

Insights Report

# How May Graphic Communication Make Tourism More Accessible for the Disabled Community?

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## Introduction

As the saying goes, “to travel is to live”. As an individual who frequently finds myself in a state of wanderlust, I appreciate just how much the urge to travel can take over. Unfortunately, travel is not completely universal, and can be very discriminatory, particularly to those with disabilities. **Physical, cognitive and mental impairments can all present very different, yet equally challenging circumstances for an individual and their carers** whilst away from the comforts of their homes. Often, these difficulties are understated across the tourism industry, rendering travelling as more of a hassle than a relief for the majority of the disabled community.

As it stands, over one billion people across the world live with a disabling condition, that's around **15% of the global population**. Furthermore, **over 46% of over 60's worldwide have a disability**. This number is expected to grow rapidly, due to population rise and increases in average global life expectancy. It is also thought that **3 in 5 people in the UK will become a carer** throughout one point in their lives. In context of the tourism industry, this is a huge potential market which has been barely explored, and as a human issue, this means that 1 in 7 of us potentially find it difficult to travel. The freedom of movement, mobility right, or the right to travel is, in fact considered as a basic human right, as stated in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, I am left to wonder; why is travel not accessible to all? **This project will explore the reasons for, and the issues involved with disabled tourism in attempts to find potential solutions that may benefit the disabled community.**

## Staying Relevant

Throughout this investigation, it will be vital to address set goals and targets, to ensure that my research is being conducted in a way that will benefit the project, and to stay relevant to the issue at hand. I have devised a set of 3 aims and 3 objectives to aid this.

### Aims

- To explore and discover the issues that individuals with disabilities (and their carers) might face whilst travelling, and how these issues differ depending on the disability that is presented.
- To understand how different cultures may perceive disabled tourists.
- To develop an understanding of the tourism industry to realise what is currently being done, and what might be implemented to improve the quality of provision for the disabled community.

### Objectives

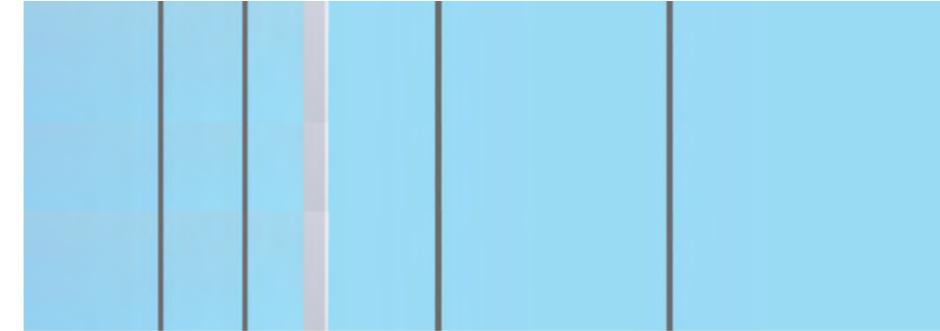
- To review literature and research journals to develop an insight into disabilities within tourism.
- To interview individuals with disabilities, their carers/family and friends, and stakeholders of the tourism industry to gain personal accounts to aid my project.
- To conduct ethnographical research to gain an unbiased, in vivo understanding of what the disabled community might experience across the tourism sector.

## Methodology

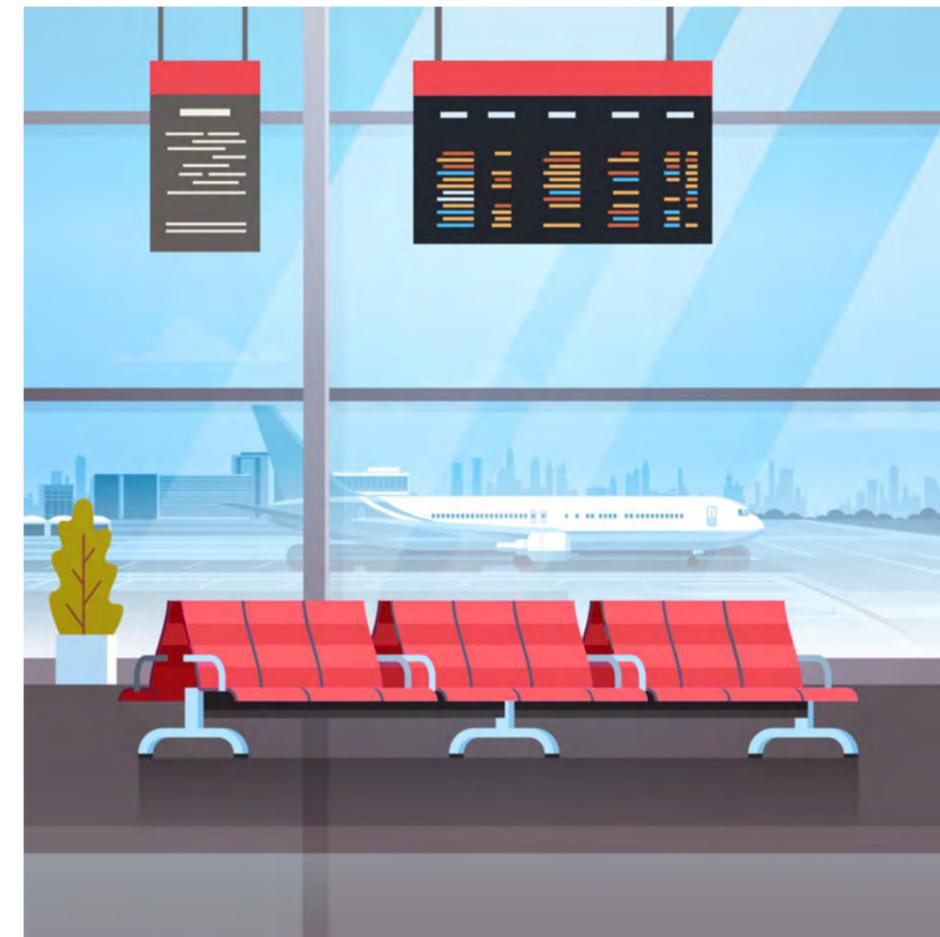
Throughout the course of this report, I have decided to focus on multiple points of interest, to allow myself to gain a broad, inclusive knowledge of disabled tourism and the issues that arise within. Consequently, I have used multiple research methods to collect information from rich secondary sources and primary alike.

I have **reviewed literature concerning the disabled population** and their inclusion and participation within tourism, and have used the findings of other researchers to identify gaps in my knowledge in order to develop my own research plan. I have used these secondary sources to build a deep understanding of topics which may require more longitudinal studies, and for information which I may not have been able to acquire in the time frame given for my investigation. I have also used literature published on **governmental policies, and texts written by established Journalists** to aid my report. Likewise, I have revised **educational documentaries** in order to view the efforts of foreign countries and their attempts to make tourism accessible to the disabled community.

I have conducted **interviews with multiple individuals who collectively cover the spectrum of the disabled community**. These range from individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities, to carers, tourism professionals and students. These interviews provide information for multiple sub-contexts throughout my report, and aid my understanding of various issues throughout disabled tourism. I have also used these interviews to question the responsibility of the tourism industry and to review the efforts made to accommodate the disabled population.



Finally, I have made use of a single **ethnographical study**, which has aided my understanding of the airport system and how it is traversed by individuals with physical disabilities. For this investigation, I sat in the Café Cwtch, which is located in the departure lounge of Cardiff International Airport, for approximately 90 minutes, and closely observed any individuals with visible physical disabilities, and noted the issues they faced across their experience. I repeated this process across three different days (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) at the same time of day (12pm – 1:30pm) to allow myself a wider opportunity to observe different situations and to compare findings from different days.



Discussion point 1

**The Impact of Travel on Life  
Satisfaction for Disabled Individuals**

The Disabled Traveller

## Existing Literature on Life Satisfaction for Disabled Individuals

Initially, I set out to discover the impact of travel on life satisfaction for disabled individuals. I found that this may indicate exactly how important it will be to make light of this issue and to explore the potential solutions. Unsurprisingly, there is very little literature based on the effects on life satisfaction for the disabled community, despite many studies detailing travelling's effects on the general population. In one study, Neal, Uysal and Sirgy (2007) found that **tourism, does in fact, play a significant role in overall life satisfaction**. Nawijn and Veenhoven (2011) also found that travelling provides the single largest direct correlation with happiness when compared to other leisure activities. Despite these findings suggesting that travel does in fact contribute to a higher quality of life, they consider a wide target audience, and not just the disabled community.

However, **Ricardo Pagán (2014)**, wrote of his study of life satisfaction for disabled individuals in Germany. This study was integral in leading the line in furthering research on disabled participants within the tourism sector. His longitudinal study consisted of both disabled (2,855 individuals) and non-disabled (13,830 individuals) ranking their levels of life satisfaction within multiple facets of life: health, job, housework, household income, place of dwelling, and free time (with overall life satisfaction serving as an aggregate of each combined). These would be measured and compared against their life satisfaction depending on the participation and intensity of 'holiday trips'.

Pagán found that **“taking part in holiday trips increases the levels of satisfaction in all domains for the nondisabled and disabled samples”**, with the increase in life satisfaction for disabled participants more noticeable than the non-disabled counterparts. Pagán also found that:

*For the disabled, the contribution of holiday trips is higher in the domains of satisfaction with health, job and housework as compared to their non-disabled counterparts. These results support the idea of the existence of a spill-over effect of holiday trips on all domains of life satisfaction which in turn have an influence on overall life satisfaction.*

In fact, it was Pagán's study which began to shine the light on the disabled community within tourism, and prompted other researchers to follow suit. In another investigation, Kastenholz et al (2015) found that travelling enhances the **“quality of life, self-confidence and self-esteem of the population with a disability, while providing opportunities for development of new capabilities as well as a chance of active social inclusion”**, supporting the findings of Pagán.

Discussion point 2

**The Impact of Physical Disabilities  
vs. Cognitive Disabilities**

The Disabled Traveller

## The Airport System: An Ethnographical Study

To begin my research on the impact of physical disabilities within the travel industry, I conducted an ethnographical study at Cardiff International Airport. During my observation periods, the airport was relatively quiet, and few passengers were departing. As a result of this, I only noted a single individual with a visible physical disability, seemingly travelling with two other friends/family members. As I closely observed the passenger, who was using a wheelchair, I initially realised that the **check-in counter was too high for the individual to see over**, thus making it difficult to hand over her passport and answer the relevant security questions. One difficult situation did arise during the passenger's experience however, as the **elevator to the departure gates was under maintenance**. This meant that the individual would have had to climb a flight of stairs to continue through the airport, which obviously was not possible. After realising the situation, her party approached a member of staff to explain the issue, and were then immediately taken through a restricted access corridor, which I later found out to be a staff entrance, possibly containing a second elevator. This is all that I was able to note for this disabled individual as I could not follow through to the boarding gates for security reasons. At the end of this investigation, I was disappointed to have only noted one passenger with a visible physical disability, so I decided to speak to a member of staff at the 'special assistance desk'. Here I was informed of the protocol for a passenger with severe mobility issues.

Figure 1



A member of the **security team** will pick up the passenger on a small mobility vehicle and transport them and their party straight to the security checks, where they will be **scanned and properly checked, while remaining on the vehicle**. The passenger will then be taken straight to the correct boarding gate and dropped off ready to board the plane. Another member of the Special Assistance Team will then transfer the passenger to a wheelchair, and will **personally escort the individual to their seat on the plane when boarding commences**. This process usually takes around 15-25 minutes to arrive at the gate, depending on the traffic and distance to the gate.

## The Accounts of a Wheelchair User

I also spoke to an individual with severe mobility difficulties. Gwyn is 62 years old and has lived with Polio for the majority of his life. Because of his condition, he struggles to walk, even for short distances, so uses his motorised wheelchair as his primary mode of transport. Despite this, he considers himself well travelled. During our meeting, Gwyn detailed numerous different accounts of his struggles while on European city breaks. During one holiday to Crete, Greece, he noted that the excessive amount of street furniture and promotional shop signs throughout the narrow streets actually rendered many different routes impossible to pass. He attributed this to “a matter of poor city planning and a lack of human decency”.

Gwyn also described an experience of Auschwitz Birkenau, in which he felt that he missed out on a lot of the organised tour, **despite the tour being labelled ‘wheelchair friendly’**. There was one instance, in particular, in which the tour was taken down a “mile-long long stretch of gravel”, where the surface was too loose for his wheelchair to function. Gwyn stated that this was a “simple fix” for the tour operators, who could provide a couple of all-terrain electric wheelchairs, so that individuals with mobility issues could access the more demanding areas of the site.

Gwyn later went on to express disgust of some ‘disabled access’ accommodation. He gave an instance where a hand rail was provided next to the bath tub, yet the bath was far too high for him to step over without assistance. He states **“Disabled access features are often only planted for hotel owners to tick a box. There is no real thought or testing of real-life application”**.

Gwyn pictured in Brisbane, Australia, with his crutches (2018).

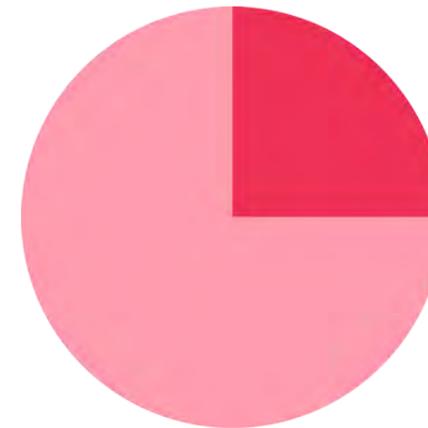


*“Being told I shouldn’t travel only makes me want to travel more. I still go abroad every year, and travel with my Brothers on coach trips every couple of months.”*

Figure 2

## The Current State of Accessibility

To follow up on the issues detailed by Gwyn, I decided investigate the state of disability access across one of the most popular network systems in the world, the New York City subway. Within recent years, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has been heavily criticised for its poor management and lack of accessibility. As of 2018, **only 119 of 472 (25%)** of all of **New York's subway stations were fully accessible to individuals with mobility disabilities**. This renders the subway one of the world's most discriminatory major transit systems. This is a massive hindrance for the estimated **7 million disabled tourists** who visit New York every year. In fact, this situation is so extreme that disability rights advocates filed lawsuits against the MTA, detailed with allegations of 'blatantly denying' individuals with mobility disabilities access to a high number of subway stations and claiming that the MTA does an 'abysmal' job of maintaining its escalators and elevators. The lawsuit also labels the NYC subway as **"the most inaccessible major transport system in the nation"**. One of the contributing factors to this crisis is the age and scale of the system. With the first underground station opening in 1904, **much of the subway predates the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, which prohibits discrimination against disabled individuals across all public sectors**.



**Only 1 in 4 of NYC's Subway stations are fully accessible to those with mobility issues.**

Further investigation into accessible tourism, however, does seem to indicate significant improvements in disabled access features and considerations across some popular tourist destinations and landmarks. The BBC Travel Show visited the Coliseum in Rome, Italy in 2014, and noted the efforts to:

**...strike the difficult balance between maintaining the character of the city's most famous monument and providing access to wheelchair users.**

The programme goes on to showcase the elevators and disability access ramps which have been implemented into the experience, to allow wheelchair users to view almost all areas of the Coliseum.

## The Difficulties of Autism

To gain a more varied understanding of my topic, I decided to interview an individual with a cognitive disability. **Lucas is 18 years old and has been diagnosed with Autism.** His symptoms are generally considered as part of a sensory disorder, in which he finds certain textures, noises and smells uncomfortable. Lucas also says that he does not respond well to changes in routine or generally unpredictable circumstances, and often finds social situations quite unsettling, he admits that he is not very good at perceiving other people's emotions. Lucas says that his travels have been relatively comfortable thus far, however his only experiences have come in the form of family holidays to major European destinations and some other locations such as Orlando, Florida, where he has had the comfort of familiar faces. **Lucas's Autism has not necessarily hindered his ability to travel, but has instead led to more uncomfortable situations to arise,** and for more triggers of his symptoms. He explains how his family must ensure to check accommodation amenities before booking a holiday to ensure that a washing machine or laundry service is accessible, as he is unable to sleep on hotel bed sheets, and instead must bring his own, as the thought of sleeping on someone else's sheets causes major anxiety and physical discomfort. Lucas also gave an instance where a flight home from Barcelona, El Prat Airport, was delayed by 45 minutes. He states that at that point in time, he was convinced that he was not going to return home, this **extreme stress** led to a "meltdown", and for Lucas to hold a very aggressive confrontation with a member of security staff within the airport.

He says that the language barrier only added to his frustration. Lucas admits that a violent outburst was definitely not warranted, and had he perceived the situation realistically, he would not have done so, however his Autism does not enable this to be the case. **Lucas says that having a non-visible condition is very frustrating** at times, as it is difficult for others to understand why he acts the way he does.

*It is obvious to everyone that a wheelchair user cannot climb steps, but no one else can understand exactly how an autistic person feels, no one appreciates how hard we try to act 'normal'. We are not given the benefit of the doubt like others with visual impairments, and we are definitely not given the help and consideration we need.*

What Lucas says is unfortunately very true. In the example of Cardiff International Airport, **people who are unable to walk are given an escort to their correct gate, and can bypass the stressful security procedures. However, it is those with cognitive disabilities who are left to suffer,** and to contain their extreme anxiety while dealing with the crowds of a busy airport. There are no shortcuts for the Autistic community.

**Discussion point 3**

**The Impact on the Carer and Their  
Subsequent Quality of Life**

The Disabled Traveller

## A Carer's Struggle

Despite growing interest in the disabled population within research concerning travel and tourism, **literature regarding disability carers is non-existent**. As I realised that I could not rely on previous studies, I decided to conduct my own interview on a disability carer. The individual that I spoke to requested to remain anonymous, however complied to releasing details of her son's disability and her personal experiences. **The individual in question is 42 years of age, and is the mother of a 14 year-old boy who suffers with Muscular Dystrophy.** Her son has been bound to a wheelchair for his entire life. During our conversation, I asked her to detail the impacts on her well-being during any travels or trips they had previously taken. She provided examples and accounts that could generally be considered within one of three distinct categories.

The first being the **physical detriments**. The mother explained that pushing the wheelchair can be very demanding depending on the surface type and incline, and can lead to **bad back pain**, and occasionally for **callouses to develop on her hands and fingers** from gripping the handles. The second notable impact is the **exclusion from activities and experiences**.

The mother provided a few examples. The most striking account was during a tour of Italy with family, which spanned 12 days and visited Rome, Venice, Milan and Lake Garda. Upon arriving in Venice, the family were informed of the difficulty that they may experience while using a wheelchair within the city.

Across the 435 bridges throughout Venice, the large majority use only steps, with no ramps, while the narrow cobblestone streets provide an uneasy surface for wheelchair users. After one afternoon of trying to traverse the city, the mother was left with **no choice but to forfeit the rest of her time in Venice**, and was forced to book separate accommodation back on the mainland for her and her son for the remaining 2 days. The third and final impact described is the **emotional drain, stress and sense of responsibility**. Between periods of joy, the mother stated that she can often become overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility that she holds whilst travelling, **ensuring that her son is safe and enjoying his experiences**. She was eager to portray that this had no correlation to her love for her son, but was aware that she has **previously entered states of unhappiness** while caring for her child. She did however, explain how **rewarding caring can be, and stated that seeing her son happy is her "greatest pleasure in life"**.

In general, it seems as though the experiences described by my interviewee are **generally negative**, and that being a disability carer whilst travelling can be very taxing both mentally and physically. To confirm this, it would be ideal to contact additional disability carers for interviews, and gain more primary accounts and experiences.

**Discussion point 4**

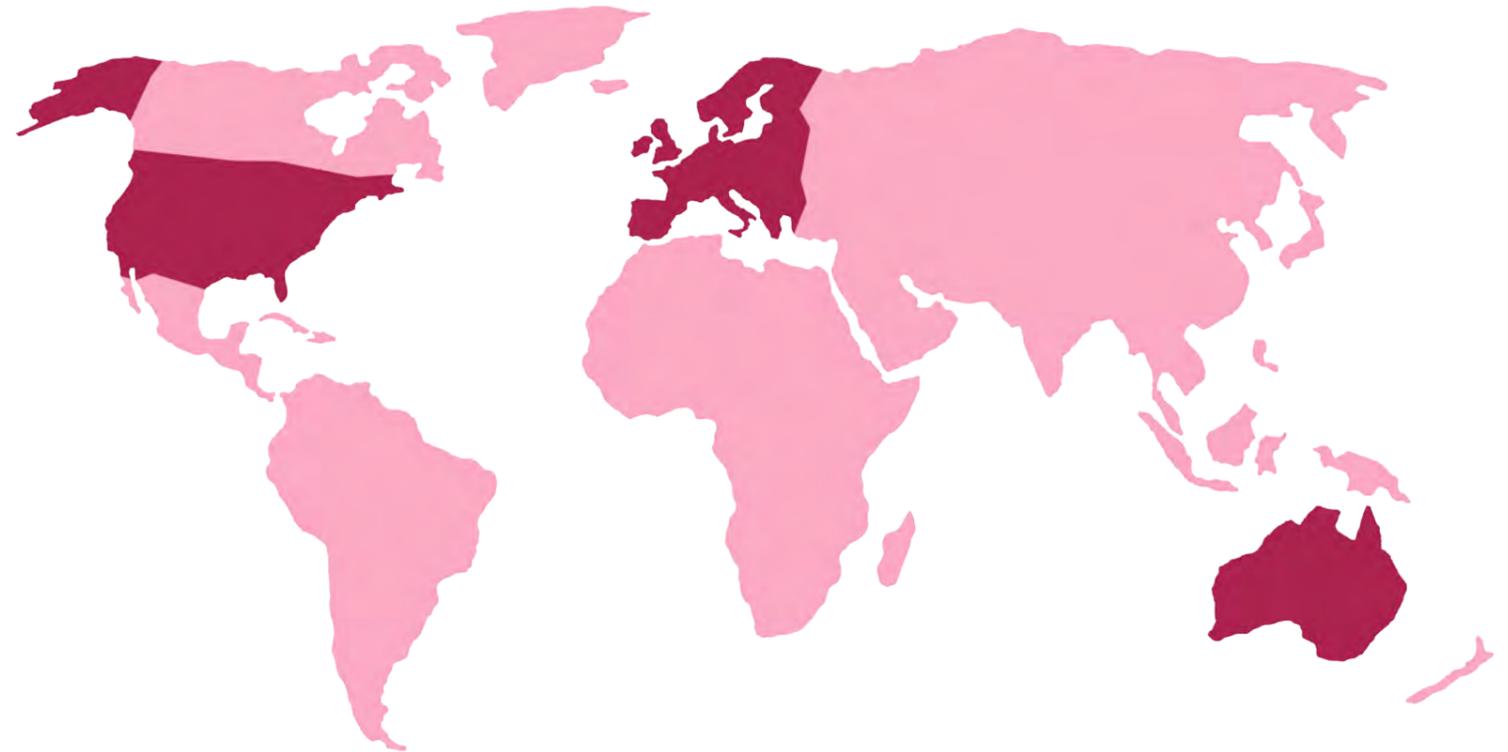
**Cultural Differences and  
Perceptions of Disabled Tourists.**

The Disabled Traveller

## Cultural Perceptions: A Seemingly Pleasant Surprise

During initial consideration of sub-topics and general research, I expected that cultural perceptions of disabilities would be very influential in the world of accessible tourism, however after further exploration into recent case studies and experiences from my own interview participants, **it is evident that disability perceptions are widely catching up to the standard in which we see throughout the western world.**

After conducting interviews with multiple disabled individuals and their carers, I am **yet to be given an instance of discrimination due to disability.** In fact, each of my interviewees have actually stated that they have all been treated with exceptional service throughout their travel experiences, some exclaiming that they have **even felt prioritised in instances.** Previous interviewee, Gwyn, did suggest however, that he has experienced some remarks from passers-by and members of the public whilst travelling, but continued on to say that he takes this “with a pinch of salt”, and unfortunately it is nothing more than what he would experience back home. In general, he says that his experiences abroad have been overwhelmingly positive. **Despite this feedback, it is a fair criticism to say that most of these travel experiences are from more developed, Westerly civilised countries, such as **Australia, the U.S.A and Europe.****



## The Middle East

As a result of this, I decided to research a region that has previously been criticised for its generally discriminatory behaviour, The Middle East. **Issues with sexism and sexuality** have recently found light in media coverage throughout the Arab culture, however their **attitudes towards disability have also been derogatory** in recent history. In Jordan, it was common for **men to divorce their wives if she were to give birth to a disabled child**, and throughout The Middle East, families would attempt to **keep disabled children hidden** from their friends and relatives out of **fear of embarrassment**. Reem Alfranji is an Arab mother of 2 children, who both have developmental disabilities. She has spent her last few years challenging her culture's perceptions regarding disabilities and campaigning to break down the taboos of the disabled. In an article for Middle Eastern newspaper Al Jazeera, Reem (2018) states:

*There remains serious lack of knowledge and awareness among parents in society and ... people are afraid - they don't know what to do when they have a child with disability, they don't know who to turn to. They do not see people with disabilities in the mainstream. For them, it is a very shameful situation.*

Over the past couple of years however, the recent **boom in tourism** throughout Middle Eastern countries such as United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has **directed Arabian governments into developing more inclusive legislations which protects the disabled against discrimination**, in order to cater for the millions of new Western tourists. UAE has even gone as far as to host the **2019 World Special Olympic Games**, and since then has declared themselves **“relentlessly focused on supporting disabled people”**. In general, there has been clear developments in attitudes towards the disabled community within the Middle Eastern countries, with that said however, it is imperative that this message is not just held as standard by governments as part of tourism propaganda, and that measures are held to ensure that attitudes are challenged throughout all facets of Arabian life.



Figure 3

## The Non-Developed Countries

Despite the recent developments in attitudes throughout some cultures, there are still countries which lack understanding and education. One example of this comes from BBC journalist **Sophie Morgan**. The 27 year old was paralysed at 18 years of age, and has since been campaigning for disabled individuals. On a trip to **Ghana**, she details some of the horrors that surround the disabled community. She explains how locals will **avoid the disabled out of fear of “catching” a physical impairment**. She also tells of a young girl, whose face was covered with **blood and tears, after ‘medicine’ was placed in the child’s eyes, nose and ears in an attempt to rid of her ‘curse’, which was later found to be epilepsy**. Also detailed was the images of men and women who were shackled and chained as a treatment to heal their ‘spiritual sickness’. **It is also common place for young disabled children to be killed, as they are labelled a “spirit child” - a youngster possessed by an evil force”**. Although these frightening views are not shared by the masses, it is still difficult to comprehend how these societies will ever progress to more modern perceptions of disability.

## An Upwards Trend

In general, views on disabilities are progressing to a state where a disabled individual may not need to consider cultural perceptions as much of a factor as they may have done throughout recent history. Across countries with a larger tourism industry, Western views have been very much adopted, while some other countries are making efforts to follow suit. Furthermore, some 3rd world countries are currently falling behind in many areas of modern life, including views on disability. These are often regions with little tourism income and few foreign visitors, however, will hopefully soon begin to gain education and awareness on the matter, and may become as accepting and inclusive as the Western world.

Discussion point 5

**Responsibilities of the Tourism  
Industry, Do They Meet This Standard?**

The Disabled Traveller

## What The Literature Says - Unrealised Potential?

In terms of accessibility, it is fair to assume that the tourism industry and tourism education can take some liability for shortcomings regarding disabled participation. **Considering over 1 billion people experience some sort of disability, it seems as though this may be a key market for the tourism industry**, and one which may perhaps not be fully recognised.

In terms of general participation, it is seen within the literature that the **disabled community are actively excluded from research and are rarely considered within tourism developments**. Referring back to Pagán's (2014) study on life satisfaction for disabled individuals, he states that "disabled people are still marginalized and even discouraged by the tourism industry itself from taking part in it; furthermore, there has been a reluctance to explore the experiences, consequences, and levels of satisfaction of the disabled traveller". He later concludes that:

*Tourism operators must increase their knowledge, training, and education regarding the needs and requirements of disabled travellers, thus avoiding negative attitudes toward disabled people. In this sense, cooperation between the public and private sector is crucial in order to create enabling environments and remove barriers in public accommodations, transport, information and communication.*

## The Role of Education and Universities

A study concerning tourism university students and their attitudes towards the disabled reinforces the idea that **this market is relatively unexplored**. The **disabled tourism industry is worth an estimated 117 billion USD (2007)**, yet it is seen that the industry has not yet found a way to serve the disabled population. In fact, The Wall Street Journal (1999) referred to the disabled community as the “**next consumer niche**”. However, over 20 years removed from this statement, we have still seen only minor efforts to accommodate them.

In this study Bizjak, Boštjan, Knežević and Cvetrežnik (2011) found that:

*... among almost 100 educational undergraduate programs in 12 European countries, there is no single program teaching about the issue of the accommodation people with disabilities”.*

These 12 European countries being France, UK, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. All developed countries with a relatively large tourism industry, and certainly countries where you’d expect to find appropriate disability access. This shows that **there is a lack of consideration in general, throughout not only the education system, but the governments and general public**.

Bizjak, Boštjan, Knežević and Cvetrežnik (2011) used an **experimental design** approach within their investigation, to discover whether **short educational programmes could change the attitudes of tourism students towards the disabled**, in terms of a marketing and potential customer standpoint. The study found that the students were **very much capable of applying a positive attitude towards the disabled following lectures** detailing the social and psychological dimensions of disability, along with the economic benefits that follow. They then went on to conclude that this “**potential is not recognized and special educational programs are not adequately used by educational institutions for the creation of their programs**”. Following this study, I decided to reach out to a 3rd year Tourism Management student, studying in Aberystwyth University. He **recognised that his course does, in fact, neglect the potential of the disabled market within tourism, and also fails to recognise the needs of the disabled whilst cultivating new tourism plans and developments**.

## Conclusion

To summarise, the **inclusion of the disabled community is certainly overlooked** throughout many facets of tourism. The general population lack empathy towards those with both physical and cognitive impairments, and subsequently fail to acknowledge or consider them during tourism developments. The **impacts of physical disabilities cannot be understated** when considering the ability to take part in general activities, whilst **cognitive and mental impairments present a completely different issue** altogether, which requires careful consideration from both the public and industry professionals. It is also evident that **disabilities not only effect the sufferer, but family, friends and carers alike**. To hold the responsibility of another individual is very brave and very demanding, and calls for great commendation, however, it seems as though these individuals are **overlooked in terms of stakeholders** within the disabled tourism industry. **Culturally, there seems to have been a renaissance in care and provision for the disabled**, and barring few non-developed countries, education and awareness seems to be reaching an all-time high, to a point where cultural perceptions of tourism aren't nearly as relevant as they once were. **Finally, it is the responsibility of the tourism industry to provide developments which cater for all, including the disabled.**

Although consideration and provision seems to have increased over recent years, it is **immediately evident that this community is still under-served**. This is an issue for both parties involved, in terms of a huge potential customer market, and general quality of life for the disabled. **This is an issue which stems from the education level**, and is one that can, and should be quickly addressed.

With this considered, I believe that it is in the best interest of all stakeholders within the disabled tourism community that **tourism boards and developers are properly educated of the difficulties and needs of the disabled population**. I firmly trust that the careful consideration of the disabled people will lead to greater inclusion and provision within tourism, and therefore improve quality of life and life satisfaction. Thus, my original question is revised, and now reads:

*How May Graphic Communication Better Inform Tourism Professionals of the Needs of the Disabled Community?*

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Figure 1 - Hurley, J. (2020) [Photograph]

Figure 2 – Poole, G. (2019) [Photograph].

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I confirm that I have contributed to the research completed by Joseph Hurley and am willing for my views and opinions to be shared accordingly.

Print Name:- Gwyo Poch  
Signature:- [Handwritten Signature]

I confirm that I have contributed to the research completed by Joseph Hurley and am willing for my views and opinions to be shared accordingly.

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Signature:- [Handwritten Signature]