Chapter 7
Accessibility to Spa Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to highlight and raise awareness of the previously unknown barriers currently faced by wheelchair using consumers in the spa industry and the implications of these barriers for consumer and industry alike. Existing research on accessibility within this specific environment is extremely limited (if any). This study shows that access to accurate information is a key issue, a key barrier to participation and not only for those who have not visited a spa before. Gaining information pre visit in tourism is increasingly done online and there is the opportunity to use technologies and especially websites and social media platforms to help provide this information. The chapter also illustrates the potential for health and greater mental and social wellbeing the spa industry and the wider wellness tourism industry have for wheelchair users and how they could mutually benefit each other, as well as further promoting the case for barrier free accessible tourism and leisure opportunities.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF STUDY

Despite a higher social conscience dictating global policy on disability, intended to promote acceptance and equality (United Nations, 2006a; 2006b), disabled people face widespread discrimination and a diverse range of disabling barriers to participation in everyday life (Gray, Gould, & Bickenbach, 2003; Harpur, Connolly, & Blanck, 2017; World Health Organisation, 2017). With calls from industry, academia and disabled people themselves for better understanding of the experiences and specific needs of this growing demographic of consumer (Jackson, 2018; Tarasoff, 2017; Williams, 2017), the importance of undertaking research on this subject is becoming increasingly apparent; particularly in a world facing the implications of increased life expectancies (Kasnauskiene & Michnevic, 2017) and ageing populations (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011).

The disabled population is projected to steadily increase, with disability and inclusion considered a growing social concern globally (Michopoulou, Darcy, Ambrose, & Buhalis, 2015). Yet much of the traditional thinking and policy making around disability has led to the inadequate physical and social environment that exists today. Modern thinking now views disability as a social construct (Masala & Petretto, 2008) caused and/or exacerbated by a disabling environment (Bogart, Rottenstein, Lund, & Bouchard, 2017; Haegele & Hodge, 2016) and not by placing the disabled person at fault (Masala & Petretto, 2008). Social action and responsibility are needed to change this disabling environment into an enabling environment, ensuring full and equal participation in life as those who are able bodied, minimising the impact of impairment and enabling those who are disabled to enjoy a full and meaningful life as possible (Jackson, 2018).

Tourism and its sub sectors are a key area in which a disabled person can escape daily life and enjoy experiences with loved ones in new and exciting locations, giving a sense of freedom and helping to minimise the effects of mobility impairment (Kaganek et al., 2017; Kastenholz, Eusebio, & Figueiredo, 2015). However, disabling barriers often limit and adversely affect these experiences (Kaganek et al., 2017; Smith, 1987; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004).

Disability and inclusion are becoming progressively more important factors as part of the supply and demand of the tourism industry, with the disabled being recognised as an important consumer demographic and considered vital for tourism economic growth (Ambrose, Darcy, & Buhalis, 2012). Many of the most lucrative travel markets are from developed countries who are experiencing ageing populations with sizeable disposable incomes, yet who are more prone to disability as they age further and will therefore have increasingly more complex and specific needs as a tourism consumer (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Global Wellness Institute, 2018b). This is a particularly pressing concern for operators of wellness tourism (Crismariu, 2017; Morris, Mueller, & Jones, 2010) of which the spa industry is a key component of, as ageing baby boomers are its key consumer. Wellness tourism, and spa in particular can bring numerous health and wellbeing benefits for wheelchair users, by the diverse therapies and unique experiences they offer (Gomez et al., 2013; Ortega et al., 2017; Suarez et al., 2011).

These industries and institutions will need to be ready to receive future consumers with access needs, and there is an urgent need to implement accessible tourism practices for better and more equal inclusion. This can be achieved by firstly gaining a greater understanding of their complex needs and consumer experiences, in order to improve the current offering. Hence, building on the above discussions, this study investigates the barriers to and within the spa industry currently encountered by wheelchair consumers, and considers the ability of the industry to service this important and growing tourist market segment. In particular, the objectives of the study are to: (1) understand the barriers to participation wheelchair tourists who have not visited a spa may face; (2) identify the barriers currently encountered by wheelchair tourists during the spa customer journey; and (3) consider how these barriers affect their participation in the spa experience.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study was focused on identifying disabling barriers, and therefore it adopts the social model stance on disability, where disability manifests as a result of shortcomings and barriers occurring in a disabling society, not as a result of a person's medical condition or impairment (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Removal of these barriers therefore lessens the extent of a person's disability. As the study also focused on the

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