when being served by EWDs. Several international customers said they had previously experienced a language barrier which limited their communication with staff in Vietnam, so they had anticipated the same situation when communicating with the EWDs. For Vietnamese customers who may have experienced problems, they

expressed hesitation in raising any issues with the EWD as they feared this might cause stress. If the matter was serious, they preferred to choose the alternative of asking the manager, or another staff member.

#### 4.2.2. Contribution to social change

**4.2.2.1. Meaningful experiences.** Customers highlighted that the service experience with EWDs enhanced the social identity and spiritual value of their trips. Customers considered that the benefits of their visits were twofold; they could enjoy good service while contributing to the generation of jobs for PWDs. Customers felt that listening to an EWD's stories, and building a friendship, was a special occasion. Some of the non-Vietnamese customers gave different motivations for the use of the service and advocated for social enterprises that employed PWDs. One participant mentioned the Vietnam war and the disabilities caused by the use of Agent Orange. He believed there was great value in offering employment to PWDs in this business.

*"I travelled along Vietnamese and see how difficult Vietnamese in many areas are living. Those with disabilities will have a better life if they can work and live by themselves. I see it is a great chance for them and I support them and this business."* (Customer 5)

During his visits to the restaurant, conversations with EWDs created a meaningful experience for this customer. Another customer who frequently visited the restaurant from the United Kingdom said that the socially positive message portrayed by the business motivated her to be a regular customer of the café. She enjoyed her visits which contributed to the 'belief in pay-it-forward' to help people in her life. For this customer, being at a workplace that employed PWDs, having casual conversations, exchanging hugs, sharing photos, and connecting on social media, were the highlights of her trip.

For the Vietnamese interviewees, cultural beliefs had a strong influence on their attitude towards the service of EWDs. Many local customers said that they believed in the goodwill associated with practicing ethical acts, e.g., by donating money, or helping beggars. They affirmed that if they enjoyed the service provided by EWDs and supported them to work successfully, it would benefit their future in return, which would be a well-deserved reward. Customer 2 explained that:

*"I always want to help people like children in mountainous areas or poor people, but I do not have much time. Thus, I come to this café and enjoyed the service of EWDs. Rather than spending money in other places, I support these EWDs by having my breakfast here. But they are doing a great job here. Their café and food are good too. There is no place better than this, two in one."* (Customer 2)

There were also some customers, both Vietnamese and foreign, with friends or family members living with disabilities, who deliberately sought out places that employed PWDs to visit. This group particularly enjoyed the service interaction with EWDs, which enhanced the confidence of group members with disabilities to communicate with employees who also lived with disabilities.

**4.2.2.2. Be inspired and willing to share stories.** A few Vietnamese customers considered that the service interaction with EWDs was a significant and inspirational story to share with others. Customer 13, the manager of a travel agency, confirmed that she invited her business partners and her team to a restaurant employing PWDs with a visual disability, as a way of supporting and encouraging corporate social responsibility.

*"When I came here, I learned the message of life, to live to the fullest as when you eat in the dark. (...) I see how employees here with their passion for offering service to customers. I learn about compassion. I would like to invite my business partners and my team to experience what I had. (...) The experience has a positive impact on my team."* (Customer 13)

Meaningful experiences with EWDs also created a pleasant memory for customers, especially when they travelled on to a new destination during their holiday. International customers who had the experience of enjoying the hospitality provided by EWDs expressed their intention to share their story as a highlight of their trip to Vietnam.

## 5. Discussion

By interviewing EWDs and customers in a paired approach, the study found that both EWDs and customers had positive perceptions of the service interactions at the cafés and restaurants. The EWDs perceived the opportunity to interact with customers as rewarding, a way of showcasing their focused attention on their customers, genuine hospitality, and desire to provide customers with a memorable experience. They also appreciated the social connections they established with customers, which increased their motivation to work and live independently. From a customer perspective, the findings indicated that customers appreciated the personal nature of the service provided by EWDs.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The aim of this study was to explore how both EWDs and their customers perceived service interactions. The insights gained from the interviews provided fresh understandings of how interacting in the foodservice context may positively influence the perceptions of EWDs and customers. The study responded to the call for further investigation into disability-related issues, which [Kim and So \(2023\)](#) categorize as 'a red cluster of factors' that influence service failure and recovery. The findings fill gaps in the literature in terms of both EWDs and customer perceptions of the same service interaction.

Firstly, the findings from this study extend understandings on the theory of service interactions in the foodservice context, from the perspective of EWDs. The study provides further support to the findings of [Baumgärtner et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Madera et al.'s \(2020\)](#) studies, which drew attention to exiting disability-job fit stereotypes regarding what EWDs can and cannot do. Despite the challenges associated with their disability status, EWDs demonstrated a high degree of customer-centric orientation. While the literature reveals significant concerns among employers about the ability of PWDs to work in customer facing service roles ([Doan et al., 2021](#); [Hui et al., 2021](#); [Madera et al., 2020](#)), this study found that PWDs in food service businesses adopted alternative measures to compensate for potential deficiencies in their ability to provide service.

When discussing the challenges faced by EWDs in terms of being evaluated as independent and professional at work, [McIntosh and Harris \(2018\)](#) found that employees with learning disabilities struggled emotionally and physically. The expectations regarding high professional standards of behavior added significant pressure on the trainees with special needs to complete their training and get employed. However, the findings of this study suggest that employees with physical disabilities were able to proactively adapt themselves to their working environment. Notwithstanding the aesthetic norms and concerns about physical attractiveness demanded by the industry ([Fang et al., 2020](#)), EWDs in this study demonstrated that their total attentiveness and genuine hospitality greatly increased customers' perceptions of a high quality of service experience. By optimizing the skills and knowledge acquired during training, EWDs went beyond the expectation to perform their jobs to a competent standard. Consistent with the findings of [Kanjakanan et al. \(2021\)](#), EWDs demonstrated their total engagement with the minutiae involved in delivering superior customer service, and consequently offered a special experience to their customers. 'Customer delight' was enshrined in the service offered by EWDs due to their 'total attentiveness' attitude, the desire to create a special experience, and the significant effort made to establish a genuine social rapport with customers. This strengthened findings from previous studies (e.g., [Mooney et al., 2016](#)), i.e., that strong social connections in the workplace create a

sense of accomplishment, which in this study motivated EWDs to be successful at work and gain increased independence. Consequently, serving and interacting with customers during the service delivery period offered EWDs the opportunity to participate in the workforce.

Secondly, the interviews with customers highlighted the sense of ethical consumption experienced by customers when visiting foodservice businesses employing EWDs. While aligned with previous studies indicating that customers supported products and services made by EWDs (e.g., Ellinger et al., 2020, Hwang et al., 2020), the findings of this study add a new and original contribution about customers' perceptions of the service experiences provided by EWDs. Previous studies that employed an experimental approach (where customers imagined themselves participating in service provided by EWDs), found that customers evaluated such service at the lower end of the scale (Kalargyrou et al., 2018a, 2018b; Madera et al., 2020). However, customers in this study suggested that they considered the service interactions with EWDs to be a beneficial ethical experience. They (spoke of?) learning from the positive attitude of EWDs, during service interactions as a reminder to appreciate their life circumstances. Customers enjoyed the service experience, without judging the backgrounds of the service providers. In addition, social interactions between customers and EWDs was viewed by customers as a means for customers to practice meaningful social behaviors. The desire on the part of customers to contribute to positive societal change, and experience a sense of personal growth, increased the perceived value of the service experience. The findings of this study demonstrated that customers would prefer being served by PWDs, even if it might have a negative impact on the service quality, as overall, it would beneficially impact on their personal well-being. Consequently, customers tended to share their sense of enjoyment with others by word of mouth, thereby encouraging additional customers to experience the service provided by EWDs.

Lastly, the insights on service interactions gained from the EWDs and customers demonstrated that the two groups of participants had different views on which was the most significant factor that influenced the overall service experience. The important dimensions of service interactions include attitude, behavior, and the expertise of the service providers when delivering service (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Dedeoğlu and Demirer, 2015). The EWDs believed that customers would care more about their professional service skills (expertise) when evaluating the quality of the interactive service that they had received. Thus, to compensate for any potential deficiencies in service, the employees attempted to impress customers with their skilled performance. However, customers paid more attention to the attitude and behavior of the EWDs, than to the exhibition of professional skills. They appreciated the positive attitude and attentiveness of the EWDs when caring for customers. Such a marked discrepancy could cause a misalignment of expertise versus attitude/behavior when reflecting on the service delivery continuum, but it also demonstrates that EWDs draw from attitudinal and behavioral resources to enable them to provide high-quality service interactions.

## 5.2. Practical implications

The study provides essential practical guidance for employers who wish to engage, and develop, employees with disabilities. Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) observe that despite increased legislative protection the "research to guide practices for integrating workers with disabilities continues to lag behind research focused on other protected groups (P. 1111)." This study provides unique insights and findings which have significant implications for employees with disabilities and hospitality businesses who wish to offer work opportunities to PWDs. Not only will employees with disabilities who are employed by foodservice businesses benefit from a satisfying job, but there are also considerable rewards for employers. The results of this study indicate that employees with disabilities are loyal and committed employees, who take an individualistic approach to each customer, in order to provide an exceptional service experience. To

realize the benefits from what has traditionally been an overlooked sector of the workforce, employers could use the findings of this study to gain a new and alternative perspective on how customers perceive and evaluate service interactions with EWDs.

The widespread reluctance to consider employing workers with disabilities to work in customer service positions due to perceived risks, could be transformed to an attitude of welcome, based on recognition that EWDs are committed to providing excellent service, and highly motivated to remain with supportive employers. In the current era of exceptionally high employee turnover in the hospitality industry (Jasper and Waldhart, 2013; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), employers should be mindful of the engaged behavior of EWDs in performing customer service (positivity, attentiveness, genuine care, and willingness to help), rather than focusing on their disability status. Support from hospitality organizations and leaders, (including training and coaching activities), will be required to develop, as appropriate, the confidence and skills of EWDs, but following this investment, employers stand to gain a new group of loyal and motivated team members. With the increase in visibility of such employees with disabilities, employers can be reassured that they are fulfilling the social remit that contemporary consumers demand (Christou et al., 2019), as well as complying with legal requirements to demonstrate inclusive practices for EWDs (Santuzzi et al., 2022).

To this end, a further practical implication suggested by the study findings is the adoption of a new approach to enhance the service performance of EWDs. Employees with disabilities consider that interacting with customers provides job satisfaction and improved social status, which in turn, assists in the development of a positive social identity. This establishes an individual's social connections, and demonstrates professional competency, even though EWDs may be anxious about their performance at the beginning. Thus, it is important that hospitality managers use a planned and staged progression, to encourage and support EWDs to engage with their customers. This is especially important in the context of a developing country, such as Vietnam, where there is limited access to education and vocational training, a negative cultural bias, and no quota legislation around the employment of PWDs.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize the differences between the EWDs' own perceptions around the important aspects of a superior service interaction, and those of their customers. While EWDs focused on their professional expertise to impress customers, in contrast, their customers had a higher appreciation of EWDs' positive attitude and customer-oriented behavior. This gap could be bridged by offering employee training programs, that not only develop the expertise, skills and knowledge of employees, but also highlight the ability of EWDs to provide exceptional service to delight their customers.

## 6. Limitations and future studies

Although the paper achieved the study objectives in exploring the perceptions of EWDs and customers in foodservice interactions, there are still several limitations that can be addressed by future research. Firstly, the authors were only able to recruit employees with physical disabilities, due to the nonavailability of employees with other types of disabilities (e.g., cognitive disabilities); therefore, the perspectives of employees with intellectual disabilities were not included in the study. Secondly, the interviews were conducted in one country only (Vietnam) which may restrict insights into the cross-cultural dimensions of service interactions between EWDs and customers. Thirdly, when recruiting and interviewing customers for a study on a sensitive topic such as service by employees with disabilities, researchers should take into consideration that they may encounter the issue of social desirability bias on the part of research participants, as observed by Dwertmann (2016) in previous studies. This could present a limitation on the quality of interview data, should customers decide to hide their true opinions on the service they received from EWDs. In addition, the study did not provide an indicator

**Table 3**  
Profiles of EWDs.

Interviewee	Summary of interviewee information	Business
Employee 1 (E1)	A senior bartender - supervisor, working for 7 years and finished vocational training, mobility disability, male.	Restaurant, 33 employees
Employee 2 (E2)	Supervisor, working for 11 years, finished primary school (grade 4), hearing and speaking disability, female.	Café with souvenir shop, 18 employees
Employee 3 (E3)	Manager, working for 14 years, finished primary school, mobility disability, female.	Restaurant, 7 employees
Employee 4 (E4)	Manager, working for 11 years, finished vocational training, vision disability, male.	Café with souvenir shop and a handicraft factory
Employee 5 (E5)	Supervisor, working for 5 years, finished high school, hearing and speaking disability, female.	Teahouse
Employee 6 (E6)	Supervisor, working for 7 years, finished primary school, hearing and speaking disability, male.	Café
Employee 7 (E7)	Waiting staff, working for 2 years, finished primary school, hearing and speaking disability, male.	Café with a roasted coffee factory
Employee 8 (E8)	Waiting staff, working for 1 year, finished grade 3, mobility disability, and male	Café
Employee 9 (E9)	Waiting staff, working for 1 year, studying at university, mobility disability, female.	Café
Employee 10 (E10)	Waiting staff, working for 3 years, learned to read and write recently but not at school, vision disability, female.	Restaurant

of agreement between multiple coders, as the data coding was undertaken by the first author, who is fluent in both English and Vietnamese, although consultation within the research team took place at all stages of the coding process. Lastly, this study was only able to recruit research participants from small and medium enterprises (cafés and restaurants). Businesses of this size may have limitations on their supportive resources (e.g., be without a Human Resource Department, or official training), and have restrictions on business and marketing activities.

Future studies, therefore, could extend the scope of the research with the contexts of two or more countries, and with the participation of a wider range of employees with different disabilities. The authors also suggest that hospitality researchers consider implementing quantitative studies to ensure the objectivity of the findings. They could, for example, examine the factors that contribute to the work engagement and performance of EWDs, or compare the perceptions of customers who have experienced service interactions with EWDs with those who have not had this experience, to explore further managerial implications. (Table 3).

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### References

- Baumgärtner, K.M., Böhm, S., Dwertmann, D., 2014. Job performance of employees with disabilities: interpersonal and intrapersonal resources matter. *Equal. Divers.Incl. Int. J.* 33 (4), 347–360.
- Bellucci, M., Biggeri, M., Nitti, C., Terenzi, L., 2023. Accounting for disability and work inclusion in tourism. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 98, 103526.
- Bengisu, M., Balta, S., 2011. Employment of the workforce with disabilities in the hospitality industry. *J. Sustain. Tour.* 19 (1), 35–57.
- Biggeri, M., Ciani, F., 2019. Emancipatory research as empowerment: an illustration from a research study of persons with disabilities in Palestine. In: *The Capability Approach, Empowerment and Participation*. Springer, pp. 339–359.

- Bitner, M.J., Booms, B.H., Tetreault, M.S., 1990. The service encounter: diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *J. Mark.* 54 (1), 71–84.
- Bordoloi, S. K. (2014). in Bordoloi, Sanjeev K.; Fitzsimmons, Mona J. and Fitzsimmons, James A.(2014), *Service Management: Operations, Strategy, Information Technology*. 8th ed. Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education (Asia).
- Brady, M.K., Cronin, J.J., 2001. Some new thoughts on conceptualizing perceived service quality: a hierarchical approach. *J. Mark.* 65, 34–49.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3 (2), 77–101.
- Christou, P., Hadjielias, E., Farmaki, A., 2019. Reconnaissance of philanthropy. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 78, 102749.
- Chung-Herrera, B.G., Goldschmidt, N., Doug Hoffman, K., 2004. Customer and employee views of critical service incidents. *J. Serv. Mark.* 18 (4), 241–254.
- Darcy, S., Maxwell, H., Grabowski, S., Onyx, J., 2022. Artistic impact: from casual and serious leisure to professional career development in disability arts. *Leis. Sci.* 44 (4), 514–533.
- Daruwalla, P., Darcy, S., 2005. Personal and societal attitudes to disability. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 32 (3), 549–570.
- Dedeoğlu, B.B., Demir, H., 2015. Differences in service quality perceptions of stakeholders in the hotel industry. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 27 (1), 130–146.
- Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., 2008. Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research. In: Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Sage Publications, Inc, pp. 1–43.
- Doan, T., Kim, P.B., Mooney, S., Vo, H.-Y.T., 2021. The emancipatory approach in hospitality research on employees with disabilities: an auto-ethnographic research note. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* 62 (1), 46–61.
- Dwertmann, D.J.G., 2016. Management research on disabilities: examining methodological challenges and possible solutions. *Int. J. Hum. Resour. Manag.* 27 (14), 1477–1509.
- Ellinger, A.E., Naidoo, J., Ellinger, A.D., Filips, K., Herrin, G.D., 2020. Applying blue ocean strategy to hire and assimilate workers with disabilities into distribution centers. *Business Horizons* 63 (3), 339–350.
- Fang, S., Zhang, C., Li, Y., 2020. Physical attractiveness of service employees and customer engagement in tourism industry. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 80, 102756.
- Feerasta, J., 2017. Individuals with intellectual disabilities in the restaurant business: an exploratory study of attributes for success. *J. Hum. Resour. Hosp. Tour.* 16 (1), 22–38.
- Gröschl, S., 2007. An exploration of HR policies and practices affecting the integration of persons with disabilities in the hotel industry in major Canadian tourism destinations. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 26 (3), 666–686.
- Gröschl, S., 2012. Presumed incapable: exploring the validity of negative judgments about persons with disabilities and their employability in hotel operations. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* 54 (2), 114–123.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., Johnson, L., 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods* 18 (1), 59–82.
- Haynes, K., 2012. Body beautiful? Gender, identity and the body in professional services firms. *Gen. Work Organ.* 19 (5), 489–507.
- Hennink, M.M., Kaiser, B.N., Marconi, V.C., 2017. Code saturation versus meaning saturation: how many interviews are enough? *Qual. Health Res.* 27 (4), 591–608.
- Houtenville, A., Kalargyrou, V., 2014. Employers' perspectives about employing people with disabilities. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* 56 (2), 168–179.
- Hui, R.T.Y., Tsui, B., Tavitiyaman, P., 2021. Disability employment in the hotel industry: evidence from the employees' perspective. *J. Hum. Resour. Hosp. Tour.* 20 (1), 127–145.
- Hwang, A.W., Yen, C.F., Liao, H.F., Chi, W.C., Liou, T.H., Chang, B.S., et al., 2020. Structural validity of an icf-based measure of activity and participation for children in taiwan's disability eligibility determination system. *International journal of environmental research and public health* 17 (17), 6134.
- Ingamells, W., Rouse, S., Worsfold, P., 1991. Employment of the disabled in the hotel and catering industry: assumptions and realities. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 10 (3), 279–287.
- Jasper, C.R., Waldhart, P., 2013. Employer attitudes on hiring employees with disabilities in the leisure and hospitality industry: practical and theoretical implications. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 25 (4), 577–594.
- Kalargyrou, V., Volis, A.A., 2014. Disability inclusion initiatives in the hospitality industry: an exploratory study of industry leaders. *J. Hum. Resour. Hosp. Tour.* 13 (4), 430–454.
- Kalargyrou, V., Barber, N.A., Kuo, P.-J., 2018a. The impact of disability on guests' perceptions of service quality delivery in the hospitality industry. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 30 (12), 3632–3655.
- Kalargyrou, V., Kalargiros, E., Kutz, D., 2018b. Social entrepreneurship and disability inclusion in the hospitality industry. *Int. J. Hosp. Tour. Adm.* 21 (3), 308–334.
- Kalargyrou, V., Trivellas, P., Sigala, M., 2020. Guests' stereotyping and quality evaluations of service delivered by employees with disabilities: does service failure matter? *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* 25 (7), 735–752.
- Kanjanakan, P., Zhu, D., Doan, T., Kim, P.B., 2021. Taking stock: a meta-analysis of work engagement in the hospitality and tourism context. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* X (2021), 1–26.
- Katsaros, K., Tsirikas, A., Bani, S., 2014. Exploring employees' perceptions, job-related attitudes and characteristics during a planned organizational change. *Int. J. Bus. Sci. Appl. Manag.* 9 (1), 36–50.
- Kenny, D.A., Kashy, D.A., Cook, W.L., 2020. *Dyadic Data Analysis*. Guilford Publications.
- Kim, H., So, K.K.F., 2023. The evolution of service failure and recovery research in hospitality and tourism: an integrative review and future research directions. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 111 (2023), 103457.
- Kim, K., Baker, M.A., 2019. How the employee looks and looks at you: building customer-employee rapport. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* 43 (1), 20–40.

- Knežević, M., Tomka, D., Bizjak, B., Fabjan, D., Kukulj, S., 2015. The physical appearance of hotel guests: the impact on service providers' communication and quality of service. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 51, 8–14.
- Kumar, R., 2014. *Research Methodology: a Step-by-step Guide for Beginners*, fourth ed. Sage, Los Angeles.
- Kuo, P.J., Kalargyrou, V., 2014. Consumers' perspectives on service staff with disabilities in the hospitality industry. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* 26 (2), 164–182.
- Liu, Y.Y.J., Koseoglu, M.A., Wong, A.K.F., Kim, S.S., 2023. Contributions of people with disabilities to the research on the intellectual structure of the hospitality and tourism literature. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* 54 (2023), 42–55.
- Liu-Lastres, B., Wen, H., Huang, W.J., 2023. A reflection on the Great Resignation in the hospitality and tourism industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 35 (1), 235–249.
- Madera, J.M., Taylor, D.C., Barber, N.A., 2020. Customer service evaluations of employees with disabilities: the roles of perceived competence and service failure. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* 61 (1), 5–18.
- McIntosh, A., Harris, C., 2018. Representations of hospitality at The Special Needs Hotel. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 75 (2018), 153–159.
- McKercher, B., Darcy, S., 2018. Re-conceptualizing barriers to travel by people with disabilities. *Tourism management perspectives* 26, 59–66.
- Mizunoya, S., Yamasaki, I., Mitra, S., 2016. The disability gap in employment rates in a developing country context: new evidence from Vietnam. *Econ. Bull.* 36 (2), 771–777.
- Moon, H., Miao, L., Hanks, L., Line, N.D., 2019. Peer-to-peer interactions: perspectives of Airbnb guests and hosts. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 77 (2019), 405–414.
- Mooney, S.K., Harris, C., Ryan, I., 2016. Long hospitality careers—a contradiction in terms? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 28 (11), 2589–2608.
- Oliver, M., Barnes, C., 2010. Disability studies, disabled people and the struggle for inclusion. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* 31 (5), 547–560.
- Paez, P., Arendt, S.W., 2014. Managers' attitudes towards people with disabilities in the hospitality industry. *Int. J. Hosp. Tour. Adm.* 15 (2), 172–190.
- Poria, Y., Beal, J., Shani, A., 2021. "I am so ashamed of my body": obese guests' experiences in hotels. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* 92, 102728.
- Randle, M., Dolnicar, S., 2019. Enabling people with impairments to use Airbnb. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 76, 278–289.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., Baniya, R., Seger-Guttmann, T., 2017. Customer responses towards disabled frontline employees. *Int. J. Retail Distrib. Manag.* 45 (4), 385–403.
- Sá, M.A.D. d., Oliveira, M.I. d M., Dias, S.M.R.C., Barbosa, M. d L.A., 2017. Human resources practices and inclusion of people with disabilities in the hotel industry of Belém, Brazil: a multiple case study. *Hum. Resour. Organ.* 24, 13–23.
- Santuzzi, A.M., Waltz, P.R., 2016. Disability in the workplace: a unique and variable identity. *J. Manag.* 42 (5), 1111–1135.
- Santuzzi, A.M., Martinez, J.J., Keating, R.T., 2022. The benefits of inclusion for disability measurement in the workplace. *Equal. Divers. Incl. Int. J.* 41 (3), 474–490.
- Song, S., Park, K., 2023. Observing disability inclusion in service provision. *Annals of Tourism Research* 100, 103551.
- Svensson, G., 2003. A generic conceptual framework of interactive service quality. *Manag. Serv. Qual. Int. J.* 13 (4), 267–275.
- Svensson, G., 2006. The interactive interface of service quality: a conceptual framework. *Eur. Bus. Rev.* 18 (3), 243–257.
- Van Dolen, W., Lemmink, J., De Ruyter, K., De Jong, A., 2002. Customer-sales employee encounters: a dyadic perspective. *J. Retail.* 78 (4), 265–279.
- Vashishth, A., Jhamb, D., 2021. Why should employers hire people with disabilities?—a review of benefits for the hospitality industry. *Rev. Tur. Desenvol.* 35, 9–21.
- Weeks, R.V., 2015. Managing the services encounter: the moment of truth. *J. Contemp. Manag.* 12 (1), 360–378.