ARTICLES

Travel Motivation and Barriers to Travel for People with Visual Impairments

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Abstract

In recent years, social tourism has been strongly promoted in the EU, including the travel of people with various types of disabilities. The present study analyses travel motivation and barriers to travel for visually impaired people. This analysis is based on several years of research at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, then on the personal travel experience of a visually impaired person and the practice of a rehabilitation instructor at Tyfloservis, o.p.s (charitable trust), Hradec Králové, an organization supporting independent living of visually impaired people. The study is also based on interviews with ten visually impaired respondents and their travel experience. SARS-COV-2 is also included as a current barrier to travel.

Keywords
Travel motivation, barriers to travel, visual impairment, SARS-COV-2

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Introduction

Having a health limitation significantly affects a person's life, affecting their experience, their social integration, relationships, and even their scale of values. People with health limitations, like visually impaired people, desire to live a full, high-quality, and fulfilling life despite their limitations. The idea of an independent and pain-free life is associated for some with the happiness of being cared for by loved ones or in the care of specialized services and facilities. Others, however, are much more ambitious. They want to have a family, high-quality education, a good job, their housing, and they desire to get to know the world and other cultures, and thus live their life to the fullest. Instead of judging whether these respective views of life with a disability are appropriate, it is meant to facilitate for either view.

Especially in tourism, the participation of people with disabilities brings about peculiar challenges to consider and research to make traveling accessible to a larger number of such people. After all, people with disabilities teach visually intact people tolerance and respect and help improve social communication skills. Moreover, their presence is another justification for developing infrastructure and services in tourism. Last but not least, like the other participants in tourism, the disadvantaged people not only generate capital in tourism but also facilitate further development of tourism.

Each type of disability involves particular needs that stimulate unprecedented demands on tourism services. These needs are researched by various authors, such as Smith (1987), Murray and Sproats (1990), O'Neil and Knight (2000), Shaw and Coles (2004), Packer et al. (2007), Darcy (2010), Packer, Small and Darcy (2008), Poria Reichel and Brandt (2011), Buhalis, Darcy and Ambrose (2012), Trejbal and Zelenka (2019). However, their interest is not uniform. It can be stated that a group of visually impaired people is still on the fringes of interest in tourism research (Poria, Reichel, Brandt 2010: 149).

This study aims to proffer answers to the following research questions: a) Why do only very few visually impaired people travel?; b)What motivates visually impaired people to travel?; c) How do they perceive destinations with their visual impairment?; d) What barriers to travel do visually impaired people experience?; and e) What travel problems have the SARS-COV-2 pandemic caused for visually impaired people?, thereby contributing to studies on travel motivations among the visually-impaired tourists.

Literature Review

Visual impairment and the resulting travel limitations affecting visually impaired people

Visual impairment is a level of visual perception at which vision is used with considerable limitations (Květoňová, Cerha 2008: 18). People whose eyesight can be corrected with ordinary spectacle optics to the extent that they can see normally without any additional compensation are not considered as visually impaired. The basic indicator for determining visual impairment is the level of visual acuity and visual field damage. Based on these indicators, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports

the following degrees of visual impairment (Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic, 2021):

[1] Moderate visual impairment – Visual acuity with the best possible correction: maximum less than 6/18 (0.30) – minimum equal to or better than 6/60 (0.10); 3/10 – 1/10.

[2] Severe visual impairment – Visual acuity with the best possible correction: maximum less than 6/60 (0.10) – minimum equal to or better than 3/60 (0.05); 1/10 – 10/20.

[3] Profound visual impairment – Visual acuity with the best possible correction: maximum less than 3/60 (0.05) – minimum equal to or better than 1/60 (0.02); 1/20 – 1/50, and/or concentric narrowing of the field of view of both eyes below 20 degrees, or a single functional eye below 45 degrees.

[4] Near-total blindness – Visual acuity with the best possible correction of 1/60 (0.02), 1/50 to lightening or limiting the field of view to 5 degrees around the central fixation, even if the central sharpness is not affected.

[5] Total blindness – Loss of vision including conditions ranging from complete lack of light perception to maintaining light perception with incorrect light projection.

According to WHO statistics from 2021 (WHO, 2021), 2.2 billion people worldwide suffer from visual impairments, of which 1 billion are more serious, leading to significant visual impairment. WHO (WHO, 2021) states that 295 million people suffer from near-total blindness, of which 43 million belong to the category of total blindness. In terms of age, the over – 50 age group dominates. The increasing incidence of visual impairment is linked with an aging population. According to WHO (WHO, 2021), at least 0.5 to 1 billion eye diseases are currently curable, or at least it is possible to treat or prevent them. For instance, cataract, which is the most common cause of blindness in the world, is curable by current modern methods and means. Unfortunately, this option is unattainable in some continents for economic or cultural reasons (WHO 2021). In the Czech Republic, people with visual impairments are the seventh-largest group in the category of people with disabilities. According to the latest comprehensive survey of the Czech Statistical Office in 2013, there were more than 102,000 visually impaired people, of which 47% were people over the age of 75 and 9% of the total were blind (ČSU 2013).

In terms of the participation of visually impaired people in tourism, global statistics show great potential, but it is necessary to look at this area comprehensively. The human population is aging and therefore increasingly threatened with diseases of civilization that effect (not only) the quality of sight. It is, necessary to look to the future and prepare for the fact that a significant percentage of tourism participants will be less able to see and will have particular needs.

Visual impairment and tourist experience

While there has been a growing interest in tourism studies of the experiences of people with mobility disabilities in recent years (e.g., Cloquet, Palomino, Shaw, Stephen, & Taylor, 2018; Loi & Kong, 2017; McKercher & Darcy, 2018; Rubio-Escuderos, García-Andreu, Michopoulou, & Buhalis, 2021; Small, 2015; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012), other physical disabilities, such as visual impairment, have gotten little attention from researchers. In addition, there is little indication that

the tourism sector fully understands or caters to this particular category of tourists. This omission could be justified by the conventional notion of tourism as a visual, sightseeing experience, which appears to support the view that traveling is pointless if one cannot see. Studies focused on experiences on visually impaired tourist only gained attention in the last decade. Despite the fact that the studies were done in different nations, they all reported similar tourist mobility and immobility. These include Israel (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2011), Australia (Small et al., 2012), and the United Kingdom (Richards, Morgan, Pritchard, Sedgley, & others, 2010). In the aforementioned studies, the respondents were mobile travelers and reported they had a high dependence of their sense of smell, sound, and touch to experience their destination. Good signage, color contrast, sufficient lightening, lack of physical barriers, and the layout of buildings or outdoor spaces contributed to their mobility.

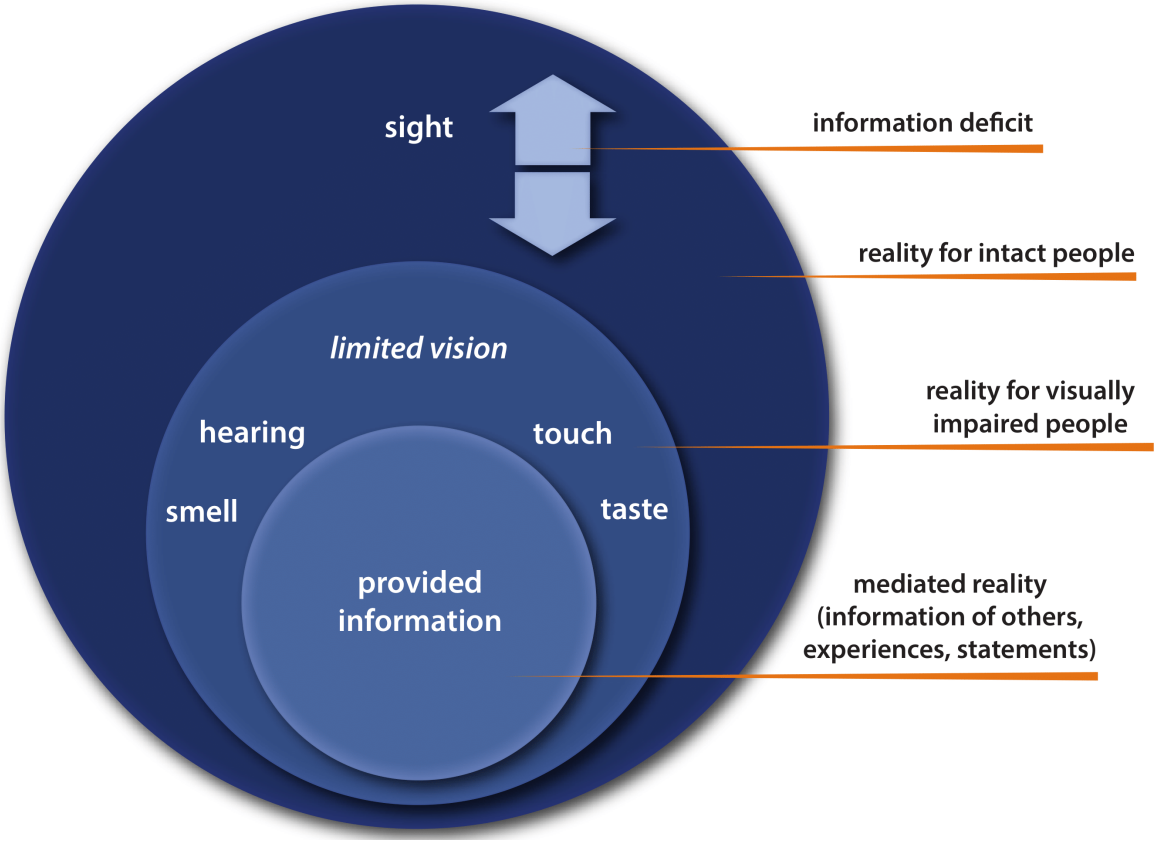
Through an in-depth interview of visually impaired and physically disable people, Poria, Reichel, and Brandt (2010) was able to identify the social hurdles encountered while flying. For the visually impaired respondents, they were no report of problem during boarding and disembarking process, however, they reported the fear of missing the flight announcement and avoided unnecessary contact with other travelers for fear of stumbling. On the other hand, physically disabled travelers reported the boarding and disembarking process to pose the most problem for wheelchair users, especially when moving from the wheelchair to the aircraft seat. The respondents also observed that the lack of staff understanding, and awareness was also a major challenge. They were of the opinion that the staff either spoke with their nondisabled companion or were patronizing. A study by Poria, Reichel, and Brandt (2011) on the hotel experience of disabled guests focused on the guests' experience with the hotel staff, public areas, restaurant, and room. For the visually impaired respondents, location of dining utensils and plates, reading of menu, and buffet serving style was the difficulty encountered in the hotel restaurant. In addition, they reported the challenge of navigating the reception desk, hotel spaces, and other areas of the hotel due to the physical design and staff attitude. Differences in access requirements were evident in restaurants, where the height of tables and stairs were the biggest concerns for wheelchair users.

A theory of disability that takes into account the concept of embodiment and social construction of disability is required to understand the tourist experience of individuals with vision impairment. According to Small and Darcy (2011), critical studies on disability had progressed beyond the model of medical disability which "*locates the problem of disability within the individual as their 'fault' and sees the cause of the problem as emanating from the functional/psychological losses (their impairment/embodiment) arising from the disability*" (Small and Darcy, 2011:75). A social model, which focuses on the social framework of society rather than the disability of a person, is more useful. The social model cogitates that disabling social practices (such as material relations of power, social attitudes, physical barriers, etc.) are responsible for individual's embodiment (impairment) transformation (Small, 2015).

Visual impairment and information deficit

To understand the position of visually impaired people in the tourism market, it is not crucial to know what percentage this group represents, but rather understand the consequences and impact of visual impairment on their lives and participation in tourism. Visual impairment distorts mainly cognitive functions, spatial orientation, and independent movement (Květoňová, Cerha 2008: 19). However, the most serious consequence of visual impairment is the information deficit (Fig. 1).

Figure 1"Reality" of the environment based on information deficit (Source: author)



A person obtains 80 to 90% of information about the surrounding world visually, so it is the most important human sense (Květoňová, Cerha 2008:18). If a person is visually impaired beyond correction, the information obtained by sight cannot be considered completely relevant – it is distorted and often incorrectly evaluated. Other senses cannot be used as a complete substitute for sight. Although they provide useful information, they are accurate only to a certain extent, conditioned by the ability and practical experience of the visually impaired person to use them better than the visually intact person. The visually impaired person acquires only a "reflection of reality", which, when supplemented with mediated information, becomes more accurate and approximates reality.

The information deficit is proportional to the degree of visual impairment. It can be divided into two basic levels:

1. **visual level** – a person is able to orientate in space and obtain information visually (albeit to a limited extent and with the help of various compensatory aids).
2. **Extra visual level** – a person is not able to orientate in space, although he uses compensatory aids or guides, so he is fully dependent on other senses and mediated information.
3. Each of these two levels requires a different way and intensity of adaptation to the environment, mobility, and access to information. Both levels require different disability management techniques and define different levels of self-care.

People whose eye disease is progressive or suffered sudden vision loss first go through an adaptation phase. They, therefore, linger for some time on the edge of the two levels. Although they no longer use visual perception, they are not able to adequately use other senses to substitute for the missing information. The adaptation phase is proportional to the progression of the disease and the person's flexibility in responding to change. This resilience is often conditioned by the age of the person and his or her ability to come to terms with his or her illness. The adaptation phase requires a lot of effort to master all the necessary skills, a lot of time, and patience. Everyone must go through this process on their own and of their own free will, otherwise, the desired result will never be achieved. However, one can receive support from the family, or organizations supporting visually impaired people. Those who fail to be resilient become fully dependent on the help of others and cease to master their own lives and enjoy the precious gift of life.

The information deficit goes hand in hand with limiting the mobility of visually impaired people (Květoňová, Cerha 2008:19). Distorted, insufficient, or missing information about the surroundings makes free and independent movement much harder. This problem is particularly striking for blind people. 90 percent of them can move freely only on previously learned routes. They depend on compensatory aids (most often a white cane, a guide dog, or assistive technology) or the help of a personal guide. Near blind people are partially able to move freely and can orientate themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, but need specific conditions allowing orientation, or at least making it easier (light, contrast, colours). Furthermore, visually impaired people react slower in emergencies and need a longer adaptation time (for example, the transition from a well-lit room to a dark one).

The information deficit is also responsible for limits and barriers to communication as well as establishing interpersonal relationships. A visually impaired person is not always able to adequately perceive his or her surroundings and respond to stimuli (Květoňová, Cerha 2008:19). For example, visually impaired people may not perceive whether or not they are alone in the room, may not be able to make eye contact, may not perceive and recognize gestures and facial expressions, and may have other criteria for assessing sympathy than intact individuals. Moreover, communication barriers occur on both sides. Many intact people do not know how to treat a visually impaired person, they often avoid contact or, on the contrary, react only with excessive care, which is not always positively received by a visually impaired person.

Methodology

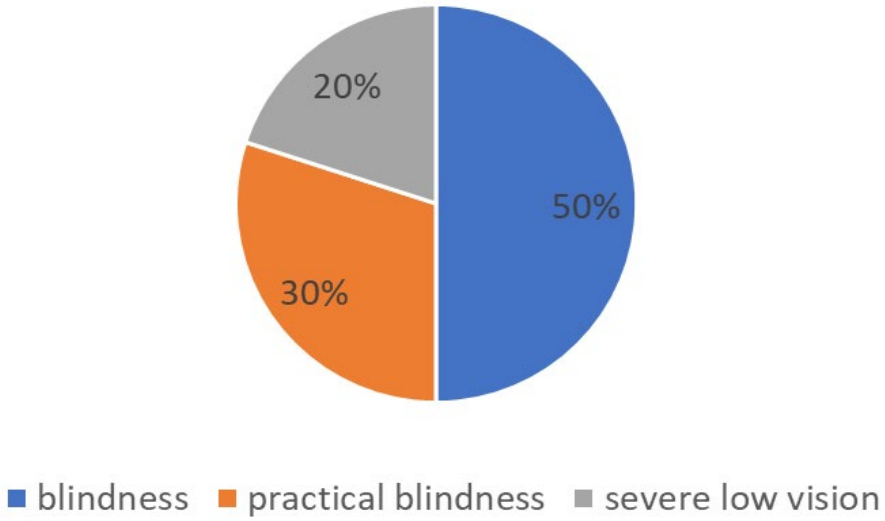
Traveling of people with disabilities and its support using ICT is a research topic at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM), University of Hradec Králové (UHK). The research results summarized in this article answer the following questions:

- Why do only very few visually impaired people travel?
- What motivates visually impaired people to travel?
- How do they perceive destinations with their visual impairment?
- What barriers to travel do visually impaired people experience?
- What travel problems have the SARS-COV-2 pandemic caused for visually impaired people?

Several research methods were used to answer these research questions. The most important input was a several-year research project run by the near-blind author. The project was launched in 2017 at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, where the author was then studying Travel &Tourism Management. Her research aimed to apply her personal experience of a visually impaired person to determine the standards of tourism services that would respect the needs of visually impaired people. The results of two other students who followed up on this research were also used, as well as the design of a SmartHotel and the evaluation of the accessibility of promotional websites of Czech destinations for visually impaired people. Another source is the author's travel experience and practice as an instructor of social rehabilitation for people with visual impairment in Tyfloservis, o.p.s. (charitable trust), Czech Republic. To research barriers to travel, visually impaired respondents were contacted, ten of whom were willing to share their experience.

Qualitative research was also carried out with a total of ten informants. This research took the form of structured interviews with semi-open and open questions. There is a practical justification for this – it is easier for visually impaired people to answer questions orally than in writing. At the same time, it was possible in this way to delve deeper into the issue through sounding questions. The informants were contacted through social networks, advertisements in specialized periodicals and with the help of local organizations Tyflocentrum o.p.s. and Tyfloservis o.p.s. The criteria for selecting informants were their experience with tourism and their willingness to share their observations. The informants came from all over the Czech Republic and were of different ages, genders, educational attainment and degree of visual impairment, in which blindness or practical blindness significantly predominated (Fig. 2). The obtained data were subsequently analysed and evaluated by methods of deduction, induction and synthesis.

Figure 2 Types of visual impairment of respondents (Source: author)



Results

Motivation to travel for visually impaired people and their perception of the destination

There is a general misconception that visually impaired individuals, especially those with more severe impairment, do not travel at all. Why should they in the first place? This view seems to be irrefutable when supported by the fact that visual perception is responsible for 80 to 90 % of our information about the world and the surroundings. Moreover, tourism is based mainly on visual stimuli. For example, promotional materials use visual appeal to entice people into visiting the destination.

And yet there are visually impaired individuals, if not many, who travel despite the mentioned facts. They are courageous enough to go to unknown places. Sometimes alone, mostly with a guide, individually, or organized, depending on their preferences. As with the intact population, they are tempted to explore the world or just relax in a nice place. Some travel on business and take part in congress tourism. Whatever reasons to travel they have, what matters is their perception of the destination where they spend their free time. The genius loci is not entirely of visual nature, it reflects the overall perception and experience of the place. Sight is not enough. The place should be perceived with all available senses and one ought to be aware of his or her presence there. Therefore, visually impaired people cannot be neglected when it comes to their participation and experiencing the genius loci.

Visually impaired people capture reality employing the other senses and mediated information. If they are not totally blind, they also perceive the place visually, although intact people may deem such perception distorted and uninteresting. Visually impaired people view this, however, as the reality of the place and it has a special character for them. The play of light and shadow, the colours of the place, contrasts – all this combines into a visual composition that identifies the place and evokes a

memory of a beautiful, or perhaps repulsive, place. Through the other senses, they can perceive heat, cold, weather, the taste of local dishes, smells, authentic sounds, and noises. Thanks to touch, they can get to know things – their size, structure, and position in space. An integral part of the travel experience is contact with people, learning about local customs and culture. All these aspects help create the genius loci of the destination for visually impaired people.

Barriers to travel for visually impaired people

Personal barriers

First, these are personal factors. Each person is a personality per se that manifests itself both internally and externally in thinking and actions. The inner experience of a visually impaired person in relation to travel can be diverse. These people may feel excessive mistrust. It manifests as mistrust of strangers, concerns about their safety, and communication problems between them and tourism operators (based on Loi - Kong 2016: 9).

Personal factors in refusing to travel are manifested by dependence on personal assistance (Loi - Kong 2016: 9). The cause is concern about the unknown environment. As already mentioned, 90 percent of visually impaired people can move safely and confidently only on previously learned routes. If they are forced to go to an unfamiliar environment, the vast majority rely on their guide, which is confirmed by the respondents of the research at FIM UHK. Only then do they rely on assistive and navigational technologies and compensatory aids. On the other hand, reliance on other people is often seen as dependence. A visually impaired person loses personal freedom and control over the situation, which can be stressful for him or her. It is necessary to find a compromise, especially if the guide is a family member. Although he or she knows the needs of the visually impaired person and they may enjoy a good relationship, they both want to enjoy traveling to the full. A professional tour guide, on the other hand, does not have to perform quality guide services for visually impaired people, and although he or she is available 24/7, he or she may not know the handicapped client well and saturate his or her needs, which leads to frustration and dissatisfaction on both sides. (Poria, Reichel, Brandt 2010).

Another personal factor limiting visually impaired people in traveling is their prevailing social isolation. The problem of mobility keeps visually impaired people "in the cage" of their familiar environment. They know it well, can function independently in it, and thus have a sense of independence. It is therefore social isolation with limited communication with a limited number of people (family and acquaintances). Some people, however, need to relieve this monotony and meet new people. This motivates them to travel as it is an opportunity to prove their independence.

Last but not least, the inability to express one's demands is another issue. Fear, anxiety and sometimes even feeling inferior hinders visually impaired people in expressing their specific needs and requirements for tourism services.

Social barriers

There are also social factors that limit the travel of visually impaired people. They reflect the attitudes of the society in question towards this target group. Firstly, it is a general idea of the intact society about visually impaired people. Secondly, there are differences in local customs (based on Loi - Kong 2016: 10). The former case means that society recognizes visually impaired people according to certain characteristics (white cane, guide dog, etc.). However, some do not have these features, although they require a specific approach, for various reasons. An example is the use of the white cane. One group of visually impaired people does not need it at all, or only sometimes. The adherents of the other group feel stigmatized by the white cane and reject using it even though it is necessary. The intact society is perplexed by such people.

The latter case concerns the diversity of the world and cultures with miscellaneous customs and rules that need to be respected. Of course, visually impaired people also have to comply with them, although they are confronted with a lot of specific problems to do so. These include foreign currency recognition, specific pedestrian facilities for visually impaired people, different levels of tolerance for visually impaired people and their traveling. The respondents, who confirm the mentioned views, identified the following serious social barriers: the inability to speak a foreign language (especially in older travellers), misunderstandings with tourism staff, who often have no idea what would be interesting and suitable for the visually impaired visitors. Furthermore, visually impaired people have a negative experience with establishing contacts with local people, prejudices and shyness of intact people, rejection by intact people, their lack of empathy, or, conversely, an excessive willingness to help, which bothers them. Visually impaired respondents are also limited by fear of thieves, rapists, and fraudsters. They are also concerned about the deteriorating security situation in the world.

Surrounding barriers

An important hindrance to travel for the visually impaired is their fear of an unfamiliar environment. Respondents were asked to name barriers they see as complications in an unfamiliar environment. The most common were the following ones:

- Inaccessible and difficult terrain – nature trails.
- Insufficient or unreadable marking for the guidance of visually handicapped people.
- Missing protective barriers against fall-related injuries – railings and handrails.
- Unmarked obstacles on the route – baskets, front gardens, billboards of pubs, construction work on the pavement, untrimmed trees, pillars, columns, and lamps having a colour blending with the surroundings.
- Unsounded pedestrian and train crossings.
- Missing tactile paving surfaces and crossings, frequent changes of paving structure.
- Unmarked glass doors and large glazed areas.
- Frequency of stairs and unevenness on the route, missing marking of the first and last step in a more pronounced colour.

- Too narrow or, on the contrary, too large and difficult-to-orientate complex spaces.
- Ill-fitting carpets, low furniture, improper placement of small objects.
- Unsounded elevators.
- Use of turnstiles – automatic entrances to public toilets.
- Doors unmarked with a raised script or Braille signs.

Information barriers

Another reason why the visually impaired travel less the lack of information about the accessibility of the destination is. In general, people with any disability carefully choose their holiday destination. They pay utmost attention to the accessibility of the destination in relation to their particular limitations. Therefore, any information regarding accessibility or specific access to disabled visitors proves invaluable to them. However, it is difficult for visually impaired people to access the information they need, mainly due to unequal access to information. The main causes of this deficiency include (KAZUIST 2011: 6):

- **Inaccessibility of format/content** – information is not available in the form, methods, and means that visually impaired people may use to receive and process information. Commercial information materials in either printed or electronic form are based on visual information (images, signs, pictograms, etc.). The emphasis is put primarily on attracting the attention of as many potential customers as possible. However, a visually impaired person is not able to perceive and process the information provided in this way, or only partially. It results in misunderstandings or even misinformation. The respondents pointed to a lack of information brochures, menus for the visually impaired and the blind, enlarged maps highlighting suitable routes for the visually impaired, web information suitable for visually impaired visitors. They also criticized the frequent incompatibility of websites (reservation systems) with assistive technologies.
- **Inaccessibility of an area** – information, or information providers, are located in architecturally complex spaces, which are difficult to orientate for visually impaired people. This fact naturally demotivates them, even prevents them from obtaining information. The respondents mentioned, for example, the illegibility of information boards (classic and electronic ones) – they are too high, out of sight, texts are printed in a small or low-contrast font. Furthermore, they criticize the absence of sound in devices such as ATMs, information kiosks, etc. They were also bothered by inaudible sound sources, caused by the size of the space or not to disturb intact people, the absence of various language mutations, and the absence of sound in means of transport.

Economic barriers

Another reason for the visually impaired to travel less is their economic situation. Their income is usually lower compared to the national average. Disabled people usually receive a disability pension or get low-paying jobs. This statement was also supported by the respondents, who disapproved of low income, the fact that discount cards (ZTP cards in the Czech Republic) are not accepted

abroad, expensive accommodation and catering. Problems also occur when concluding written contracts (e.g., reading or signing them), difficult handling of card payments (entering the PIN code), illegibility of price tags, etc.

SARS-COV-2 as a barrier to travel for visually impaired people

In the last 3 years, tourism has been in decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has catastrophic consequences for visually impaired people. The availability of destinations they usually targeted has been reduced significantly. Fear of illness and possible infection, fear of vaccination, inability to comply with the regulations of the Czech government as well as those of other states, caused by inaccessible information as well as complex procedures and conditions for entry or departure limit traveling. Moreover, the confusing and constantly changing information are difficult to obtain even for intact people, who are often unable to keep up with the current conditions, let alone for visually impaired people.

COVID-19 also endangers the perception of the genius loci. Measures to protect against COVID-19 make it impossible to use senses other than sight to explore places. The face mask and respirator prevent the perception of odours or smells. The COVID-19 pandemic affects the food and drink business and consumption. It is also recommended to avoid touching surfaces. How can a visually impaired person "experience" the genius loci under these circumstances? Even social contacts are severely disrupted by the pandemic. Many clients of Tyfloservis o.p.s. (charitable organization) remained isolated in their homes. They were afraid to go out, they used volunteers to shop and deliver food for them, even walk their guide dogs. The clients had limited access to social services, neither the guide service nor Tyflocenter activation services (including various trips and excursions) worked at all. Tyfloservis could not but limit the teaching of spatial orientation, self-service – in other words, a lot of visually impaired people lost much they had to live for. Unfortunately, social distancing also caused "human soul distancing". People were getting more and more tired of the situation and started to keep to themselves, which further deteriorates the relationship between visually impaired and intact people. On the other hand, many clients of Tyfloservis, o.p.s. (a charitable organization) share the view that social distancing allows them to respond better in emergencies and provides them with more space. The decrease in the number of tourists and visitors in destinations helps them move more freely. Moreover, a lot of them were forced by circumstances to start using information technology, due to the digital transformation of everyday life.

Conclusion

Living a visually impaired life is a long-term prospect. It doesn't matter if one loses his or her sight at birth or during life, suddenly or gradually. What matters is whether or not and to what extent one can cope with the loss at all. Only those who accept their disadvantage as a part of their nature learn to live with it and respect it. Only if that is the case, they can move on in their life – and may even travel far and wide.

This article is the result of a research project focusing mainly on visual impairment in connection with the decision to travel and on the analysis of all factors that may affect the travel of visually impaired people. Future research will focus on the specific situation in the Czech Republic

concerning the accessibility of tourism for the visually impaired. The research will look for the potential utilization of various procedures and technical means (such as voice-activated devices (Buhalis & Moldavska, 2021) with respect to the specific needs of visually impaired people. It aspires to fill in the knowledge gap concerning ways to support the travel of visually impaired people. Hopefully, the results of this research will inspire entrepreneurs and destination managers in making travel and tourism more sustainable and accessible to all people.

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