The inequalities in the travel booking process: The case of mobile booking apps

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This study focuses on the accessibility and usability of travel booking mobile applications (apps) for people with a variety of visual impairments. The advent of assistive technologies in particular offers those with a visual impairment the opportunity to source information, plan itineraries and purchase travel products and services, thus potentially allowing people with disabilities to travel and take charge of their own tourism experience. However, the empowerment that comes from the ability to ‘take charge’ of own tourism experience can only be realised if the technology facilitates an inclusive and full experience for both disabled and non-disabled users. Following the Grounded Research methodology aimed at helping to understand the unique way visually impaired travellers access and navigate travel booking apps, the authors utilised an observational research design. The sample consisted of 19 participants aged 25 between over 65, who are registered sight- or severely sight impaired, including people with no useful vision. The data suggests that people who have some useful vision are able to, with varying degrees of difficulty, navigate and use the app (Booking.com) to successfully complete the pre-determined booking scenario. However, people with no vision were initially able to use the app but were unable to finalise the booking process due to several limitation of the app. This included, amongst others, a lack of text to speech integrations, loss of orientation and overlooking of essential controls, such as the close or back button. This research contributes to the ongoing debates around the gaps in the understating and provision of tourism being accessible to all.