

User-Friendly Accessible Travel and Booking Apps – An Exploratory Study

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Structured Abstract

Purpose

This exploratory research is part of a wider, multi-phased project aimed at developing accessible travel booking and mobility apps to help facilitate greater inclusion and access to tourism products for all; inclusive of those who might use assistive technologies. This research reasons that information and communication technologies (ICT), through the provision of user-friendly accessible travel and booking apps, should help disabled tourists navigate their own tourism experiences. Yet, inaccessible technologies still limit both choices and enjoyment of travel for people with disabilities (Richards et al., 2021). This is despite the World Health Organisation [WHO] (2012) noting that approximately 15% of the global population has a disability, and that 36 million people are living with some form of sight loss (WHO, 2020). Such figures have prompted national legislation such as the UK's Equality Act (2010) and highlighted the importance of accessible tourism. Booking sites, information boards, travel apps continue to come in inaccessible formats together with limited functionality for users. So, while delivering high-quality tourism experiences to people with disabilities remains an aspiration there are challenges (Cassia et al, 2020). Existing travel booking and mobility apps simply do not enable all people to live and travel independently. Therefore, the authors aim to build upon the growing body of literature and assess the need for, and an engagement with, accessible mobile apps.

Design/methodology/approach

Similar to Darcy's (2010) study on accessible tourism and accommodation information preferences, the authors employed a quantitative survey, to assess the need for accessible mobile apps for tourism related activities. Administrated via Qualtrics, both convenience and snowballing sampling were utilised in order to capitalise on both social media outlets and academic communities (e.g., Twitter, TRINET, personal networks and social media outlets, tourist forums) together with disability groups (such as Wales Council of the Blind). The survey itself embedded accessibility through the provision of alternative formats including large print, telephone, and easy read, but was purposely designed to target the general public, and was not aimed at any specific groups of the society. Once completed the authors had 195 responses (n=195) in total. All data were then analysed using Qualtrics to help identify possible trends relating to perceived need and benefits of accessible mobile apps. It is anticipated that the findings will be utilised further to help underpin additional research into the design and experience of accessible travel and booking apps.

Originality/value

There is a body of research focused on identifying constraints faced by tourists and in delivering accessible tourist experiences (Darcy, 2002, 2010; Buhalis and Darcy, 2010; Vila, Darcy, and González, 2015; Altinay et al., 2016; Cassia et al., 2020; Richards et al, 2021). More research is needed however in large part down to the growing dependence on mobile services and technology for such experiences. This leads to greater appreciation of what 'universal design', or 'inclusive design' is and what it needs to look like. While a majority of the sample did not consider themselves to have a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010 nor encounter difficulties when using travel and booking apps. A majority agreed that there is a need for both accessible booking and mobility apps. Findings here do illustrate that having accessible travel and mobility apps would encourage participants to travel more, while at the

same time making it easier to travel. Above all, universal, accessible design will not deter but rather encourage main-stream use of travel apps. Thus, confirming that the foundations of any tourism experience are having accessibility at destinations (Darcy, 2002, 2010; Israeli, 2002) enabling a truly inclusive environment. It is also concerned with those initial decisions and choices about travel thus enabling a truly inclusive environment for all. As such, the findings from this exploratory study will help contribute towards greater understanding of accessibility, and in particular the provision of information and communication technology in tourism. While also providing baseline research on accessible tourism and technology.

Keywords: *Accessible tourism, disability and tourism, information technology, universal design*

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