




DISCRIMINATION AND ACCESSIBILITY IN TOURISM – EXPLORING BARRIERS BY DISABLED TRAVELERS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

Accessible tourism has historically been an under-researched area within tourism studies. However, over the past decade, growing recognition of its importance and the diverse range of stakeholders involved has led to a significant shift. As a result, an increasing number of international researchers have begun exploring this field. The Erasmus “Accessible” project has contributed to this momentum by conducting international research across four countries, aiming to better understand the current state and development potential of accessible tourism. A survey conducted among individuals with disabilities yielded several new insights into the travel habits of this target group. The study also examined how inclusive the social environment is and whether people with disabilities face discrimination while traveling. These negative experiences may affect their motivation and travel behaviours. By analysing awareness and the types of discrimination encountered, this research can help identify best practices and promote greater social inclusion.

Keywords: accessible tourism, discrimination, people with disabilities, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The population of persons with impairments cannot be precisely determined. The World Health Organization reports that more than 16% of the world population, almost one in six individuals, has some type of disability (WHO, 2023). In prosperous nations with elevated living standards, those with disabilities continue to be one of the most marginalized groups in society. They often display inferior health, less educational attainment, and obstacles to work (Bernát et al., 2022; Jarjabka et al., 2024). Moreover, they are more prone to experience poverty, victimization from harassment, assault, and crime, and are less likely to get sufficient legal protection. Numerous individuals also live inside constrained legal frameworks (WHO, 2023).

This research, as part of a comprehensive examination into accessible tourism, aims to determine if persons in Hungary with disabilities encounter prejudice when traveling, and if so, to what degree and in what manifestations. Based on our prior study and current literature, we offer the following three hypotheses:

- H1: Due to insufficient social inclusion, the majority of people with disabilities experience some form of discrimination while traveling.
- H2: Individuals with higher levels of education and women are more likely to perceive discrimination in tourism.
- H3: The severity of the disability correlates with a heightened perception of discrimination in tourism.

We contend that empirical investigations into the lived experiences of prejudice merit particular focus within the realm of accessible tourism. Nevertheless, an examination of the existing literature indicates that this field remains underexplored.

This research starts with a concise overview of the literature and the characteristics of its target demographic. We subsequently delineate the approach used in the empirical investigation carried out from 2023 to 2024. The results of this investigation will be presented to validate or disprove the aforementioned theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism sector is evolving to be more inclusive and accessible, focusing on meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). This reflects a broader cultural shift that recognizes the economic and social impact of this demographic group, alongside their right to dignified travel experiences. By adopting accessible tourism practices, the industry highlights its commitment to a market segment with significant economic potential while promoting sustainable and responsible tourism (Darcy et al., 2020; Sipos et al., 2021; Rácz & Egyed, 2023).

The financial influence of individuals with disabilities, often termed the “purple pound” or “disability dollar,” underscores the economic potential for businesses that prioritize accessibility (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). The growing number of tourists with disabilities reflects both societal acknowledgment of their economic importance and an ethical duty to provide equitable tourism opportunities. This shift not only drives business success but also helps organizations stand out in a crowded market, offering a competitive edge.

Tourists with disabilities are increasingly seeking experiences tailored to their specific needs, going beyond basic legal accessibility requirements for more seamless and engaging travel (Poria et al., 2011). The industry's efforts to cater to this group not only enhance the quality of tourism products but also make destinations more attractive to a broader audience. Comprehensive accessibility includes physical access, clear information, and personalized

services, fostering an inclusive environment that benefits all travellers (Burnett & Bender Baker, 2001).

Emphasizing accessibility offers businesses a unique position in a competitive market, appealing to both individuals with disabilities and those who value diversity and corporate social responsibility. Accessible tourism also aligns with global goals for sustainable and ethical tourism by promoting social inclusion and equitable access (McCabe et al., 2010).

However, barriers remain, such as the need for universal accessibility standards and better staff training in disability awareness (Ray & Ryder, 2003). Overcoming these challenges presents opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and leadership in promoting inclusion. Ultimately, embracing accessible tourism benefits not only travellers with disabilities but also enriches the experience for all, advancing a more inclusive and sustainable tourism industry.

Prejudices against people with disabilities are deeply embedded in broader societal contexts, including political, economic, cultural, and socio-political systems. While there is a robust tradition of studying general public attitudes toward disability (Bernát et al., 2022; Bálint et al., 2024; Bálint, 2025), research specifically addressing attitudes within the tourism sector remains scarce. In particular, the perspectives of tourism industry personnel – such as those working in catering, accommodation, attractions, transportation, retail, as well as fellow travellers – can significantly affect the tourism experiences of people with disabilities. Their acceptance or rejection of individuals with disabilities may create obstacles as significant as the presence or absence of legislation or specialized services (Barnes, 1995; Vila et al., 2015). From a broader perspective, accessibility can be defined as the uninterrupted pursuit of human activities and the continuous search for comfort (Farkas et al., 2022).

Accessible tourism, in this context, is an ongoing effort to ensure that all destinations, tourism products, and services are available to all individuals, regardless of their physical limitations, disabilities, or age (Farkas & Raffay, 2022). This issue is particularly pressing given the demographic shifts associated with aging populations. While accessibility needs are most prevalent among older individuals, various life circumstances, such as post-accident rehabilitation or traveling with young children, also necessitate attention to such requirements (Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

Throughout history, humanity has made efforts to promote accessibility, but it only became widely recognized as a social issue in the latter half of the 20th century. Today, the idea that everyone – regardless of disability – should be able to enjoy travel and leisure is broadly accepted, as it aligns with the belief that the right to fully experience life is universal (Végh, 2005). Furthermore, it is now understood that facilitating travel for individuals with disabilities

and providing the necessary physical accommodations is not only a moral, ethical, and legal obligation but also a sound economic strategy (Raffay-Danyi & Ernszt, 2021). Despite this recognition, the tourism sector still largely underutilizes the potential of accessible tourism, though recent reports indicate several promising developments (Buhalis et al., 2012). It is important to recognize that this untapped market segment should not be viewed as a homogeneous group. Instead, individuals with disabilities have diverse service needs depending on the type and severity of their disability (Zajadacz & Lubarska, 2019; Miskolczi et al., 2020; Berkes et al., 2025).

While certain barriers impact all travellers, others disproportionately affect a smaller segment of the population (Shaw & Coles, 2004; Zajadacz & Lubarska, 2020). Some destinations have made special provisions for people with disabilities, while others have recognized accessibility as a core market advantage (Lőrincz et al., 2019). Achieving true accessible tourism requires more than just physical access. An accessible destination must provide an experience that ensures independence, equality, and human dignity for all travellers.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection took place in the autumn of 2023 as part of an international Erasmus project involving four countries. A non-probability, purposive sampling approach was adopted, combined with convenience recruitment. Participation was open to individuals who self-identified as persons living with a disability and reported engaging in travel, either for leisure or other purposes. Apart from these inclusion criteria, no quotas, stratification, or random procedures were applied. Participation was entirely voluntary. Altogether, 1,171 questionnaires were completed across the four participating countries, of which 320 responses were provided by Hungarian respondents. The present paper focuses exclusively on the Hungarian subsample. Owing to the non-probability design, the findings cannot be considered statistically generalizable to the entire population of people with disabilities in Hungary, rather, they reflect the experiences and perspectives of those who met the inclusion criteria and chose to participate. The aim of the data collection was to obtain a comprehensive picture of the current situation of accessible tourism and the tourism habits of the target population. The survey of people with disabilities has been complemented by a questionnaire survey of the whole population in early 2024. The sample of 1,000 was representative of gender (475 men, 525 women) and age groups. The key demographic characteristics of the sample is shown in Tab. 1. Item development during our research followed a deductive, hypothesis-driven approach,

whereby each hypothesis (H1-H3) was linked to one or more underlying constructs that were subsequently operationalised into measurable survey items. All items were created by the research team, drawing on their subject-matter expertise and on relevant literature in accessible tourism and disability studies.

Below, we present the results of the questions about whether and in what form respondents experienced discrimination when travelling. Responses to the open-ended items of the survey were divided into ten groups, which was the basis of a frequency analysis. In addition, several nominal variables from the questionnaire were utilised to describe the sample and to provide contextual insight into the distribution of the coded responses. The results are presented in terms of absolute and relative frequencies. In preparation for the testing of our hypotheses, re-coding was done to create a new binary variable: it took the value 1 if the respondents had experienced any discrimination in their travels and 0 if they had not. By applying this variable for testing each hypothesis, to determine significant differences in the answers of the different groups defined by the hypotheses (according to education, gender, and severity of disability), Chi-square tests were used, where statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$. Before conducting the analyses, the dataset was thoroughly screened for data entry errors and inconsistencies, including out-of-range values, duplicate cases, and missing responses. For each cross-tabulation, the assumptions underlying Pearson's chi-square test, namely the independence of observations and the adequacy of expected cell counts were carefully examined.

Table 1 The key demographic characteristics of the sample

Age	No. of persons	%	Education level	No. of persons	%	Residence	No. of persons	%
18-35	256	25,6	PhD, doctoral degree	41	4,1	Capital	97	9,7
36-50	278	27,8	University Master's degree	167	16,7	City	351	35,1
51-65	232	23,2	University Bachelor's degree	311	31,1	Town	363	36,3
more than 65	234	23,4	Higher education vocational training	17	1,7	Village	189	18,9
			Secondary school	364	36,4			
			Vocational training school	50	5			
			Primary school at most	50	5			

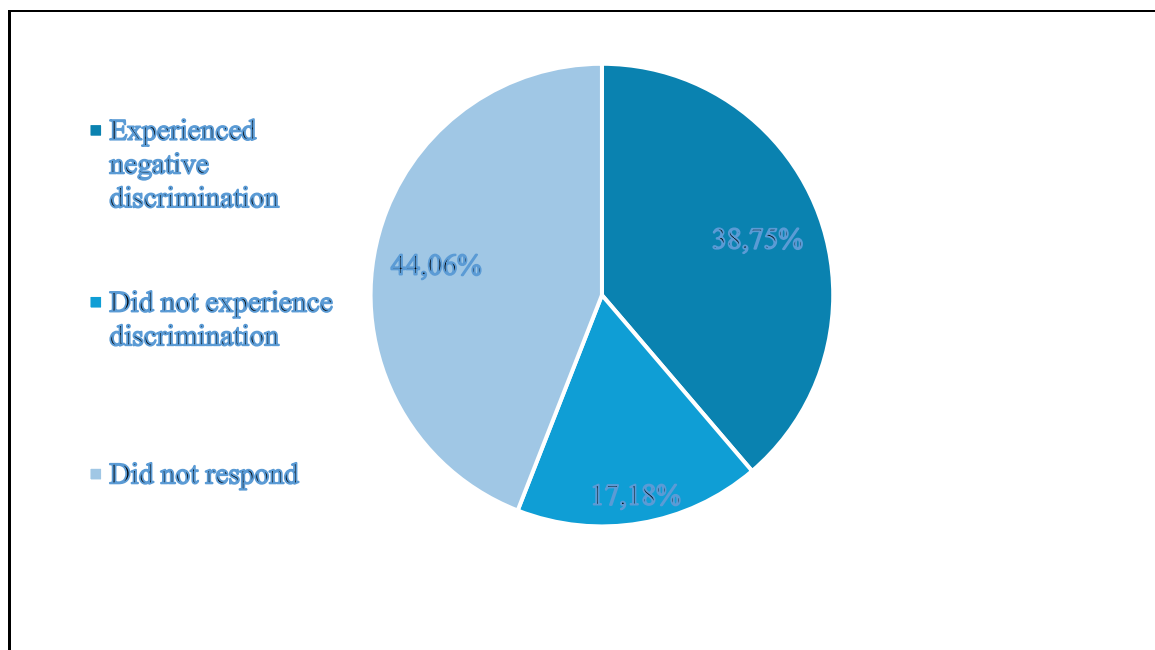
Source: authors' data.

RESULTS

The inquiry was structured to allow those who had not encountered prejudice throughout their travels to opt out of responding, resulting in 44% of participants (141 individuals) abstaining from answering this question (Fig. 1). The remaining participants, 56% of respondents (179 people) answered the question. More than two-thirds of them (69%) had personally experienced discrimination during their travels, with 31% (55) of respondents indicating that they had not (Fig. 1). Adding to this the number of people who did not complete the questionnaire, 196 (61%) of the 320 people surveyed did not report any discrimination during their travels. Based on this result, our H1 hypothesis is rejected.

Of those who had personally experienced some form of discrimination, the majority had done so primarily in terms of human attitudes (56.4%, 70 people). They mainly reported lack of understanding and helpfulness, as well as negative attitudes, inconsiderate and impatient behaviour, and, unfortunately, there were also more serious cases (Tab. 2). Some respondents were refused help outright and even shamed, with several people mentioning that they had been ostracised and disrespected. A number of people with autism also said that they were not welcome anywhere because the behavioural difficulties resulting from their condition were seen as an intellectual deficit. Another fairly sizeable group was of those with negative experiences of public transport (18.5%, 23 people).

Figure 1 Frequency distribution of responses to the question: *If you have ever experienced discrimination because of disability when travelling, what was it?* (n=320)



Source: authors' data.

Table 2 Frequency distribution of responses to the question: *If you have experienced discrimination because of disability during your travels, what was it?* by type of discrimination (n=124)

Type of discrimination	Respondents reporting	Rate (%)
Human attitude	70	56.4
Public transport	23	18.5
General lack of accessibility	15	12
Accommodation not accessible	4	3.2
Tourist attraction not accessible	4	3.2
Event not accessible	2	1.6
No. of accessible parking	2	1.6
Lack of accessible toilets	2	1.6
Restaurant not accessible	2	1.6
	124	100

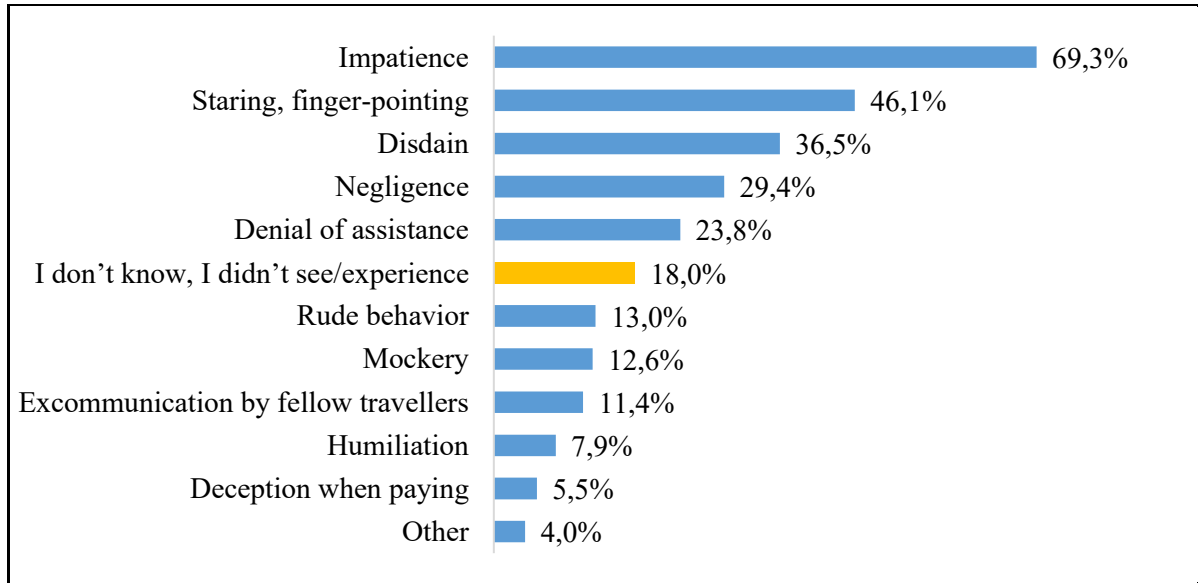
Source: authors' data.

Twelve percent of respondents mentioned a general lack of accessibility as a negative experience, with a smaller proportion pointing out a lack of accessible toilets and parking spaces for the disabled. Equally unfortunate and unsatisfactory is the situation in terms of basic tourism services of accommodation and catering, with several respondents reporting that the accommodation, restaurant, tourist attraction, or bathing resort was not accessible, and therefore they could not use the service as equal access was not ensured.

Analysis of the results of the survey of the whole population revealed an interesting contradiction. The population as a whole perceives the level of discrimination against people with disabilities to be much higher. Based on their personal experience, only 18% said they had never experienced discrimination against people with disabilities (Fig. 2).

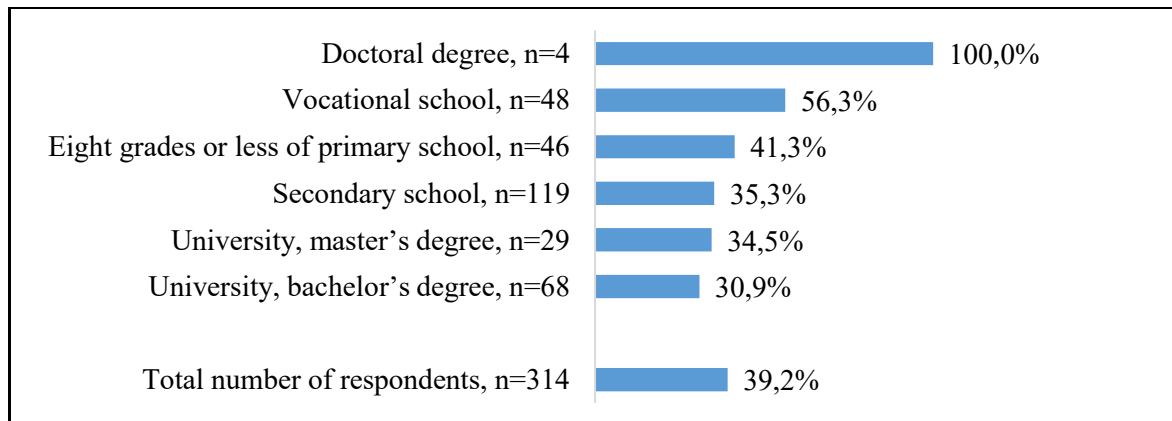
Testing our hypothesis H2, the Chi-square test revealed significant differences in perceptions of discrimination across groups according to their levels of education ($p=0.010<0.05$). As can be seen in Fig. 3, for lower-educated groups, a higher proportion of respondents had experienced discrimination during their travel. 56.3% of those with vocational education and 41.3% of those with eight grades or less of primary-school education felt discriminated against when travelling. This is in contrast to 34.5% and 30.9% for those with master's and bachelor's degrees, respectively. Holders of doctorate degrees are also included in the figure, but no conclusions can be drawn for them because of the low number (4). The empirical results not only did not confirm the hypothesis, but also showed a pattern to the contrary.

Figure 2 If you have personally seen/experienced discrimination against people with disabilities during your travels, what was it? (You can tick more than one answer) (n=1000)



Source: authors' data.

Figure 3 Perception of discrimination in travel according to level of education (p=0.010<0.05)

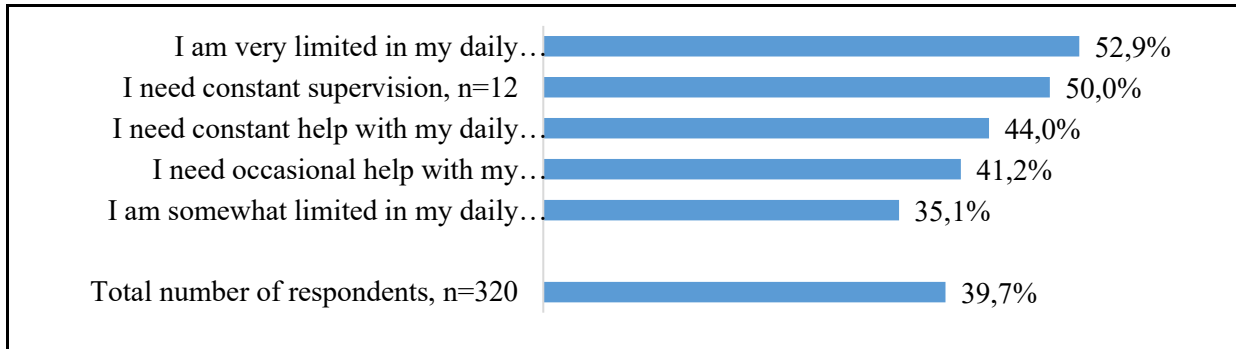


Source: authors' data.

The results did not confirm that women have higher rates of perceived discrimination in tourism, as the Chi-square test did not yield significant results ($p=0.451>0.05$). In terms of hypothesis H3, however, we did find significant differences with the Chi-square test as far as the rate of discrimination experienced was concerned during travel according to the severity of disability ($p=0,038<0,05$). Fig. 4 shows that 52.9% of those who are very limited in their daily activities and 50% of those who need constant supervision felt discriminated against in tourism. In contrast, only 41.2% of those who only need help with their daily activities occasionally and 35.1% of those who are somewhat limited in their daily activities reported experiencing

discrimination during their travels. In light of these results, we can verify the third hypothesis that stated that the level of discrimination in tourism increases with the severity of disability.

Figure 4 Perception of discrimination in travel according to severity of disability
($p=0.038<0.05$)



Source: authors' data

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research sought to examine the degree and characteristics of prejudice encountered by those with disabilities when traveling, so adding to the wider discourse on accessible tourism. Our research indicates that prejudice continues to be a substantial obstacle for those with disabilities, affecting both physical accessibility and societal attitudes as well as service delivery. In contrast to our original hypothesis, two of the three assumptions were not validated. In particular, we discovered that:

- *Education level and perception of discrimination:* Our prediction that those with elevated education levels would exhibit more awareness of or sensitivity to discrimination was disproven. Respondents with lower educational attainment reported increased instances of felt prejudice while traveling. This research indicates a multifaceted link between education and the sense of discrimination, implying that elements beyond education – such as socio-economic position, personal experience, and exposure to inclusive environments – may affect one's view of discrimination.

- *Gender and perception of discrimination:* The hypothesis that women would report elevated levels of discrimination was not corroborated by the data. Although women may exhibit increased vulnerability in some situations, our data indicate that this was not evident in the tourist industry. This indicates that gender may not significantly influence the experiences of discrimination encountered by those with disabilities while travel, or other factors, such as the kind of impairment, have a greater influence.

- *Disability severity and perception of discrimination:* We established that the severity of an individual's handicap is directly proportional to the degree of prejudice encountered. Individuals with more limits reported elevated instances of adverse encounters, especially with human attitudes and accessibility challenges. This highlights the need for a more inclusive tourism framework that effectively caters to diverse levels of impairment.

The results of this study have several implications for the advancement of accessible tourism. There is an immediate need for enhanced awareness and training of tourist operators and service providers. The demeanour and actions of those engaging with impaired travellers – be they hotel personnel, transportation providers, or other tourists – are essential for facilitating a favourable travel experience. Neglecting to confront unfavourable attitudes and insufficient understanding about the requirements of those with disabilities may render initiatives aimed at enhancing physical accessibility ineffective.

The findings underscore the need for a more sophisticated understanding of accessibility. Although physical access to locations, amenities, and services is crucial, genuine accessibility entails enabling those with disabilities to travel with dignity and autonomy. This necessitates a comprehensive strategy for accessibility that transcends physical enhancements to include education, awareness initiatives, and improved enforcement of current legislation.

Ultimately, our research indicates a significant economic potential for the tourist industry. Prior studies indicate that the handicapped population is an underutilized market niche. Enhancing services and advocating for accessible locations would enable the tourist sector to attract a broader audience and foster social inclusion. This necessitates investment in the design of accessible areas and in fostering an atmosphere where those with disabilities feel accepted and supported.

Like every research, our study has inherent limitations. Initially, while the research sample included respondents from four nations, the analysis mostly focused on data from Hungary. This may restrict the generalizability of the results, especially to various cultural or socio-economic situations where perceptions of prejudice may vary. Future research should strive to include a more varied sample to investigate cross-cultural differences in the experience of prejudice within tourism.

The self-reporting aspect of the poll may have produced biases. The perceptions of prejudice among respondents are subjective and may be shaped by personal experiences, expectations, or interpretations of the notion itself. Some respondents may underreport their experiences owing to social desirability bias, whilst others may overreport due to increased sensitivity or previous adverse interactions.

A substantial segment of our sample abstained from responding to the inquiry on prejudice, potentially distorting the findings. The causes of non-response are ambiguous and require further inquiry. Comprehending the reasons behind some people's lack of response may provide significant insights on concealed prejudice or ambivalence toward the problem.

Finally, the research did not investigate in depth the particular sorts of disability and their correlation with various forms of prejudice. Future studies might benefit from a more detailed examination that distinguishes between the experiences of individuals with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health problems.

Based on the results and limitations of this study, numerous directions for further research arise:

- *Cross-cultural comparisons*: Broadening the study to include more nations and regions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural, legal, and social circumstances affect the experiences of those with disabilities in tourism. This may assist in identifying optimal methods and effective models for enhancing accessibility and mitigating prejudice across various contexts.
- *Longitudinal studies*: A longitudinal methodology may provide insights into the evolution of discriminatory perceptions over time as societal attitudes and accessibility legislation advance. This would also assist in evaluating the efficacy of initiatives aimed at enhancing accessible tourism and mitigating prejudice.
- *Intersectional analysis*: Future studies need to investigate the intersectionality of disability with other demographic characteristics, including race, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic position. Comprehending the interplay of various identity dimensions in the experience of discrimination may facilitate the development of more customized and effective policy interventions.
- *Service provider perspective*: Although this study focused on the experiences of impaired tourists, further research might investigate the viewpoints of service providers within the tourism industry. Comprehending their attitudes, knowledge deficiencies, and obstacles in assisting impaired clients might enhance training programs and policies to promote more inclusive settings.
- *Innovative solutions and technology*: The evolution of technology presents increasing opportunities to mitigate accessibility obstacles via new solutions, like virtual reality tours, assistive devices, and mobile applications for visitors with disabilities. Investigating how these

technologies may enhance the travel experience for those with disabilities would provide significant insights into the future of accessible tourism.

- *Policy impact studies*: Assessing the influence of national and international accessibility policies on the travel experiences of persons with disabilities helps illuminate the efficacy of existing restrictions. Research may concentrate on the implementation deficiencies and enforcement obstacles that might impede the achievement of accessible tourism objectives.

Accessible tourism is not just a legal or ethical concern but also an economic and social need. Notwithstanding advancements, considerable obstacles – both tangible and perceptual – persist for those with impairments. This study underscores the necessity for a comprehensive strategy that integrates infrastructure improvements with attitudinal shifts, awareness initiatives, and legal enforcement. By resolving these difficulties, the tourist sector can foster a more inclusive society in which all persons, irrespective of their disability, may fully experience the advantages of travel.

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