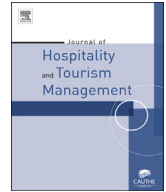




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The barriers to holiday-taking for visually impaired tourists and their families



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ABSTRACT

Although the provision of holidays for people with disabilities (PwD) and their families has been mainstreamed within social care policies in recent years, such a concern has not been given ample discussion in the tourism context. This investigation of the importance of accessibility factors from the point of view of both the PwD and their family members may direct future improvements in tourism destinations, with a special focus on the visually impaired group. It helps to provide an understanding of the factors affecting the decision-making process while evaluating a destination. It is hoped that, through recognising and raising awareness of equal travelling opportunities, PwD and their families will be encouraged to undertake more tourism activities. Thus, with a focus on the visually impaired group in Macao, this paper is an exploratory study that gathers insights from people with visual impairment and their family members. By conducting a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews, the issues discussed are organised in three themes, namely structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal aspects. A conceptual model is developed based on these themes, adding to it the perceived barriers that resulted from the interviews. The results contribute to a better understanding of these two groups as consumers in the tourism industry, leading to better enjoyment and more quality time at the destination. As indicated in this paper, the public's tendency is mainly to focus on structural aspects and typically underestimates the beneficial effects of intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects. The implications of the relationships among these three aspects can help tourism practitioners to acknowledge the most significant factors for better and more efficient resource management in tourism destinations.

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1. Introduction

Tourism development in Macao is mainly attributed to the expansion of its gaming sector, which has also become an important feature of Macao's economy. The blossoming of the gaming business is contributing not only to the visitor flow but also making the tourism industry an indispensable component of Macao's economy. With a population of 643,100 inhabitants, visitor arrivals for the whole year of 2015 amounted to 31,343,998 (Statistics and Census Service, 2015). Travelling is commonly perceived as an activity that is solely performed by those who are physically and financially healthy. It should be enjoyed equally by all people, regardless of their physical conditions. However, many tourism practitioners in destinations assume that people with disabilities

(PwD) are not interested in travelling or stereotype them simply as wheelchair users, therefore believing that if the attractions or facilities can accommodate wheelchair users, they can accommodate the needs of all PwD. They seldom consider the dynamicity of this population and the fact that people may possess different types (and levels) of disability.

According to the Macao population census in 2011, the resident population with disabilities in Macao consisted of 11,141 people (Statistics and Census Service, 2015), among a rough count of the 600,000 total population. The types of disability included visual impairment and blindness (10.1%), voice disorder and speech impediment (6.1%), hearing impairment and deafness (10.8%), impaired limb(s) or trunk (23.2%), mental disorder (19.8%), and chronic illness (41%), and 5411 PwD were over 65 years old. These data mainly come from voluntary self-reporting to government departments or social organisations; thus, the true number of PwD could be hidden (McKercher, Packer, Yau, & Lam, 2003). Even though the statistics appear to be small, the actual numbers are

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probably higher, and the population with disabilities could be bigger than expected. Furthermore, as a consequence of modern society's aging process, the elderly population may encounter constraints and problems similar to PwD. Between 2000 and 2050, the world population of people older than 60 years will double from 11% to 22% (Burnett & Baker, 2001). Frailty becomes increasingly common in older age groups and is associated with difficulties in mobility and other everyday activities (Gale, Cooper, & Sayer, 2015). Since visual impairment is also strongly related to the aging process (Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012), there appears to be a significant relationship between aging and disability, with the disability rate increasing as people age (Vila, Darcy, & González, 2015). Inevitably, continuous growth in these numbers is to be expected. As a result, PwD may become a significant market segment for the tourism industry.

The academic interest in the field of disabilities has been growing in recent decades but, there is still limited research that attempts to address the dynamicity of PwD. Similarly, the tourism industry in Macao does not place sufficient emphasis on this potential market, which could be extended to include PwD's family members, as they usually require travel companions. Tourism is an important component, as having a healing effect and can improve the general well-being of PwD and their family members. However, they face many constraints/barriers at the same time. Although many studies investigate the relationship of physical barriers, disability, and the accessible tourism market, few examine in detail the emotional barriers and the relationships between PwD and family members during holidays. Thus, an investigation of the importance of accessibility factors from the point of view of both the PwD and their family members may direct future improvements at tourism sites. It will help to provide an understanding of the factors affecting the decision-making process while evaluating a destination. A destination can be marketed more effectively to visitors with disabilities, and tourist sites will be better equipped for serving travellers of all kinds. The different dimensions of disability are unequally recognised by tourism practitioners, whose focus in access issues is mainly on wheelchair users (Darcy & Pegg, 2011). In view of this, this paper focuses differently on the visually impaired and blind group. It sheds light on the concerns of people with visual impairment and their family when experiencing tourism and leisure activities.

Synthesising all these previous studies, the current study attempts to explore the needs and interests of people with visual impairment and their family in travelling both domestically and abroad and to highlight the presence of an interest in travel that might be restricted due to barriers or difficulties and other possible reasons. A conceptual model is developed to indicate the relationship between these constraints. This paper is the first attempt to expand the understanding of the nature of the barriers from the viewpoint of people with visual impairment and their family members. The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it contributes to a better understanding of people with visual impairment and their family members as a consumer group of the tourism industry. Second, it fills the void in the existing tourism literature with a focus on the visually impaired group. Third, it can contribute to developing tourism planning in a more sustainable and comprehensive way. It provides the possibility to implement specific strategies that increase the accessibility, demand, participation, and positive experience of tourism activities among PwD, their families, and tourism practitioners. In conjunction with the concepts perceived by different parties, this paper attempts to enable the consideration of disability issues more comprehensively to achieve sustainable tourism development goals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disabilities and visual impairments

Based on the definition provided by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (The National Archives, 1995), a 'person with disabilities' is a person who 'has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. Disability means that humans may have physical, cognitive/mental, sensory, emotional, developmental barriers or a combination of them. Visual impairment is one of those disabilities. The World Health Organization (2009) and the Tourism Review Digital Network (TRDN) (2010) estimate that 314 million people worldwide live with low vision and blindness, but they still enjoy life very much and discover new parts of the world, experience diverse cultures, and meet lifelong friends from other continents based on tailored holiday packages and tours. People with visual impairment not only have many difficulties in their daily life, such as currencies (all bills are the same size and colour), a lack of auditory elevator cues, inaccessible customs declaration forms, and safety when crossing roads (McKercher et al., 2003) but also generally face many barriers and obstacles in travelling, such as purchasing air tickets, searching destinations' information, and participating fully in tourism activities. They may not travel due to their inability to travel independently (Small et al., 2012). As such, members of this group are often considered or assumed to be not interested in travelling. However, some previous studies recognise that they have the same needs and desires for tourism as others (Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2004). Disability research remains on the margins of tourism research; studies are recommended to explore the concept of people with visual impairment in experiences and interactions with tourism spaces, the environment, and other people (Richards, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010). The Royal National Institute of Blind People (2009) points out that the national and local government agencies responsible for tourism development have also been charged with widening access to tourism opportunities, most recently as part of a social justice agenda that recognises tourism participation as a right of citizenship. In a preliminary survey conducted by Shaw and Coles (2004), the respondents express that travelling had provided them and their family members with a break and a means to release the stress from the usual routine. Meanwhile, in the study conducted by Nunes and Kong (2005), the interviewees (who possess some forms of disability in Macao) reflect on the importance of being able to travel and the role that it played in the rehabilitation process and enhancement of their quality of life. It can also help to harmonise the family relationship (Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2009) and maintain social networks with the world.

Furthermore, Bi, Card, and Cole (2007) indicate that there is a kind of ethical obligation for tourism practitioners to provide travel services for PwD. Tourism has a significant influence on the understanding and appreciation of other people. PwD have the chance to mingle socially with others and become better acquainted through tourism activities. Tourism can therefore increase the awareness of each other's characteristics then build appreciation and respect between PwD and others. Most people consider that disability is related to wheelchair use, because accessibility barriers in the tourism industry still remain a significant issue for people who have difficulty walking (Takeda & Card, 2002). The market for travellers with disabilities is a misunderstood and under-appreciated segment of the tourism industry (Burnett & Baker, 2001). Tourism practitioners in destinations should identify PwD as a distinct market segment and should not assume that those in this group have the same interests and needs. Meeting the needs of

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