



## **Investigating the accessibility of disabled people in tourist destinations: A literature review**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents a systematic literature review that investigated the accessibility of individuals with disabilities and older adults aged 65 and over in tourist destinations. Using the PRISMA methodology, the primary obstacles encountered by individuals with disabilities, such as physical (e.g. spatial, architectural), social and informational barriers, were analyzed. International studies and trends from the past five years are also presented using comparative tables and flow charts. It is highlighted the multidimensional obstacles to accessibility and it is emphasized the need for coordinated policies that can practically uphold tourism as a universal right.

**JEL Classification:** M14, Z3

**Keywords:** Accessibility, disability, disabled people, tourists, tourism

### **1. Introduction**

Accessibility for disabled individuals, particularly in the tourism sector, has gained significant scientific and political attention in recent decades. Tourism accessibility extends beyond mere technical or architectural challenge, representing a multifaceted and complex issue in which social, cultural, institutional and psychological factors intersect. Modern societies that aspire to demonstrate an inclusive model cannot ignore the fact that large segments of the population, such as the elderly or people with disabilities, remain excluded from fundamental human rights such as free and equal movement, participation in cultural and recreational events, and tourism activities (WHO, 2011; Darcy, 2010; Eichhorn et al., 2013).

Tourism is considered a right, rather than a privilege, and therefore access to it is a central element of social justice. Although progress has been made at the institutional and legislative level, in practice disabled people continue to encounter physical and symbolic barriers and exclusions (Barnes, 2019). The review of international literature shows that the problem of accessibility is not limited to the lack of infrastructure, but now includes the lack of awareness, education, and political will.

People with mobility difficulties are a particularly vulnerable population. Their needs vary depending on the type and degree of their disability, ranging from basic infrastructure like smooth surfaces and ramps to the existence of adequate information signs and accessible personal hygiene areas (Minnaert, 2014; McCabe, 2009). Currently, the tourism industry has an urgent need for specialized, trained personnel capable of understanding and addressing the specificities of these visitors with disabilities (Tucker, 2021). Furthermore, data shows that people with disabilities are often accompanied by relatives or assistants, which means that accessibility initiatives must be designed to accommodate their entire support network.

The case of the elderly, especially those over the age of sixty-five, is of similar importance. This group often encounter diverse challenges that are not limited to mobility limitations but extend to sensory problems, communication difficulties, the need for pharmaceutical support and regular rest periods (Nazli et al., 2019). Sociological and demographic studies have highlighted the increasing participation of the elderly in tourism, which makes it imperative to adapt infrastructure and service programs. For these individuals, tourism is not merely a form of leisure activity, but is linked to quality of life, mental well-being and social participation. Consequently, the formation of a tourism product aimed at the elderly requires innovative and personalized solutions.

The interest in this topic stems from the fact that tourism accessibility is no longer a simple indication of social sensitivity and respect for diversity but a crucial criterion for the sustainability of the tourism industry. Modern demographic and social developments make the issue more relevant than ever (WHO, 2011; Daniels et al., 2005; Lehto et al., 2018).

Tourism, in particular, is not just a product, but an experience that encompasses travel, accommodation, communication and cultural interaction. When a person with a mobility disability or an elderly person wishes to participate in a similar tourism experience, they do not simply face physical obstacles such as stairs and narrow doorways. They also face a range of social, informational, organizational and psychological obstacles.

The study was focused on individuals with mobility impairments and the elderly due to the significant proportion of these groups within the global population as well as their heightened vulnerability to tourism challenges. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011), by 2050 the global population of people over 65 years of age will exceed 1.5 billion. This increase is largely attributable to increased life expectancy, especially in countries of the so-called global North. At the same time, people with mobility disabilities, whether permanent or temporary, constitute a significant percentage of the general population and constantly face limitations in their mobility and accessibility (Lehto et al., 2018; Tucker, 2021).

While accessible tourism has been reviewed in earlier work, existing reviews often (i) cover broader disability categories without a focused discussion on mobility-related impairments, (ii) give limited analytical attention to the 65+ population as a distinct (and frequently under-theorized) group with functional constraints that do not always translate into self-identification as “disability,” and/or (iii) span longer time horizons that dilute the most recent post-COVID and digital-transition developments in tourism accessibility. In contrast, this review deliberately concentrates on 2020–2025 evidence and synthesizes findings through a combined lens of mobility disabilities and older adults, allowing us to (a) map the current barrier “bundle” beyond infrastructure (information, staff competence, inclusive culture, governance), (b) identify where evidence is convergent versus mixed across contexts, and (c) highlight actionable gaps for destination management, measurement, and policy implementation.

Consequently, the purpose of this systematic literature review is to capture the multidimensional nature of the obstacles faced currently (from 2020 onwards), by individuals with mobility impairments and older adults

Thus, the main research question is *what are the main obstacles that limit access of disabled people to the tourism sector?*

The ultimate goal of the literature review is to bring to light the existing gaps between the theoretical declaration of rights and their practical implementation (Barnes, 2019; Eichhorn et al., 2013).

## **2. Methodology**

The systematic literature review was carried out based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta – Analyses) guidelines. The choice of this specific methodological approach is dictated both by the nature of the study subject, which concerns the complex and multidimensional concept of tourism accessibility for people with mobility disabilities and elderly people over 65 years of age, and by the need for a systematic and evidence-based approach that incorporates data from various sources and geographical contexts (WHO, 2011; Darcy, 2010; Eichhorn et al., 2013).

The search was conducted in both Greek and English to ensure the widest possible coverage of the relevant literature. The main keywords used were: “disabled people”, “people with disabilities”, “tourism accessibility”, “accessibility in tourism”, “elderly tourists”, “inclusive tourism”.

The databases used during the search included, among others, Scopus, Google Scholar (to identify open access academic articles and theses related to tourism accessibility, people with disabilities, and the elderly.), Web of Science & Scopus (used as main multidisciplinary databases with peer-reviewed content), Emerald Insight (database with a strong focus on management, tourism, and the social sciences), Hospitality and Tourism Complete (as a specialized database for tourism and hospitality issues to identify articles related to the experiences of disabled people in tourism). The review covered publications from 2020 to 2025.

The inclusion criteria for sources in the systematic review were as follows: studies directly related to the concept of tourist accessibility, focused either on people with mobility disabilities or on people over 65 years of age. In addition, they must include quantitative or qualitative data, be authored and scientifically documented, available in full text, and published in a peer-review scientific journal and/or produced by an academic institution.

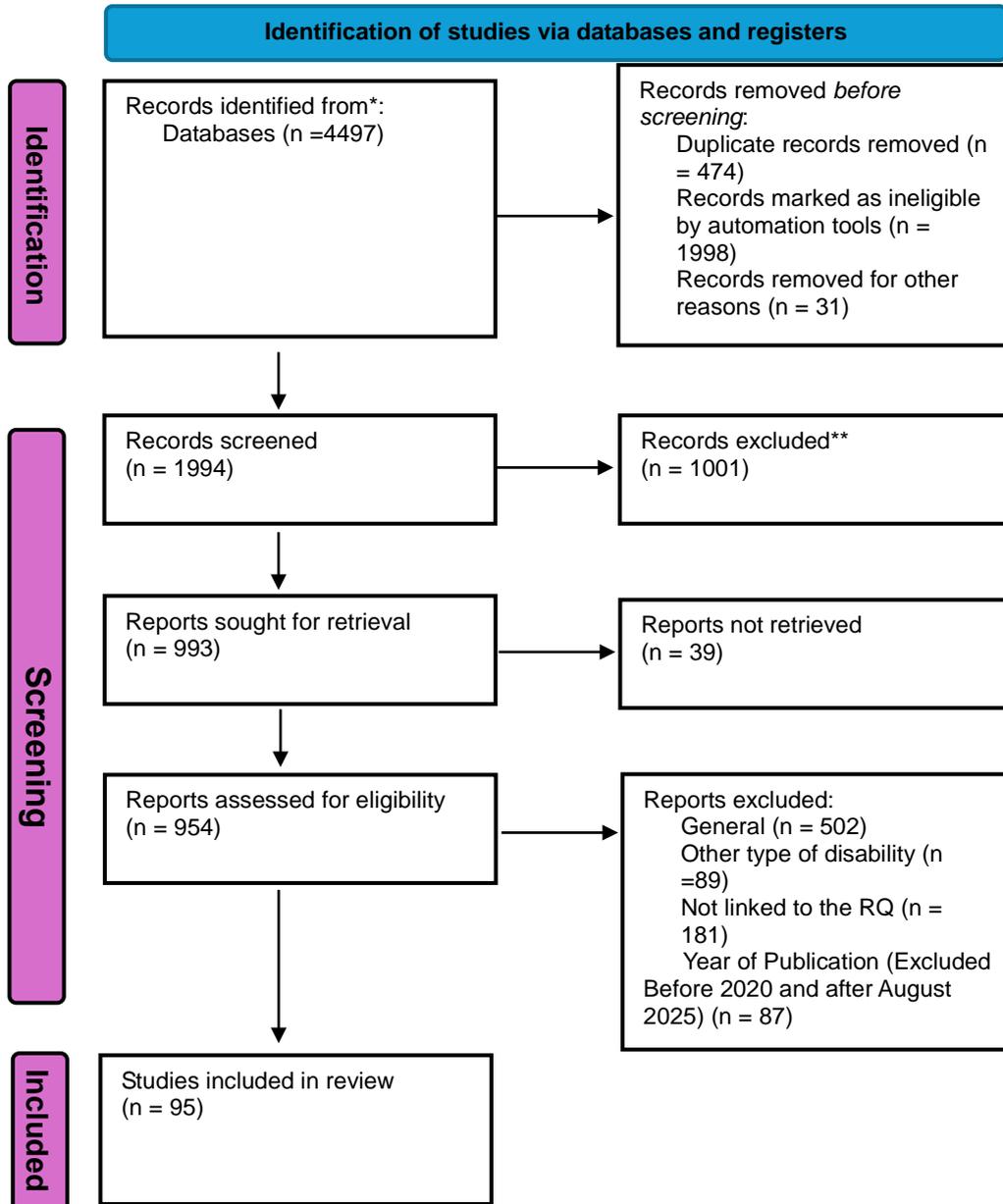
Exclusion criteria included sources that contained only general reports without empirical data, materials lacking authorship or scientific review, studies that focused exclusively on other forms of disability, such as intellectual or sensory disability unless they also addressed mobility impairments, as well as sources published before 2020 or after 2024.

The initial search yielded approximately 4,497 results. From these results, 474 were duplicates, 1998 were automatically excluded and 31 studies excluded for other reasons (language/lack of accessibility to the archive) were removed. Screening of titles and abstracts led to the exclusion of a further 993 articles as irrelevant. The remaining 954 (except for 39 inaccessible) articles underwent full-text evaluation during which 95 studies were selected because they fully met the inclusion criteria. Of these, ten representative studies were selected for detailed presentation, in tables. These studies originate from different continents (Europe, Asia, Australia, America), ensuring geographical representation and are based both

on quantitative as well as qualitative methodology. The studies come from recognized prestigious university research centers and are published in high-impact scientific journals, most with an impact factor (IF) >3.5 up to 7.6. In some of the selected studies, the perspective of travelers with mobility impairments and elderly travelers is examined in parallel with the perspective of tourism industry entrepreneurs, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the accessibility issues.

The selection process is schematically depicted in the following PRISMA flowchart

**PRISMA Flowchart (2020)**



The quality of the selected articles was assessed based on the following criteria: methodological validity, transparency in sample selection, appropriateness of the theoretical framework, and the applicability of the findings across broader population and geographical

contexts. In particular, attention was given to whether studies refers to internationally accepted models of disability, such as the social model (ICF), and whether it takes into account both physical, social, and psychological barriers. The review was not limited to a theoretical framework, but aimed to integrate multiple interpretative approaches, in order to reflect the complexity of the phenomenon (Fontes et al., 2014; Oliver, 2013; Patel & Brown, 2017).

The main categories of obstacles, as emerged from the literature review, are divided into five basic categories:

- a) the natural geographical /architectural obstacles,
- b) inadequate staff training,
- c) the absence of accessible information,
- d) social prejudices and stereotypes,
- e) the absence of institutional measures and the inaction of parliamentary parties to ensure universal access to tourism.

These factors have also been highlighted by previous studies conducted in the field, which shows that the progress that has been made is not sufficient (McCabe, 2009; Flaherty et al., 2016). Each of these categories can be a potential cause of exclusion from the ability of tourists with disabilities to move freely, make choices, experience and participate equally in tourism.

It is important to recognize the role that age plays in exclusion from tourism experiences. People over 65 do not self-identify as disabled, yet they present some corresponding functional limitations. (Nazli et al., 2019). These specific issues, such as mobility and sensory difficulties, have a decisive impact on the ability of these individuals to travel, participate, and interact with the tourist environment. It is worth mentioning that these individuals remain an under-represented category in the design of accessibility policies, while at the same time age exclusion is unofficially considered “natural”, which further reinforces invisible exclusion (Devile et al., 2020; 2023).

Moreover, the lack of reliable monitoring indicators and the non-systematic collection of data create a statistical gap that hinders the development of evidence-based policies (WHO, 2011; Darcy, 2010). This concern, already highlighted in reports, previous studies and monographs on the subject, is repeatedly confirmed in the studies included in the review (Rubio - Escuderos et al., 2025). Table 1 presents the main results and conclusions that emerged from the literature review regarding access barriers.

**Table 1:** Selected studies analyzing access barriers.

Authors (year)	Study title	Country	Study type / Methodology (N-number of participants)	Key results
Rubio-Escuderos, L., Ullán de la Rosa, FJ, & García-Andreu, H. (2025)	What is stopping the process? Analysis of obstacles to accessible tourism from a stakeholders' perspective	Spain (region: Costa Blanca)	Qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with 83 tourism stakeholders [57 participants from supply side (38 tourism enterprises, 19 public administration) and 26 participants from demand side (15 disability associations, 11 tourists with disabilities)] in the Costa Blanca	The main obstacles to accessible tourism include: lack of cooperation and conflicts between tourism stakeholders, discrimination by businesses and non-disabled customers, reluctance to implement universal design, legislative inconsistencies, and the tolerance of people with disabilities (PWDs) for inaccessibility. In favour of accessible tourism (specialized): 6 enterprises (mainly transport & hotels) Neutral towards accessible tourism (some initiatives): 17 enterprises (tourist services, campsites, travel agencies, etc.) Against accessible tourism (no willingness): 15 enterprises (restaurants, hotels, agencies, car rental, etc.)
Cole, et al. (2022)	Multi-stakeholder perspectives of environmental barriers to participation in travel-related activities after spinal cord injury	USA	Semi-structured interviews were taken place among four groups: i) Travelers with Spinal Cord Injury-SCI ( $n= 39$ ), ii) Caregivers and family members of persons with SCI ( $n= 24$ ), iii) Therapists working with people with SCI ( $n= 9$ ), and iv) Travel Professionals experts on accessible tourism ( $n= 11$ ).	Five major categories of travel obstacles were reported by the interviewees: a) Partial Accessibility, b) Systemic Ignorance, c) Travel Hassles, d) Poor Service Performance, and e) Lack of Support. People with SCI reported the most specific information about the barriers. Family members/caregivers focused on the impact of systemic ignorance on their loved ones, while Therapists paid attention on offering people with SCI tools to overcome barriers. Finally, Travel Professionals underlined their limitations of serving customers with disabilities.
Darcy, McKercher, & Schweinsberg (2020)	From tourism and disability to accessible tourism: A perspective article	Australia, Hong Kong	Literature review – Theoretical approach	Highlighting the evolution of the tourism sector for people with disabilities towards the concept of accessible tourism. The lack of data on accessibility at national and regional levels is highlighted and recognized as a significant challenge.

<p>Awan, MI, Shamim, A., Saleem, MS, &amp; Gill, SS (2022)</p>	<p>Service inclusion for tourists with disabilities: Scale development and validation</p>	<p>Pakistan</p>	<p>Scale development and validation process. Two studies: (1) Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (EFA &amp; CFA) on a sample of tourists with disabilities (N≈300), (2) Field validation study on an independent sample (N≈250).</p>	<p>A new scale was developed to measure inclusion services in tourism/hospitality. These services provided opportunities, relieving distress and enhancing satisfaction. It was found that service inclusion positively influences the perception of well-being of tourists with disabilities, leading to more favorable behavioral responses. The scale was deemed reliable and valid, with the potential to be used in other service environments.</p> <p>Study 01 Phase 01: Item Generation Literature review and interviews (initial items: 49 → 31) Phase 02: Scale Purification Face &amp; content validity by experts (items: 33 → 8) Exploratory Factor Analysis (items: 8 → 5) Phase 03: Scale Dimensionality Confirmatory Factor Analysis Convergent &amp; discriminant validity Model fit to the data Study 02 Phase 04: Scale Validation Further data collection (n = 327) Validation from EFA &amp; CFA (items: 22 → 7) Support for Service Inclusion as a reflective second-order model with four first-order dimensions Phase 05: Nomological Validity Additional data collection (n = 327) Service inclusion positively predicts tourists with disabilities' well-being and satisfaction with tourist services</p>
<p>Devile, EL, Eusébio, C., &amp; Moura, A. (2024)</p>	<p>Traveling with special needs: investigating constraints and negotiation strategies for engaging in tourism activities</p>	<p>Portugal</p>	<p>Qualitative study with interviews. Sample: people with special needs (motor, sensory, intellectual disabilities, elderly people and people with food allergies) (N =12)</p>	<p>People with disabilities face a variety of limitations (e.g. daily mobility difficulties, difficulty accessing basic information, limited options for visiting tourist attractions/activities) when participating in tourism activities, which vary depending on the type of need.</p>

Chik et al (2024).	Accessible tourism and the built environment: Challenges and best practices	Asia	Qualitative (N=12) disabled individuals	Accessibility challenges which are mainly related to the man-made environment, namely the spatial configuration, especially in large city centers, and means of transportation
Tao, C. (B.), Huang, S. (S.), Wang, J., & Qiao, G. (2024)	Accessible tourism: tourists with physical disabilities – segmentation based on perceived travel barriers	China (Sichuan Province)	Quantitative study with on-site and online surveys (N = 480 people with physical disabilities).	The market for tourists with physical disabilities is heterogeneous based on perceived barriers. Three different segments were identified (Explorer Moderates, Minimalists, Intensives) with differences in travel characteristics, demographics, and the nature of the disability (e.g. age plays a role in familiarity with technology / different needs in people with mobility problems, others in people with blindness with each unique person needing appropriate adaptations).
Kamyabi & Alipour (2022)	An investigation of the challenges faced by the disabled population and the implications for accessible tourism	North Cyprus	Quantitative (N = 250 people with disabilities)	The main obstacles identified were the lack of information and accessibility difficulties as a result of inadequate infrastructure.
Perangin-Angin, R., Tavakoli, R., & Kusumo, C. (2023).	Inclusive tourism: the experiences and expectations of Indonesian wheelchair tourists in nature tourism	Indonesia	Qualitative study with semi-structured interviews via snowball sampling (N = 10 wheelchair users). Thematic analysis was used.	Wheelchair tourists want to travel, but obstacles make them more selective about natural destinations. Putting the concept of inclusion into practice requires cultural change and support from tourism service providers and other travelers. It is therefore necessary to initially understand the needs during planning and then expand to specific interventions both at the service level and at the accessible infrastructure level. For example, there is a need for space for wheelchair navigation and awareness-raising among staff.

<p>Skalska (2023)</p>	<p>Identifying quality gaps in tourism for people with disabilities: Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)</p>	<p>Poland</p>	<p>Quantitative study – Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) (N = 610) and descriptive statistics</p>	<p>Identification of quality gaps (e.g. in infrastructure and services starting from lack of space and reaching behaviors such as disrespect for disabled spaces, lack of staff awareness) in tourism services for people with disabilities. Identification of accessibility needs at each stage of the tourism chain. Lack of accessibility was rated 7.6 on a scale of 1 to 10</p>
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### **3. Discussion**

According to the findings of the studies, although WHO promotes a more functional and holistic model of understanding disability, which includes the interaction between individual abilities and the environment, progress in this area remains limited, which highlights the need for change (Stankov et al., 2024).

Furthermore, we explored the evolution of the international approach to tourist accessibility. While studies from the 1980s and 1990s focused almost exclusively on architectural barriers and any technical solutions (e.g. stairs, ramps, corridors, and handrails), more recent research, especially after 2010, emphasizes staff training, the development of an inclusive culture, as well as the perspectives of individuals who experience exclusion. (Eichhorn et al., 2013; Patel & Brown, 2017). This shift is very important, as it reveals that the problem extends beyond technical aspects to encompass social and cultural dimensions, a point clearly reflected in the studies reviewed (Tucker, 2021; Cooper, 2022).

A typical example is the fact that the presence of an elevator in a hotel does not ensure accessibility for disabled people if staff lack the knowledge to assist an elderly guest with a cognitive disability. In addition, many booking website lack enhanced accessibility functions for users with visual impairments. Similarly, the use of generic “accessibility” icons without an adequate description often causes confusion and discourages users (Beaudry, 2016; McCabe, 2009). Consequently, it can be written that a multi-level strategy that addresses infrastructure, information, education, and political will, is necessary.

Critical analysis of these studies highlights education and training of tourism professionals as a key factor. The absence of adequate professional training and awareness, constitute one of the most important obstacles as documented by Chik et al. (2024). Employees in tourism businesses often lack knowledge of the basic needs of disabled people, leading them to underestimate, defensively accommodate, or even display fear or hostility. Such practices reproduce stereotypical perceptions of “disabled people” as “non-tourists” that is, individuals presumed to have neither the desire nor the right to travel and participate in tourism experiences.

The lack of training essentially leads to behaviors that undermine respect for the dignity of users, such as feigned politeness, over-protectiveness, indifference to autonomy as well as excessive intervention without any consent. These practices create a hostile, or awkward environment that repels potential visitors. In contrast, effective practices highlight how the education of tourism professionals can radically improve the user experience, as well as establish a more positive image of the destination (Tucker, 2021).

Another crucial finding, building on the previous ones, is the importance of accessibility to information itself. Numerous studies have emphasized that even when infrastructures are available, the absence of clear and accessible information often prevents disabled people from utilizing them. The absence Braille materials, audio instructions, websites that comply with accessibility standards, as well as accurate photos or videos of facilities, essentially constitute an “invisible barrier”, which often goes undocumented, yet has fundamental implications for the ability to plan and participate. (Lu et al., 2022; Casais et al., 2021).

In many cases, the effectiveness of accessibility policies cannot be evaluated due to unclear measurement indicators and a lack of quantitative data. Most countries lack basic reliable indicators for monitoring the tourist participation of people with disabilities or older people, which essentially creates a “statistical gap”. Collecting data in collaboration with the communities themselves is essential, not only for reasons of transparency, but also to be able

to design new policies based on actual needs rather than assumptions, as emphasized in previous research (Mayordomo-Martínez et al., 2024).

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, the studies reviewed reveal significant barriers to tourism accessibility for people with disabilities, which are not only related to the lack of infrastructure and a clear legislative framework, but also from the limited access to information, which are equally important for participation in tourism. Furthermore, researchers addressing this issue have proposed potential solutions, such as policies to facilitate accessibility for people with disabilities (Stankov et al., 2024), management models, and measures to support tourists through the provision of information and inclusive design of the built environment (Chik et al., 2024).

It is important to note that systematic efforts were made to minimize bias in the sources included in the review, in order to ensure the validity of the findings. However, the searching of literature published exclusively in English and Greek, may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant studies available in other languages. Moreover, the findings may be influenced by publication bias, where studies with sound/ statistically significant outcomes are more likely to be published, while others remain unpublished, potentially affecting the representativeness and accuracy of the overall conclusions. Although efforts were made to identify comprehensive and relevant sources, grey literature was not investigated, raising the possibility that important data may have been missed. In addition, the reliance on major indexed databases and journal outlets may entail publication bias, as studies reporting null or less “novel” results, practitioner reports, and local evaluations are less likely to be published or indexed. Finally, *accessibility research* is context-sensitive; therefore, evidence may not generalize across regions with different regulatory regimes, infrastructure baselines, and social norms.

At the same time, the study of relevant sources also highlights a broad scope for future research, particularly in documenting the lived experiences of people with disabilities, identifying their needs, and proposing solutions that directly address the challenges they report. Research in this direction can inform practices both at the state level and within civil society, with the goal of reducing obstacles to the barest minimum and enhancing the tourism experience of individuals encountering significant difficulties due to disability or age.

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