

Exploring accessibility challenges in hospitality: A qualitative study on the needs of people with physical impairments

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Abstract | In this qualitative research, we explore accessibility challenges within the hospitality sector, specifically through the lens of guests with physical impairments. We aim to bridge the Sustainable Development Goals with the realities of people with physical impairments (PwPI), shedding light on the hurdles encountered in accessibility during two critical phases of the hospitality experience: the pre-service stage and the service encounter and delivery stage. By engaging a focus group of PwPI in Portugal, we gathered in-depth insights into their lived experiences, which were analysed using content analysis to craft a nuanced understanding of their needs. The findings underscore the role of technology in planning accessible trips and the importance of informed, sensitive service from hospitality staff. However, we observed a prevalent uncertainty among PwPI regarding the reliability of various sources of travel recommendations. The study advocates a dual approach: a) enhancing technological solutions for planning and b) fostering a culture of sensitivity among service providers to meet the unique needs of PwPI effectively. Acknowledging the limitations of a small, geographically concentrated sample, we recommend extending this research to a broader demographic and incorporating quantitative methods to assess the influence of factors like age and education level. Ultimately, our research calls for a more inclusive hospitality sector that not only provides accessible infrastructure but also embraces a customer-centric attitude to ensure that PwPI are not left behind, thereby contributing to the achievement of global development goals.

Keywords | Guests with disabilities, Guests with physical impairments, Accessibility, Hospitality sector, Guest cycle, SGD

1. Introduction

In an era where inclusivity and accessibility are increasingly recognized as crucial to customer satisfaction, the hospitality industry faces a critical challenge. This research analyses the often-overlooked dimensions of accessibility in the hospitality industry, ensuring that all guests, especially those with disabilities, including people with physical impairments (PwPI), experience a seamless and welcoming stay. Applying a qualitative lens, its aim is to uncover the multifaceted hurdles encountered by guests with physical impairments, illuminating their experiences from the moment they consider a stay to the completion of their journey. By giving a voice to those directly affected

and proposing actionable solutions, the aim of this study is not only to bridge the accessibility gap in the hospitality sector but also to contribute to a more empathetic and comprehensive understanding of guests' needs, thereby being aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of inclusive growth.

This research addresses an existent research gap concerning the way people with physical impairments experience their stay in hotels. The hospitality sector has made improvements in accommodating guests with disabilities, yet there remains a significant gap in understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by PwPI. The existing literature tends to either broadly address disabilities without approaching the specific nuances of physical impairments or focus on logistical accessibility while neglecting the personal, lived experiences of PwPI during their stay in hospitality establishments. Our study aims to fill this research gap by providing a detailed exploration of the accessibility challenges encountered by PwPI, particularly in the Portuguese hospitality sector, across two critical phases of their guest cycle: the pre-service stage and service encounter and delivery stage.

This research begins with an introduction, setting the context by highlighting the importance of accessibility in the hospitality industry, particularly for PwPI. Following this section, the literature review is presented and previous studies and findings relevant to this topic are discussed in two main parts: one focusing on guests with disabilities and accessibility, and the other on the guest cycle in the hospitality industry. In the methodology section, the article describes the qualitative research approach used, including the specifics of conducting focus groups in Portugal, the nature of questions asked, and the methods used for data analysis. The results and contributions section presents the key findings of the study. It includes the challenges identified, insights from the focus groups, and potential solutions to improve accessibility. This section also discusses the study's contributions to the field. The limitations of the article are then addressed, acknowledging the scope and constraints of the research, such as its geographical focus and the nature of its qualitative methodology.

Finally, the conclusions wrap up the article, reiterating the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of guests with physical impairments in the hospitality industry. It underscores the study's alignment with SDGs and the need for further research in this area. The article ends with a comprehensive list of references, citing all the sources and literature utilized in the research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Guest with disabilities | Guests with physical impairments

People with disabilities (PwD) are entitled to the same rights to participate in tourism activities as anyone else, a principle affirmed by different researchers (Darcy, 2010; Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Figueiredo et al., 2012; Tutuncu, 2017). Despite this acknowledgment, the World Health Organization and the World Bank (2011) identify PwD as one of the most marginalized groups. The prevalence of PwPI is on the rise, representing a significant portion of the global population. The

World Health Organization (2013) estimates that around 1.3 billion people worldwide live with some form of physical, mental, or sensory disability.

Disability is defined by the UN as "a limitation in a functional domain that arises from the interaction between a person's intrinsic capacity, and environmental and personal factors" (UN, 2018, p. 21). Disabilities can vary on a spectrum from slight to severe, either within a particular domain or across multiple domains. The way countries collect data can also be a problem to those that work in these field as PwD are not defined uniformly and national definitions differ in meaning, scope, and severity of disability (UN, 2018).

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the SDGs that intend to ensure that by 2030, no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, planet protection among other goals would be achieved (UNDP, 2023). This ambitious agenda, despite the fact that we all know that the goals cannot be achieved without the inclusion of PwD, only specifically addresses inclusion regarding disability in seven out of 169 targets and only in ten of their 231 indicators is disability data disaggregation required (UNDP, 2024). As stated by UNDP (2024), disability is referred to in different parts of the SDGs, especially when mentioning poverty and hunger (Goal 1 and 2), health and well-being (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality and empowerment of women and girls with disabilities (Goal 5), growth and employment and decent work (Goal 8), inequality (Goal 10), accessibility of human settlements (Goal 11), violence against persons with disabilities, inclusive societies and institutions (Goal 16) and data collection and monitoring of the SDGs (Goal 17). The tourism sector can help achieve these goals.

Buhalis and Michopoulou (2011) emphasize the critical importance of accessibility and the disability market. Nonetheless, the tourism and hospitality sectors still face significant challenges in fully accommodating the needs of these groups (Poria et al., 2011). PwD, particularly those requiring wheelchairs or crutches, encounter notable obstacles in selecting accommodation for their travels (Figueiredo et al., 2012; WHO & The World Bank, 2011). Depending on the degree of the disability, PwPI can travel alone or with friends, family or other companions. The support of people with whom PwPI travel plays an essential role in the pre-trip stage and during the trip (Poria et al., 2009; von Lehn, 2010).

It is widely recognized that PwD face numerous barriers in daily life. Although often perceived as a homogenous group, there exists diversity within this community, each person having unique needs (Shakespeare, 2017). The presence of both visible and invisible disabilities, along with those resulting from aging, presents an opportunity for the hospitality industry to enhance its services (Karacaoglu et al., 2015; Turismo de Portugal, 2021). This growing awareness has led hospitality managers to prioritize improved accessibility for their guests. The expanding disability market underscores the social significance of tourism, offering opportunities to foster equality, justice, and enhanced social interaction (Poria et al., 2009; Wall-Reinius et al., 2023).

Accessibility is a pivotal consideration for individuals with disabilities. Case Western Reserve University (2024) asserts that PwD are entitled to the same access to reliable information, participation, and enjoyment of daily life as their non-disabled counterparts. This principle underscores the imperative for the tourism and hospitality industries to adapt and become more inclusive, thereby enhancing the travel experience for all guests, irrespective of their physical abilities.

Individuals with physical impairments can navigate spaces freely with the aid of assistive devices if they are not hindered by physical barriers such as inadequate ramps, steps, and uneven flooring (Wall-Reinius et al., 2023). This underscores the critical need for thoughtfully designed environments in promoting accessibility.

The interplay between environmental and attitudinal barriers significantly impacts individuals with disabilities, particularly within the hospitality sector. Environmental barriers, while tangible and often cited, represent only one facet of the challenges faced. Equally critical are the attitudinal barriers that stem from societal perceptions and behaviours (Poria et al., 2011). These invisible barriers can deter individuals with disabilities from fully participating in tourism activities, underscoring the importance of fostering an inclusive environment. Recognizing and addressing these constraints is not just beneficial but vital for the success and sustainability of the hospitality industry. Studies emphasize the need for comprehensive inclusion, advocating for individuals with disabilities to be active participants in tourism, thereby enriching the travel experience for all involved (Yau et al., 2004).

The examination of constraints in tourism for individuals with disabilities has evolved over time, reflecting an expanding understanding of the multifaceted nature of these challenges. Smith (1987) was a pioneer in this field, categorizing constraints into three distinct types: intrinsic, which are personal to the individual; environmental, relating to physical or infrastructural barriers; and interactive, stemming from social interactions. Expanding on this framework, Murray and Sproats (1990) identified economic, physical, and attitudinal constraints, highlighting the broad spectrum of obstacles that can affect accessibility. McKercher et al. (2003) further delineated these constraints into internal, which are personal to the individual, and exogenous, which arise from external factors. This body of research not only illustrates the complexity of accessibility in tourism but also guides the industry towards more effective strategies for inclusion. Concerning physical factors, a lot of studies have already been published referring to new requirements for hotel facilities. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Standards were designed to avoid architectural and environmental barriers and ensure public accommodation is as accessible as possible to those with physical impairments (<https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/design-standards/>). Hotels must be prepared in accordance with universal design, international accessibility standards, national legislation and the application of good practices already existing in the sector (Turismo de Portugal, 2021). Critical accessibility factors for PwPI were mentioned in different studies (Darcy, 2010; Israeli, 2002; Turismo

de Portugal, 2021). Regarding physical accessibility, the presence or absence of features such as elevators, accessible parking, sidewalks, ramps, pathways, and restrooms plays a crucial role in either restricting or enhancing the mobility of this group (Israeli, 2002).

Concerning attitudinal factors, it is crucial to raise the awareness of tourism professionals to adequately respond to a customer's needs. This can be achieved by training the staff and by hiring employees with disabilities whereby tourists with functional diversity can identify with the tourist resources and destinations they seek (Turismo de Portugal, 2021).

2.2. Hospitality sector | Guest cycle

2.2.1. Guest Cycle failure and complaints in the services industry

The guest cycle is commonly associated with the hospitality industry and can be applied to various service-based sectors, such as healthcare, retail, and customer service. In this article the focus will be on the first three stages of the cycle: the pre-service stage, the service encounter stage and the service delivery stage. An overview follows, based on the following concepts related to customer service, service encounters, and service delivery in different industries.

The guest cycle is composed of five stages; however, in this article we will focus on the first three stages: (i) the pre-service stage involves the initial interaction or contact between the customer and the service provider. Bitner and Gremler (2010) addresses the importance of understanding customer needs and expectations before service delivery begins. This stage might encompass appointment scheduling, information gathering, or preliminary communication channels between the customer and the service provider. For PwD, this is one of the most important stages when booking a trip as this group have considerable difficulties in planning their trip due to the lack of accessibility in the contents provided by supply agents (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011). Reliable information is essential for PwD, as without this information this group will be uncertain if their needs will be met, and may be hesitant to travel (Atef, 2011). It is of utmost importance for hotels to provide accessible contents on their websites (Teixeira et al., 2021) and assistive devices can also increase the independence of PwPI (Tutuncu, O., 2017); (ii) the service encounter stage refers to the critical point of interaction where the customer directly experiences the service. In various service industries, this could include face-to-face interactions, interactions via digital platforms, or the moment when a service is delivered (Baron et al., 2018). According to Karacaoglu et al. (2015) some supply agents may be reticent to address the needs of PwPI as they fear the costs this may imply. However, the problem which PwPI experience can be defined as the ease of approaching the entrance, how to reach the main hall, how to use the building or the outdoors areas (Karacaoglu et al., 2015) and how trained and educated staff are concerning access provision and services related to PwD (Atef, 2011). At the moment of delivery of the service, (iii) the service delivery stage involves the actual provision of services or products. Wirtz and Lovelock (2021) emphasize the importance of service quality, efficiency, and reliability during this stage across different service sectors.

It can be concluded from service marketing that customer relationship management, and service quality management can offer valuable insights into understanding and managing the customer journey in different service-oriented sectors.

2.2.2. Guest cycle hospitality sector

The hotel guest cycle is a critical aspect of the hospitality industry, and service failures and complaints can significantly impact guest satisfaction and loyalty. The study by Sann and Lai (2020) aimed to analyze online complaints to synthesize specific service failure items and group them into the hotel guest cycle and related categories. The study found that the most common service failures were related to the pre-stay and in-stay stages, with issues such as booking, check-in, and room quality being the most frequent complaints. The study also highlighted the importance of addressing service failures promptly and effectively to prevent negative reviews and damage to the hotel's reputation. The studies suggest that the most common service failures in hotels are related to cleanliness, booking, check-in, and room quality, and that addressing these issues promptly and effectively is crucial for guest satisfaction and loyalty.

The guest cycle within the hospitality industry is a critical framework that encompasses various stages of a guest's interaction with a hotel or lodging facility. Service failures and guest complaints within this cycle have been the subjects of extensive study due to their impact on guest satisfaction, loyalty, and the overall reputation of the establishment. According to Turismo de Portugal (2021), in addition to the physical aspects of accessibility, it is essential to work on human skills in order to improve the customer experience.

According to Smith and Wheeler (2002), service failure is defined as any instance where a service fails to meet customer expectations. These failures often occur during critical stages of the guest cycle, including reservations, arrival, stay, and departure. Pizam and Ellis (1999) highlight that service recovery, the process of addressing service failures, is crucial in mitigating the negative effects of such failures on guest satisfaction and loyalty. Firstly, guest complaints represent an essential feedback mechanism for service organizations. Sparks and Bradley (1997) suggest that complaints are an opportunity for service providers to identify and rectify service failures, thereby retaining guest satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Johnston and Fern (1999) emphasize that the handling of guest complaints can have a significant impact on a guest's perception of service quality and the likelihood of repeat visits. Furthermore, service failures and guest complaints impact guest experience and loyalty. Several studies have demonstrated the direct relationship between service failures, guest complaints, and the subsequent impact on guest experience and loyalty. For instance, Kim et al. (2009) found that unresolved service failures significantly reduce guest satisfaction and increase the likelihood of negative word-of-mouth communication.

Effective complaint management strategies are vital in addressing service failures. Bitner et al. (1994) propose that timely resolution, empathy, and compensation are crucial factors in successful

complaint handling. Additionally, Gohary et al. (2016) highlight the importance of technology-enabled complaint resolution systems in enhancing guest satisfaction. In addition, the role of social media is also important to avoid complaints. With the advent of social media, guest complaints have gained increased visibility. Many guests use platforms like TripAdvisor and Yelp to share their experiences, making effective complaint management more critical than ever. Gursoy (2019) emphasized the need for hoteliers to actively engage and respond to online guest feedback to manage their reputation effectively.

In conclusion, the management of service failures and guest complaints is a critical aspect of maintaining guest satisfaction and loyalty in the hospitality industry. Effectively addressing these issues within the guest cycle is pivotal for improving service quality, enhancing guest experiences, and safeguarding the reputation of hospitality establishments (Turismo de Portugal, 2021).

3. Methodology

This study focuses specifically on the needs of guests with physical impairments and tries to answer two primary questions. Which are the main challenges that PWPI face when accessing hospitality services, focusing on the three phases of the guest cycle, at the pre-service stage and at the service encounter and delivery stage? And what are PwPI perspectives concerning detailed insights into the lived experiences before and during the stay? In order to answer these questions, a focus group was held on March 2023. Focus groups are a powerful qualitative tool that encourage participants to interact and stimulate discussions that may not arise in one-on-one interviews. The group dynamics can reveal deeper insights into shared experiences and societal attitudes, which are central to understanding the accessibility challenges faced by PwPI. This empirical work demanded a qualitative approach to give active voice to seven participants with physical impairments. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to this task because it allows in-depth exploration of participants' views. Table 1 summarizes some main aspects of the participants, like age, assistive product used, whether the disability condition is congenital or acquired, as well employment status and educational level.

Table 1 | Sample characterization

| Participant | Age | Assistive Product | Moment of acquisition | Employment status | Degree level |
|-------------|-----|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| F1 | 69 | Cane | Late acquired | Retired | Bachelor |
| F2 | 24 | Wheelchair | Late acquired | Unemployed | Bachelor |
| F3 | 35 | Wheelchair | Late acquired | Employed | Bachelor |
| F4 | 49 | Wheelchair | Late acquired | Employed | Bachelor |
| M1 | 67 | Cane | Late acquired | Retired | Secondary |
| M2 | 23 | Wheelchair | Congenital | Student | Secondary |
| M3 | 26 | Wheelchair | Congenital | Employed | Master |

Source: Own elaboration

3.2. Data collection

This study, essentially exploratory and qualitative, was conducted using focus groups. This approach was chosen mainly because this study concerns a minority group such as PwPI, the studies about the topic are scarce, and finally, the researchers intended to promote knowledge exchange between participants. The study was held in Portugal and focused on PwPI, with a congenital or acquired condition. A mix of convenience and snowball sampling approaches was adopted. This mix is justified by the focus on a specific community (PwPI), where participants are likely interconnected through shared experiences and social networks. This approach is often used in exploratory research where the population is difficult to reach, and the aim is to develop an initial understanding that future research can build upon. One of the participants was a personal acquaintance of one of the researchers and the others were invited due to their work on social media related to accessibility issues. A total of seven participants agreed to participate in the study. The focus group were held face to face and the session lasted approximately one hour. The moderator was one of the authors, and all the participants allowed the focus group to be recorded and authorized the use of the data. A script was produced using brief questions, based on the literature review. Table 2 shows the script used in the focus group.

Table 2 | Interviews' script

| Travel Behavior | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Q1 | Did you travel in the last year? If yes, can you describe the concerns you had when choosing the destination? Did you travel alone or with someone? |
| Pre-service stage | |
| Q2 | How important are the technologies on this stage? |
| Q3 | What are your main concerns related to the search of general information when planning your trip? |
| Service encounter and delivery stage | |
| Q4 | What main barriers have you faced when arriving to the hotel and during the stay? |

Source: Own elaboration

3.3. Data analysis

The focus group was recorded with participants' consent and the discussion was fully transcribed. The data were analysed using content analysis. Four phases were carried out to conclude the analysis; first, the material was organized, second, the thematic categories were identified, third the discourses were codified and lastly the results were processed. The categories used in the codification were based on the literature review. The participants were labelled with letters (M = male and F = female).

4. Analysis and discussion of results

4.1. Travel behaviour

All the participants in the empirical study had travelled the year before, even if two of them only travelled inside their country (F1 and M1), and all mentioned having special concerns with the accessibility of the destination as a whole:

I think my concerns are with the destination. I try to visit places where I know I will find the minimum accessibilities required. My biggest concern is with bathroom and if I can go to the bathroom. In relation to my experience, for example on the street, here in Portugal it was never very good. Regarding transport, for example, in Paris the metro was terrible because the stations were very old – there were very few stations that had an elevator. Therefore, the bus was the best transport to get around. Concerning the accommodation, I just ask for some specific information such as the existence of assistive products for example to take my bath. (F2)

So, I'm like F2, obviously my concern is where do I go to the bathroom, mainly, but when I go travelling the research I do is firstly the city itself. I also go a lot on recommendations – people who have already been there understand which are the most accessible and which are not the most accessible. Then, when it comes to accommodation, I always do a search on search engines using disabled mobility filters, although I don't always trust these filters, so nowadays I do this search but I always call or send an email to the hotel and often ask if they can send me photos of the room, the bathroom, if they have a shower chair, because many places are accessible but don't even have a shower chair. (F3)

Depending on the length of the trip and if the participant travels alone or with someone can change the way they search for information. The literature suggests that the support of people with whom PwPI travel plays an essential role in the pre-trip stage and during the trip (Poria et al., 2010; von Lehn, 2010). This aspect was mentioned by M2, F2 and F4 as described:

The main research is done by my father as he travels a lot and is aware of my special requirements. It's like that, here in Portugal I don't care so much about this research as I am native and I can phone the hotels directly to ask for information, but abroad, yes, I try to plan my trip in detail as it is more difficult for me to understand the language. (M2)
I consider whether I go alone or with someone. I'm more comfortable when I go with someone in that aspect, but I always take accessibility into account. (F2)

I always travel with my husband, but I have an active voice when planning my trip. (F4)

4.2. Pre-service service

In the empirical study, the participants were asked about the importance of technologies in the pre-service stage and their concerns related to searching for general information when planning their trip. All respondents stated having concerns related to the search for information. Various factors related to their concerns emerged from the focus group. The narrative confirms the importance of assistive devices, as stated by several researchers (Teixeira et al., 2015; Tutuncu, 2017); however, most participants mentioned the importance of confirming the information themselves, in order to avoid bad experiences.

Even if most websites have been improved after COVID-19, I don't trust the information. I always try to check the information, either with the hotel staff or with other people's recommendations. (F4)

I use a lot of technologies – nowadays they are a great help. Google Maps, I don't know if you have heard about this, has an accessibility filter but often it isn't completely reliable. Despite that, I think it's much better because now, it has filters that mention specific accessibilities. I have it active on my Google Maps and I use it a lot. For example, even now, I was away this weekend and to understand where I was going to stay, I used this filter, and it worked well. However, when it is possible, I try to confirm the information directly with the hotel in order to avoid bad experiences. (F3)

To book accommodation I normally use the websites and some search engines. Technologies are crucial. Apart from accommodation, I am always concerned about bathrooms in the destination I visit. Concerning that, I use "Flush" to check issues related to that. But I think it's a bit like Google. Despite the answer, even if the app says there are or aren't accessible bathrooms, I always try to check in another way, or call or find out from other people who have already been there. (F2)

Concerning the main apprehensions related to the search for general data in terms of information gathering, most participants mentioned the importance of having reliable information. When requiring wheelchairs or crutches there are still a lot of obstacles.

For someone who doesn't require a wheelchair it doesn't matter so much the lengths they need to go to in order to arrive somewhere. For me, if someone gives me wrong information concerning a place, it can be terrible. Once I asked at the hotel if they could inform me about a nice accessible restaurant. The receptionist

gave me a name and when I arrived there the bathroom was not really adapted.
(F2)

Now I don't trust any information without checking it with friends and relatives.
(F3)

As I always travel with my husband, he checks all the information for me.
Sometimes, when arriving at the destination, he does a pre-visit to the venues.
Wrong information can have a negative impact on my experience. (F4)

4.3. Service encounter and delivery stage

Various factors that influence the stay of someone with a physical disability were mentioned by the focus group participants. The most mentioned were related to attitudinal and physical factors. Concerning attitudinal factors, discourse analysis confirms the importance of these factors for people with physical disabilities. Some attitudes that constrain and facilitate their stay were mentioned.

The staff were polite, but they showed some lack of knowledge concerning the basic requirements I was asking for. Despite that they were very patient trying to answer my questions. (M3)

The lack awareness concerning how to deal with PwPI was mentioned by all the participants. This corroborates the literature review that states that the absence of trained staff can have severe negative impacts for PwPI (Poria et al., 2009).

I can feel some pity in the voice of the staff when they met me in person. Maybe due to my age..., I don't know. (F2)

However, it is true that the way people look at PwD has changed, and two participants (F4 and F3) stated that:

It is really fun – when people are aware of the trips I took in my wheelchair, I can see respect. Nowadays disabilities are viewed in a different way. We are no longer poor things. (F4)

Society is changing, I can see that through my social media. I have a lot of followers that want to know more about disabilities. (F3)

These statements not only corroborate the changes in the way people see disabilities but also the importance of technologies to reach a larger number of people (Agree, 2014).

5. Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, this qualitative study has provided valuable insights into the accessibility challenges faced by PwPI in the hospitality sector, focusing on the guest cycle's pre-service and service encounter stages. So forthwith, the main ideas to extract from this research are presented. Regarding travel behaviour concerns of PwPI, participants expressed concerns related to the accessibility of destinations, emphasizing the importance of accessible bathrooms and reliable information when planning trips. The support of companions was highlighted as influential, in line with the literature suggesting the importance of the role of travel companions in the pre-trip and trip stages.

Concerning the pre-service stage, this study showed the significance of technology in the pre-service stage, particularly in confirming information about accommodation and destinations. Despite advancements, participants revealed a lack of trust in online information, emphasizing the need for direct confirmation to avoid negative experiences. In the next stage, the service encounter and delivery stage, attitudinal factors were identified as crucial. While participants noted improved societal perceptions of disabilities, there were instances of staff showing a lack of knowledge, pointing to the ongoing need for training in dealing with PwPI. Another interesting discovery is the change in public perceptions. The study noted positive shifts in societal attitudes toward people with disabilities, reflecting changing perspectives and increased awareness. Participants highlighted the importance of technologies, such as social media, in influencing public perceptions and fostering respect for individuals with disabilities. Another important conclusion from this research is its contributions towards achieving the SDGs. The study is aligned with SDGs by advocating for inclusivity and equality in the hospitality sector. It emphasizes the need for a customer-centric attitude, not just in providing accessible infrastructure but in embracing a holistic understanding of guests' needs.

In summary, this research contributes to both the academic literature and industry practices by addressing existing gaps in understanding the unique challenges faced by PwPI in the hospitality sector. By providing a detailed exploration and practical recommendations, the aim of this study is to foster a more empathetic and inclusive hospitality industry that caters to the diverse needs of all guests, thereby contributing to broader societal goals of inclusive growth and accessibility.

This study contributes theoretically by refining the conceptualization of accessibility within the hospitality industry, particularly for individuals with physical impairments (PwPI). By exploring the nuanced challenges encountered during critical stages of the guest cycle, the research advances the theoretical understanding of accessibility, moving beyond logistical considerations to incorporate the

personal, lived experiences of PwPI. Another theoretical contribution is the design of a guest cycle framework for accessibility. The study introduces a theoretical framework by examining accessibility challenges across the pre-service and service encounter stages of the guest cycle. This conceptual framework provides a structured approach for understanding and addressing accessibility issues, offering theoretical depth to the temporal dimensions of guest experiences in hospitality. The study also advances theoretical perspectives by highlighting the importance of attitudinal factors during the service encounter and delivery stage. The analysis of participant narratives underscores the impact of staff attitudes on the experiences of PwPI, contributing to theoretical discussions on the interplay between staff behaviour, societal perceptions, and the overall hospitality encounter.

Regarding the implications for industry, the findings call for a comprehensive approach to enhancing accessibility in the hospitality sector. Practical recommendations include improving staff training programmes, addressing staff knowledge gaps about guests with physical impairments (PwPI) through comprehensive training on attitudes and practical considerations and fostering a culture of sensitivity. Another implication is to integrate innovative solutions, such as reliable accessibility filters and direct communication channels with guests, enhancing information sharing and the overall guest experience.

An idea that can help industry is creating tailored services. The results help diverse needs to be recognized, considering factors like travel companionship and tailoring services and communication for a personalized and inclusive experience. Finally, the customer-centric approach implies instilling a customer-centric attitude beyond infrastructure, fostering empathy among staff for an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Concerning limitations, the small sample size and geographic focus of the study are acknowledged as a limitation due to the small, geographically concentrated sample, which primarily includes participants from Portugal. Practitioners should be cautious about generalizing the findings to broader demographics or different cultural contexts. There is a potential bias in participant responses, as those participants may exhibit a degree of social desirability bias or may share experiences selectively. Practitioners should be aware of this limitation when interpreting findings and consider implementing diverse research methods, such as combining qualitative insights with quantitative surveys, to triangulate results and ensure a more comprehensive understanding.

Future research should explore the efficacy of specific training modules for hospitality staff, assessing the impact on attitudinal shifts and improved practical considerations for guests with physical impairments (PwPI). The integration of emerging technologies, such as augmented reality or artificial intelligence, in enhancing accessibility planning and guest experiences is another promising avenue for exploration. Further research can also examine the long-term effects of tailored services based on factors like travel companionship, gauging guest satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, understanding the influence of societal attitudes and awareness, possibly through longitudinal studies, can contribute to creating more inclusive environments in the hospitality sector.

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