

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION AND ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION: PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY ON TOURISM SERVICES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (2001) establishes tourism as a universal right, highlighting the obligation to provide reliable information to all tourists. The lack of equal access to this information, especially on accessibility issues, constitutes discrimination against people with functional diversity, leading to a discrepancy between their expectations and actual experiences. This challenge underlines the need for a more inclusive tourism marketing strategy.

Social representations and brand image are crucial in the perception and choice of tourism destinations, but standard communicative practices often exclude those with specific accessibility needs. This exclusion has been widely documented and criticised in the academic literature (Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Jackson and Scott, 1999; Darcy, 2010; Devile and Kastenholz, 2018).

This qualitative study, through focus groups segmented by disability type, explores how people with functional diversity perceive tourism information and services, especially with regard to accessibility. The findings reveal variations in experiences of accessibility, with some participants facing significant barriers both in accessing information and in the relevance and accuracy of the data found. The importance of adapting tourism offers and services to improve accessibility is highlighted, underlining a discriminatory situation that compromises the right to tourism for persons with disabilities.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an anthropological methodology, focusing on the active participation of the subjects with the aim of generating a positive social impact. Focus groups, segmented by disability type (DFA, DFF, and DFC), are used to explore tourism experiences and perceptions on key aspects of tourism, such as travel arrangements, accessibility, and customer service. The focus groups, conducted virtually via Zoom due to the pandemic, have allowed for a detailed analysis of accessibility needs and branding of tourism destinations. This approach is justified by its potential to reveal personal attitudes and experiences in a profound way, fostering empowerment and collective identity (Johnson, 1996; Gibb, 1997). Participants were selected through qualitative sampling, seeking diversity and representativeness within communities of people with disabilities. The sessions were recorded and transcribed in full, allowing for a thorough analysis of the content and interactions, in order to identify specific needs for accessibility in tourism and to suggest improvements in the information provided and in the construction of an inclusive brand image.

3. RESULTS

The results of the study reveal significant challenges in the accessibility of tourism information for people with disabilities, showing that the information available is often scarce, unspecific, and often misleading. Participants, who organise their trips mainly through the Internet, find deficiencies in the quality and specificity of accessibility data. This manifests itself in additional challenges, such as the lack of accessible online discounts and the need for more planning and resources to ensure smooth travel, which often comes at a higher financial and time cost.

Individual strategies for gathering necessary information include the support of informal networks and the experience of peers, especially valued by those with physical disabilities. However, people with cognitive disabilities often rely on family members or guardians for travel planning, which limits their direct involvement in information seeking.

Accessibility of information on adapted services and resources is inconsistent, with significant barriers for people with hearing and cognitive disabilities. Although some solutions such as easy reading and the use of pictograms can help, most digital tools are not designed with diverse accessibility needs in mind. Technology offers opportunities for low-cost improvements, but lack of awareness of specific needs and limited dissemination of accessible information remain major barriers.

The accessibility of tourism information is crucial both before and during the trip, directly impacting on the perceived quality and representation of destinations. People with disabilities find it difficult to orient themselves in public spaces and to understand available information, such as menus or signage, due to a lack of cognitive accessibility. Direct and personalised communication, as well as easy-to-read materials, stand out as preferred solutions to overcome these barriers.

Participants with hearing impairment highlighted the importance of technological adaptations and effective communication with staff, suggesting improvements such as

menus with pictures and more information on adapted services. Staff training on accessibility is essential to avoid discriminatory treatment and improve assistance to customers with disabilities.

The inclusion of people with disabilities in the branding of tourism destinations is essential. Currently, there is a notable absence of representation of functional diversity in advertising material, which perpetuates aesthetic prejudice and limits the perception of inclusion.

Participants' cross-cutting demands include recognition as potential customers, transparency about the accessibility of services, and the expansion of opportunities for autonomous tourism experiences. They highlight the need to consider all forms of functional diversity in tourism adaptations, not only physical ones, to ensure truly inclusive tourism.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights significant deficiencies in information and communication accessibility within the tourism sector, particularly evident for people with hearing and cognitive disabilities. These barriers range from linguistic and cognitive to structural, profoundly affecting the inclusion and representation of these groups in tourism branding. The results of our research suggest the need for a systematic change that recognises tourism as a fundamental right, ensuring universal accessibility in accordance with existing regulations.

Conversations reveal that the tourism experience, traditionally associated with pleasure and satisfaction, is often inaccessible to people with disabilities, limiting their opportunities for enjoyment. This challenge calls for a comprehensive transformation in the sector, from promotion to communication of tourism services, to embrace the diversity of users and ensure equal participation. The involvement of the tourism sector is crucial to meet the accessibility and representation needs of all groups, promoting truly inclusive tourism.