

BY SONYA RUFF JARVIS

RACISM IN RETAIL: MY PERSONAL SHOPPING EXPERIENCES

Amid growing public recognition that bias affects not only personal attitudes, but also broader and subtler social dynamics, the term systematic racism has become a watchword in both Canada and the U.S.

Retail and racism go hand-and-hand. It is an unfortunate truth. I can attest to it. I have experienced racism while shopping throughout my entire life. Even now, because I am a middle-aged African-American woman living in the U.S., it still happens.

As a shopper, I am treated “less than” in stores. Not all stores, not at all times; but enough that the stories would make you frown in disbelief. I can share countless times when I have been followed around the store by sales associates who watch me as if I am going to shoplift. I have a college degree, a master’s degree and my own business, but these aspects of me aren’t physically visible. I can’t wear those accomplishments or status for everyone to see. Many retailers see only the colour of my skin and bring their racial biases to the situation.

I am not talking about raw in-your-face individual racism, the kind that is blatant and violent. I am talking about the subconscious bias type of racism. These are biases that we may not be aware of or may not want to acknowledge, but our resulting actions sometimes disqualify others because of their differences or because someone doesn’t look like us. We all do it. If brought to our attention, we can recognize what we are doing; admit that it is wrong and make adjustments, knowing that we can change how we negatively interact with others due to those biases.

There are several phrases being used during this time in our history, such as structural racism, institutional racism, and systematic racism. In fact, they all mean the same thing. They describe the awful feeling of inequality that results because of inappropriate treatment on account of

one’s race. When an individual or a group of people is considered inferior because of their skin colour, we all lose. We lose because inequality denies our communities of opportunities for our friends, neighbours and businesses—and that includes retailers.


In light of the current state of affairs in the U.S., it’s important that we take time to exhale and examine our hearts and values to determine if they align with our actions, and specifically, with our daily contributions to our society. When considering the presence of racism in retail, a recent Gallup survey revealed that 22 percent of African-Americans felt that they were extended less courtesy in stores. Another 20 percent felt that they received less respect during their shopping experiences.

There is no mistake that retail and racism are connected and many incidents are being called out through smartphone videos that capture bad behaviours. Have they occurred in the past? Yes, they just may not have been captured for the world to see via social media. Do you remember the Starbucks video that went viral where police were called to arrest two African-American men waiting for another person to show before starting a meeting? These men were targeted because of their race while others were not approached for sitting in a Starbucks without making a purchase. It was a public relations nightmare resulting in Starbucks shutting down all its U.S. stores to conduct mandatory training around diversity, equity and inclusion (which is another buzz phrase now too).

I believe that most people exhibiting racist behaviours do not realize the implications of their conduct. They probably are



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not racist, but their conduct is racist and produces the same negative results. Many non-minorities may only experience contact with minorities in the retail setting. That fact is powerful. While racism in retail is an unfortunate reality, I hope that retail leads the way in knocking out racism. This period in history has given us a chance to exhale, to examine our hearts and our values to ensure that our actions contribute positively to our communities and the world. 

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