

Chapter 4

Use of the Internet to Plan Tourism Trips by People With Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to examine internet usage to plan a tourism trip by people with special needs (PwSN), particularly addressing differences in the intensity of internet usage according to their age and education level. To achieve these aims, a survey was applied to a sample of Portuguese people with special needs who have already undertaken tourism trips. Various bivariate statistical tests (chi-square, t test, ANOVA, and Kruskal-Wallis) were used to examine differences in internet usage according to respondents' age and education level. Results obtained reveal that the internet is the most important information source used by PwSN in planning their tourism trips. However, respondents report that they are not very satisfied with the online sources used. Moreover, online sources used to plan tourism activities vary according to PwSNs' age and education level.

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INTRODUCTION

People with special needs (PwSN), including people with disabilities (PwD) and people with other types of needs, represent an important market for tourism destinations. Nevertheless, historically, the population with disabilities has been subject to stereotypical social representations and constructions, based on unfounded beliefs and superstition, which has led to discriminatory attitudes and acts. It is for this reason that, even today, disability has severe consequences for individuals in society (Moura, 2018), leading to their exclusion from many fields of social life, including leisure travel (Kastenholz, Eusébio & Figueiredo, 2015).

Today, any community has the duty to permit and promote access for every person so they can actively participate in society, in a fair and equal way, based on the globalizing approach to human rights organizations (Fontes, Martins, & Hespanha, 2014). Thus, in recent years, human rights protection and the individual value of the person, respect for diversity, the discrimination debate, increasing social awareness, and gradually growing political responsibility are strongly supported by various international organizations. These initiatives have culminated in a broad and vigorous social movement covering more and more countries, leading to innovative and profound societal changes (Moura, 2018).

Gradually, full participation of the individual with special needs in all kinds of social activities is accepted and supported in contemporary societies. In the context of tourism, the emphasis should be on the awareness of governments and tourism industry stakeholders regarding their responsibility to avoid exclusion and not on individuals with disabilities (Packer, McKercher, & Yau, 2007). Therefore, participation in tourism should be understood as a process of interaction in which disability is only one of the factors to be taken into consideration, and not as the determining aspect of the limitations to such participation. Moreover, tourism involvement will enable social inclusion and the enjoyment of benefits that will positively affect health and overall well-being (Kastenholz, Eusébio, Moura, & Figueiredo, 2010). However, travel is still a challenge for many PwSN (including PwD), partly due to the lack of reliable information about tourism destinations (Buhalis, Eichhorn, Michopoulou & Miller, 2006; Darcy, Cameron & Pegg, 2010; Darcy, 2012).

Information and technology are the key to boost accessibility and equal opportunities in tourism planning and enjoyment, playing a crucial role in empowering individuals with disabilities (Altinay, Saner, Bahçelerli, & Altinay, 2016). Thus, Darcy, McKercher and Schweinsberg (2020) stress that it is essential to shift the focus of accessible tourism initiatives from a piecemeal manner, typical in the traditional tourism industry (e.g. transport, accommodation and attractions), towards understanding and developing an integrated and equitable view of the tourism experience as a whole. To do so, the ignition should be precisely the information made available to the tourist in an accessible way. Correspondingly, there is an urgent need for an in-depth investigation of the inclusion and accessibility of information for all, particularly those with disabilities or other difficulties of access (Domínguez Vila, Alén González & Darcy, 2020), and how PwSN use online sources. This is especially true considering the global trend towards democratization of the Internet and other digital tools and the almost doubling of the population with disabilities in the next decade (WTO, 2013). However, there is little research providing a thorough understanding of how PwSN use the Internet to plan and organize their tourism trips. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the use of the Internet by PwSN, namely the type of online information sources used to plan trips, the objective with which these sources are used and how this group evaluates these sources. Additionally, this chapter aims to examine whether there are differences in the use of the Internet by PwSN to plan their tourism trips, according to their age and education level.

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