

QUALITY GAPS IN TOURISM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: ACCESS TO INFORMATION SERVICES

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the article is to assess the significance and level of inconvenience of selected attributes of tourist services provided for people with various types of social exclusion, the disability among them. It may be helpful for understanding the possibility of separating customer groups and seeing their needs at particular stages of the supply chain in tourism (information, accommodation, transport, organization and intermediation).

Methodology – The survey was conducted among disabled and seniors helped to identify quality gaps in the provision of tourism services, taking into account their complementarity and accessibility at every stage of the delivery. The empirical data were obtained as a result of a survey conducted with the use of the CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interview) method among persons with disabilities (n=610). The survey aimed to acquire respondents' opinions on the significance (importance) and individual inconvenience to the respondent of a number of services related to a tourism trip. The method of Importance-Performance Analysis (I.P.A) and basic measures of descriptive statistics were used to analyze empirical data.

Findings – The survey results show how much the expectations of people with disabilities differ from the stereotyped perception of both the community itself and barriers to information services and participation in the tourism market. The important gap related to the widespread use of modern information technologies in tourism services was particularly highlighted. The results of the study will help to indicate to what extent the tourist experience of a disabled person and seniors affect the assessment of the significance and inconvenience of selected attributes of tourist services. It can point out stereotyped perception of restrictions and expectations.

Contribution – The results of the author's original research are mostly of practical and social character. They can be used by entrepreneurs to analyze the quality and reliability of services provided by their partners and the behavior and needs of the disabled people and seniors in tourism. They will also be useful for local and regional authorities responsible for ensuring the competitiveness and inclusiveness of tourism regions.

Keywords: tourism of people with disabilities, seniors, Importance-Performance Analysis, quality gaps.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of the article is to show the most important discrepancies between the real needs of traveling people with various types of social exclusion, the disability among them, and their stereotypical understanding, in tourism sector in particular. A large study, of which this article is a part, covered four main dimensions of a tourism product: (1) tourist information (TI) services, provided both at TI offices or kiosks and at websites; (2) travel agency services; (3) accommodation services; (4) other travel-related aspects

(including food and beverage serving establishments and transportation). The survey results help to assess the significance and level of inconvenience of selected attributes of tourist services provided. The paper shows basic results obtained for all four dimensions of the tourist service, but the main emphasis was placed on selected information services. The focus was on determining the extent to which support for people with disabilities is needed in free access to tourist information and services provided with the use of the newest information technologies, in particular the Internet. The community of people with disabilities has been paying attention to this problem for a very long time (eg. *Klucz do informacji...*; Paszkiewicz and Dębski 2013).

The author's original research was conducted among disabled and seniors. It helped to identify quality gaps in the provision of tourism services, taking into account their complementarity and accessibility at every stage of the delivery. The empirical data were obtained as a result of a survey conducted with the use of the CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interview) method among randomly selected persons with disabilities (n=610). The survey aimed to acquire respondents' opinions on the significance (importance) and individual inconvenience to the respondent of a number of services related to a tourism trip. The method of Importance-Performance Analysis (I.P.A) and basic measures of descriptive statistics were used to analyze empirical data. The assessment of quality gaps was based on the SERVQUAL method, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985).

The results of the study may be helpful for understanding the possibility of separating customer groups and seeing their needs at particular stages of the supply chain in tourism (information, accommodation, transport, organization and intermediation).

1. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE TOURISM MARKET

In the literature devoted to the subject, an attempt is often made to distinguish people with disabilities as a separate segment of the tourist market (*Economic Impact and Travel Patterns...*; *Manual on Accessible Tourism for All*; Skalska, ed., Kociszewski, Koskowski). When doing this it is worth remembering two significant difficulties: (1) the lack of unanimity on specifying the nature and defining the dimensions of disability, visible in the literature, legislative practice or social policy measures; (2) stereotyped perception of restrictions and expectations from people with disabilities side. Meanwhile, their proper awareness could be helpful, or even pivotal for the possibility of separating customer groups characterized by relatively uniform expectations for the type, scope and quality of tourism services. Such stereotypes are dominated by the perception of a person with disability as a wheelchair user for whom the main restriction is the lack of free access to services due to various architectural barriers. It seems that the definition and classification of this consumer group could be based on the assumption that disability-related restrictions are much broader in nature, combining three parallel areas: impairment, activity and participation. The last dimension – participation – or an individual's involvement in life situations in their environment, includes the social and physical environments. Both of them – eg. the level of social acceptance and accessibility of physical environment – could comprise factors having negative or positive effects on

that participation (*International Classification...* 2001). Therefore, analyses of the participation of persons with disabilities should stress the interaction of physical and/or mental dysfunctions with such environmental and social determinants.

Based on this international classification, we can conclude that participation can be defined as the type and extent of a person's involvement in life situations in the environment in which he or she functions. Both the social and the physical environment can contain factors that hinder as well as facilitate this participation. Given the above, the classification adopted in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health could constitute one of the main criteria for tourism market segmentation regarding people with disabilities and become the basis for distinguishing three levels of participation in tourism (on the basis on *International Classification...*, 2001):

- (1) independent and conscious participation, concerning tourists whose personal situations and broadly understood environmental factors pose no barriers to making full use of tourism services; general market segmentation methods and tools are utilised with regard to that group of persons with disabilities;
- (2) participation that is not independent but fully conscious, concerning persons who require – for various reasons – assistance from a third person or the existence of other assistive factors (e.g. adapted means of transport, adapted accommodation establishments, specific IT tools, computer software, etc.);
- (3) participation that is passive but fully conscious, concerning tourism observers, i.e. persons who see their own tourism needs, being aware of them but not participating in tourism for various reasons.

Diagram 1: Levels of participation in tourism: directions of action



Source: prepared by the author

One must not forget that the community of people with disabilities also includes a group of unconscious tourism observers, who do not see and do not declare their tourism needs, being unaware of them but still capable of observing tourism-related phenomena, as well as persons to whom the problem of participation in tourism does not apply (e.g. fully immobile persons) (Skalska 2015).

The growing, noticeable threat of exclusion results from several reasons, among them: (1) an increase in the number of elderly and disabled people traveling, (2) slightly different needs, also in the use of modern technologies, (3) lack of proper understanding of the needs in the field of modern technologies, (4) insufficient level of knowledge among employees responsible for services, (5) the unavailability of a number of information technologies services addressed to people with disabilities. The problem of hindered access to services provided with the use of modern communication technologies, currently experienced by some social groups, especially the disabled and the elderly, relates both to the equipment used (computers, smartphones, infokiosks) and

services provided using these media, especially internet services. When it comes to devices, the problems and limitations focus primarily on basic operation and navigation (necessity to use a mouse, extensive use of touch screens), while in the case of using content - around the inability to receive sounds, images and language. This is a new dimension of limitations and barriers observed in the participation in social life, including the use of tourism and travel, affecting not only people with disabilities, but also traveling elderly people. On the other hand, it seems that there is a lack of awareness and knowledge about the specific needs of the environment at risk of IT exclusion among people and institutions responsible for the proper use of new technologies. The aim of the article is to indicate the essence and dimension of restrictions in access to IT services for people with disabilities and the elderly, to discuss legislative solutions and to indicate compromise measures, examples of good practice, and recommendations. The article uses numerous secondary sources, analyzes made by non-governmental organizations, legal acts and the results of the author's own research, conducted among disabled and elderly people, own experience and own participant observations.

Research conducted at the national level by Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism has shown that the tourism activity of persons with disabilities is low. According to the findings from this survey, in the period covered, 22.8% of the respondents travelled for tourism purposes; the vast majority of them (95.4%) took one trip only (*Aktywność turystyczna...*, p. 22 et seq.). Among active tourists with disabilities, those with mild or moderate disabilities accounted for nearly half (48.3%) and 32.3% respectively. From the point of view of market segmentation, it is worth noting that the survey showed the dominance of trips taken by persons with reduced mobility (51.1%), respondents with mild disabilities (48.2%), university-educated (47.7% of trips) or graduates of post-secondary schools (13.6%). As regards the purpose of the trip, irrespective of the type of disability, those surveyed mostly declared leisure (60.6%), followed by health-related purposes, most frequently indicated by persons with severe disabilities (29.7%). Another quite significant purpose of the trip was sightseeing (19.2%) (*Aktywność turystyczna...*, pp. 26–27). The above mentioned study was conducted on a sample of 1,721 randomly selected people with disabilities aged 15 and over.

In examining the results of the national survey, it is worth pointing out the duration of tourism trips. Even though short trips (2 to 4 days) were the most popular, persons for whom the very process of transportation, travelling could be a major hindrance (persons with reduced mobility or with other but severe disabilities) more frequently took long trips (lasting 5 days or more). From the point of view of segmentation, other relevant issues include the source of financing or co-financing of tourism trips, the role of company social benefit funds, the co-financing of therapeutic rehabilitation and the use of treatment at a health resort. It follows from the national survey that approx. 27.9% of trips were co-financed by employers, 18.8% represented therapeutic rehabilitation, whereas treatment at health resorts co-funded from the National Health Fund (NFZ) accounted for 17.5% (*Aktywność turystyczna...*, p. 37).

2. QUALITY GAPS

It is worth pointing out that the low tourism activity of persons with disabilities as well as the second and third participation levels discussed above give rise to the necessity of naming and describing quality gaps between specific, disability-related needs and expectations of this consumer group and the degree and quality of meeting them. The basis for understanding those gaps is the identification of the distinguishing features of needs of persons with disabilities, comprehending differences between groups, followed by the differentiation and individualization of facilities. Such an assessment could be based on the SERVQUAL method, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). The instrument aims to indicate situations where service quality is reduced (or adequate quality is not supplied) and differences between consumer expectations and actual perception of the experience. It is worth emphasising that the quality of tourism services provided to persons with disabilities is determined by all the factors indicated in the SERVQUAL method, i.e. tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, individualized attention to the customer, but the last dimension is particularly important and highly expected.

Detecting the moments most critical to the final assessment of the quality of tourism services supplied to persons with disabilities not only allows the identification of the areas requiring improvements and firm actions from companies and state institutions, but it also enables service providers to segment the market appropriately and to establish which of the segments distinguished to cater for.

Diagram 2 presents in a composite manner the quality gaps in the provision of tourism services to persons with disabilities, reveals the specific characteristics of the segment, its differentiation and the necessity to indicate and emphasise slightly different problems. Thus:

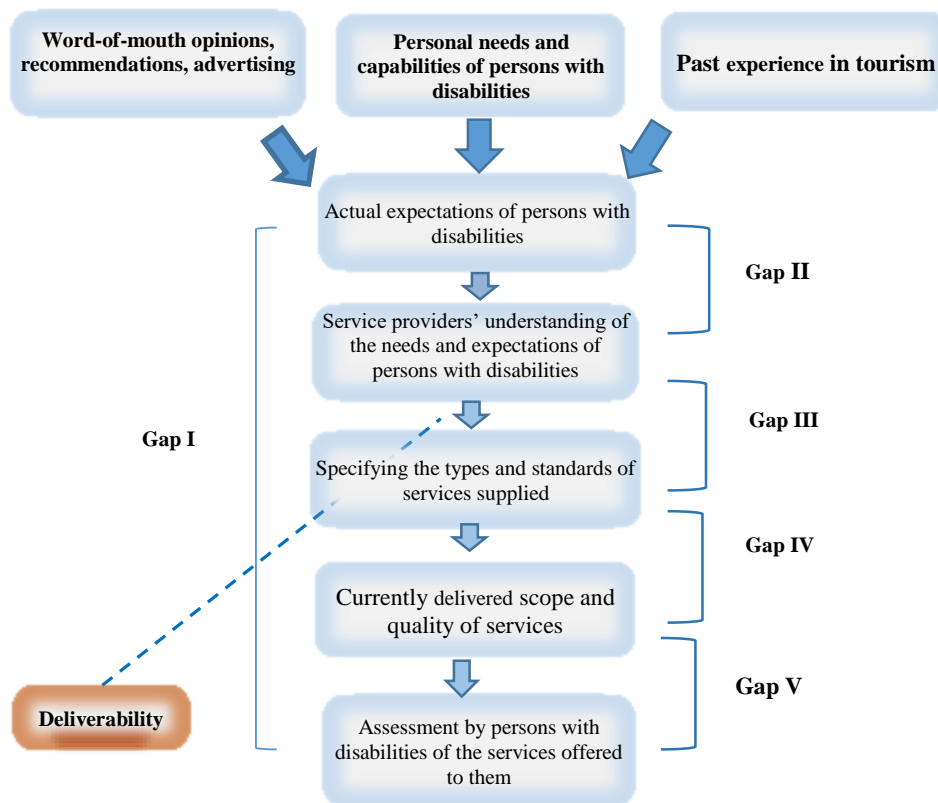
- gap I (the main gap), reveals the difference between the actual expectations of tourists with disabilities and the final assessment of the degree of meeting them.

It is composed of four sub-gaps:

- gap II, indicating the lack of understanding the specific needs of persons with disabilities by service providers, frequently caused by insufficient knowledge and following stereotyped perceptions of such expectations; the gap illustrates inadequate awareness and knowledge of the requirements of that market segment, primarily as a result of the absence of research on actual needs of persons with disabilities, failures in communication with consumers and inadequate training; it could also stem from the lack of interest in and (often excessive) concerns over the provision of services to persons with disabilities; it indicates the need for additional information and training to both management and employees directly delivering services to persons with disabilities;
- gap III, reflecting the lack of compatibility between the adopted service standards and needs; it could arise even where those needs are properly and fully understood, but for various reasons the service provider fails to translate them into appropriate procedures and activities; it could result from incorrectly defined quality goals of the enterprise concerned;

- gap IV, depicting the discrepancy between the adopted standards, frequently regulated by the legislation (e.g. the number of residential units to be adapted by the hotel owner to the needs of persons with disabilities, the elimination of architectural barriers), and the actual delivery; the gap could indicate the lack of appropriate skills of the personnel, poor employee–job fit, the lack of employee commitment to the adopted standards, the perception of the service as effort- or cost-intensive, poor supervision of service delivery;
- gap V, between the level of service delivery, frequently deviating from the relevant standards, and the perception by tourists with disabilities. Where the service delivery level is not different from the adopted standards, the gap could result from inadequate communication with a tourist with disability and failures in building the service image. It is worth noting here the influence of internal, personal factors on the functioning of a tourist with disability and their individual perception of the service concerned (e.g. inclination towards self-marginalization).

Diagram 2: Quality gaps in the provision of tourism services to persons with disabilities



Source: prepared by the author; the adaptation of the SERVQUAL model of five quality gaps to the market situation of the tourism of persons with disabilities.

To recapitulate the analysis of quality gaps noted in the provision of tourism services to the community of persons with disabilities, it is worth pointing out that gap I (the main gap), in the SERVQUAL method also referred to as the external gap in the model, reflects the four sub-gaps and depicts the overall difference between the quality actually expected and obtained, but as subjectively perceived by the consumer; it indicates a reduced service quality in the tourist's assessment in comparison with their earlier, actual expectations for it.

In adapting the SERVQUAL model of quality gaps to the market situation observed in the tourism of persons with disabilities, it is worth giving attention to specific conditions, characteristic of this market segment:

- (1) actual expectations of persons with disabilities for the service concerned are determined not only by their personal capabilities and restrictions, but also by past experience and external opinions (recommendations, marketing communication); it is worth emphasising that persons with severe disabilities, frequently having negative experiences in the past, sometimes have expectations below possible delivery;
- (2) an objective factor, often beyond the control of the service provider, is the actual deliverability of the service, resulting in lower quality delivered or refusal to deliver (e.g. the possibility of transporting a large group of wheelchair users in one aeroplane).

3. QUALITY GAP ANALYSIS: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Research description

The empirical data were obtained as a result of a survey conducted with the use of the CAPI (*Computer-Assisted Personal Interview*; research method consisting in conducting an interview with the respondent using mobile devices) techniques among persons with disabilities (n=610)¹. The advantages of this method are: accuracy of performed tests, receiving data in electronic form, speed of generated results. The survey aimed to acquire respondents' opinions on the significance (importance) and individual inconvenience to the respondent of a number of services related to a tourism trip. Preparing the questionnaire and the list of attributes and dimensions author followed - among others - European and country law and accessibility standards prepared by different institutions and communities (eg. City of Kingston 2019 Facility Accessibility Design Standards, Queen's University Facility Accessibility Design Standards, Ustawa o usługach turystycznych 2017, Obwieszczenie...2017). The author's experience drawn from previous research, cooperation with the society of people with disabilities and participation in several EU and governmental projects (eg. European Network for Accessible Tourism ENAT) was also very helpful. to include four substantive parts, relating to the main dimensions of a tourism product: (1) tourist information (TI) services, provided both at TI offices or kiosks and at websites; (2) travel agency services; (3) accommodation services; (4) other travel-related aspects (including food and

¹ The survey was carried out by a professional research company Grupa BST Sp. z o.o., conducting both quantitative and qualitative social research, <https://grupabst.pl/badania-spoleczne> [accessed: 10 March 2023].

beverage serving establishments and transportation). The respondents made two assessments of 50 attributes of a tourism trip (with regard to both the significance of services and the level of hindrances to using them). Those included tangible (e.g. hotel bedroom equipment) and intangible characteristics (e.g. employees' helpfulness). The evaluation of tourist information, travel agency and accommodation services covered 17, 18 and 15 attributes respectively. As mentioned before, the survey additionally included other services used by tourists during trips, e.g. restaurants, transportation, museums, tourist attractions. The design of the questionnaire was based on a quantitative rating scale from 1 to 10, allowing to assess the importance of an attribute to the respondent (1 – unimportant attribute, 10 – very important attribute). The scale proposed in the survey involved the respondents' assessment of the importance (significance) of a specific service attribute on the one hand and its inconvenience, understood as the hindrance level encountered by the tourist using the service in question, on the other hand. The higher the inconvenience level, the greater the dissatisfaction with service quality.

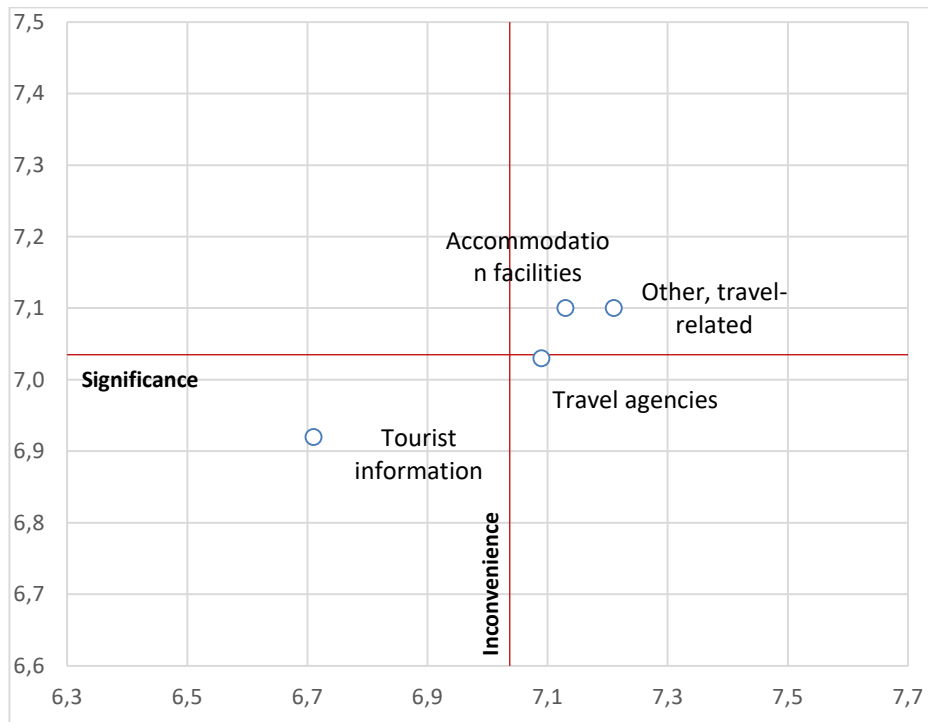
Questions about the respondents concerned their gender and age, place of residence, type and degree of disability and level of tourism activity measured by the number of trips taken in the year of the survey. Women and men represented 51.8% and 48.2% of those surveyed respectively. The largest group were persons with secondary education (59.7%), followed by university graduates (23.3%). Persons aged 26–54 years accounted for the highest share (44.9%), whereas respondents aged 75 years or more were the smallest group. Nearly every fourth respondent represented large cities (with a population exceeding 500,000), whereas residents of villages and small towns (up to 50,000 inhabitants) accounted for a third. Those surveyed were dominated by persons with mild disabilities (49.8%), followed by people with moderate and severe disabilities (38.5% and 11.7% respectively). More than half of the respondents (56.7%) were persons actively participating in tourism (two or more trips in 2019), nearly 12% declared taking no trip in the year covered.

3.2. Data analysis

The first stage of data analysis included the calculation of average ratings of all the 50 attributes of a tourism trip, separately for their significance (importance to the individual consumer) and for the level of hindrances to using them, as well as the average for all the attributes combined. Next, those values were used as coordinates for the creation of the IPA (*importance–performance analysis*) matrix, illustrating the 'significance–inconvenience' relationship. The total average values concerning the importance (significance, hereafter denoted by S) of all the rated components of tourism services combined (the main groups: tourist information – a; travel agencies – b; accommodation facilities – c; and other travel-related services – d) as well as of each of them separately were introduced on the horizontal axis (x), whereas the total average values regarding their inconvenience (I) – on the vertical axis (y). The average values of (S) and (I) for all components classified within particular groups of services (tourist information, travel agencies, accommodation facilities, other travel-related aspects) were selected as the point of intersection of axes (x) and (y). Using the IPA method allowed to determine four areas (quadrants) and to examine components/attributes according to their location within the matrix. The IPA matrix shows that attributes located in the top right corner

were rated as priorities, requiring special attention, since the respondents considered them both to be particularly significant and to cause above-average inconvenience (accommodation facilities, other travel-related services). Further in the analysis, the quadrant in question was labelled as 'requiring attention'. As mentioned before, it included accommodation facilities and the group of travel-related services referred to as 'other'. The attributes placed in the bottom left area were assessed as less significant, of lower priority, whereas their inconvenience was evaluated as 'below average'. It included tourist information services. The other two (the top left and bottom right) quadrants should also be treated as important, but with below-average ratings of significance or inconvenience.

Chart 1: IPA analysis (significance – inconvenience): the main areas of tourism service provision. Ratings from 1 (unimportant attribute) to 10 (very important attribute)



Source: research conducted by the author.

In analyzing the results presented in Chart 1, it must be remembered that those are provided in a composite manner, as average values for the main four areas; therefore, they should be treated in consideration of all the reservations involved in the use of the arithmetic mean. To identify the levels of significance and inconvenience based on particular attributes (classified in the main groups), the attributes are further reviewed in terms of importance within the groups concerned. The data obtained in relation to the

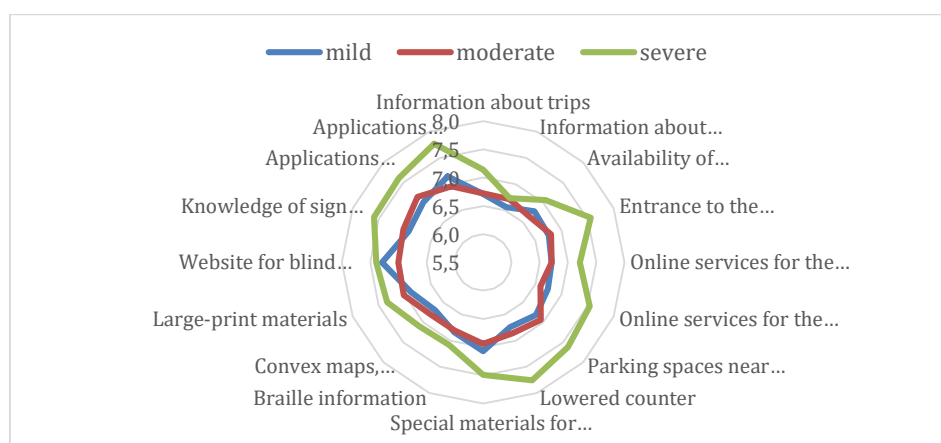
assessment of the inconvenience of tourist information services may serve as an example (Table 1).

Table 1: Average ratings (on a scale from 1 to 10) of inconvenience – selected information services (by degree of disability)

Selected information services	Degree of disability		
	<i>mild</i>	<i>moderate</i>	<i>severe</i>
Information about trips	6.7	6.7	7.1
Information about tourism events	6.6	6.7	6.7
Availability of information for different disabilities	6.8	6.7	7.1
Entrance to the tourism information point	6.8	6.8	7.6
Online services for the blind	6.7	6.7	7.2
Online services for the deaf	6.7	6.6	7.5
Parking spaces near TI offices/kiosks	6.8	6.9	7.6
Lowered counter	6.7	6.9	7.8
Special materials for blind persons	7.1	6.9	7.5
Braille information	6.8	6.8	7.1
Convex maps, diagrams, mock-ups, etc.	6.7	6.8	7.1
Large-print materials	6.9	7.0	7.3
Website for blind persons	7.3	7.0	7.4
Knowledge of sign language	6.9	7.0	7.6
Applications dedicated for blind persons	7.0	7.1	7.6
Applications dedicated for hearing-impaired persons	7.2	7.0	7.8

Source: research conducted by the author.

Chart 2: Ratings of the inconvenience of selected attributes of tourism information services by degree of disability



Source: research conducted by the author.

4. DISCUSSION

The survey results show how much the expectations of people with different types and degree of disabilities differ from the stereotyped perception of both the community itself and barriers to their participation in the tourism market. The respondents explicitly indicated the importance of inclusivity, encompassing a strong need for persons with disabilities to be part of the tourism mainstream, to avoid being stigmatized in any way and to strive for independent use of tourism services, whether travelling alone or in the company of one's relatives. It concerns not only transportation and accommodation but also the possibility to move around in the immediate vicinity, the time of arrival/departure, tours in the place visited and the whole process of trip organization. Service providers, travel agencies, intermediaries, carriers must be aware of the complementarity of tourism services and realize that those should be available and accessible at every stage of service provision. In the spirit of the times, the most recent aspect of that inclusivity is the possibility to function in the digital environment, making available all modern forms of communication, various ways of contacting customers with disabilities with the use of multimedia techniques, including via the Internet. Despite new legislative solutions recommending the application of standards consistent with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 3.0 (WCAG 3.0), the environment remains inaccessible to many persons with disabilities (www1).

The IPA analysis allowed to determine the attributes of tourism services most valued by tourists with disabilities, thus the characteristics with the greatest potential for creating management strategies boosting competitiveness where the company (or the tourist region) concerned intends to design products for this – very diverse – market segment. As shown by the survey results, facilities for booking and purchasing tourism services on-line, the availability of essential items of bedroom equipment at accommodation establishments, access to health care during tourism trips and the accessibility of recreational services are of paramount importance to persons with disabilities, which changes the stereotyped image of the market segment in question. Those findings could be used by businesses in the examination of tourism behavior and needs of people with disabilities, broken down by type and degree of disability.

Meanwhile, disability in tourism is still perceived primarily through the prism of physical limitations. This approach most often determines the methodological assumptions of research, entrepreneurs' activities and initiatives in the field of tourism policy. The International Symbol of Access is wheelchair symbol. Given the author's survey results and the classification adopted in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, mentioned above, three levels of participation in tourism could be one of the main criteria for tourism market segmentation. Moreover, it is worth thinking about modifying the attributes of segmentation of people with disabilities that have been used so far. Talking about the whole group of "people with disabilities" and "seniors" is useless from the point of view of making tourist services accessible (to whom?).

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the paper was to show the problem of ensuring access to digital information, distance communication with customers and on-line purchasing facilities. It was meant to show service providers basic issues for people with different forms and degree of disability. When discussing the quality gaps it is worth paying attention to a more and more important gap related to the widespread use of modern information technologies in tourism services (Vila et al. 2020). A huge barrier, impossible for many people with disabilities to overcome, are the high costs of access to new, specialized technological solutions that enable the use of the Internet, artificial intelligence and important functions of mobile telephony. In particular, this applies to various types of devices and programs that "intermediate" between the capabilities of a disabled person and the content presented on websites: Braille screens, screen reading programs, various types of specialized interfaces. Research conducted in many countries shows that the most important reason why people with disabilities do not use the Internet are still too high costs of purchasing both appropriate hardware and software. Extremely dynamic changes in the field of new technologies on the one hand, and the impoverishment of the environment of disabled people on the other, are the cause not only of IT exclusion, but - what is more - the deepening of the gap between the needs and the possibilities of meeting them. This is despite the fact that from a technical point of view the existence of such a huge gap is not justified. It seems that the problem for people with disabilities in relation to the possibility of using new information technologies is something that - paradoxically - is in fact the driving force for the development of new solutions, dedicated mainly to this social group: the constant search for novelties, each of which goes a little differently page. Before people at risk of exclusion manage to get acquainted with them and "tame" them, and before these novelties are so popular that they become available both in terms of price and technology (after all, some of them have high hardware and software requirements) - the next ones are already appearing. It seems that the pace of change is far ahead of the achievable rate of pursuit. Therefore, the problem is excessive diversity, the emergence of various technological and software solutions on the one hand, and the lack of, for example, uniform interfaces that would be fully accessible to people with disabilities, in particular the blind, on the other. These conclusions should also be useful to local and regional authorities responsible for ensuring the competitiveness and inclusivity of the areas they are in charge of.

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