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ENHANCING INCLUSIVE TOURISM: MAPPING ACCESSIBILITY AND RECOMMENDING STRATEGIES FOR THE LIBEREC REGION*

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Abstract. The article aims to map the Liberec region from the perspective of visitors with special needs and provide recommendations for the future development of accessible tourism in the region. The article explores the requirements of individuals with medical disabilities, as well as other groups such as mothers with strollers, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with dietary restrictions. This approach offers a comprehensive solution to a gap in academic literature, which often concentrates solely on individuals with disabilities. The study examines the relationship between age and disabilities of respondents, their participation in travel, and the difficulties encountered when choosing destinations in the region. To analyze correlations and frequencies related to age, disabilities, and travel participation, the study formulated three research questions and corresponding hypotheses and employed statistical tests. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and frequency tables were used to analyze the data. Data collection involved primary and secondary sources, including professional literature, tourism reports, and specialized portals. Primary data was gathered through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey targeted diverse groups with specific needs, focusing on the region's accessibility for barrier-free tourism. The study's comprehensive scope and unique regional focus provide valuable insights into enhancing accessible tourism in the Liberec region. The study highlights the cultural and natural attractions of the region. It suggests improving accessibility-related aspects such as accommodations, gastronomy facilities, transport, and information centres. Tailoring services, increasing destination awareness, improving infrastructure, and promoting inclusivity are recommended. The aim is for the Liberec region to become an inclusive tourist destination, achieved through physical improvements and promoting societal changes that embrace diversity and accessibility.

Keywords: accessibility; accessible tourism; inclusion; quantitative survey; Liberec region; semi-structured interviews; tourists with special needs

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1. Introduction

Tourism has traditionally focused on those who participate rather than those excluded (Smith, 1987). Marginalized groups are typically those who are 'othered,' overlooked, or ostracized based on their low socioeconomic status, ethnicity, indigeneity, age, gender, sexuality, ability, or the intersectionality of these aspects of identity. It is important to note that accessibility issues in tourism for people with specific requirements are gaining prominence.

In the 21st century, society has increasingly focused on inclusion and equal opportunities for all. It is becoming more urgent to make tourism accessible to people with specific needs, including providing accommodation services, transportation, and activities that can be enjoyed during their visit. Targeting this group of visitors can bring economic benefits to the destination due to their loyalty and frequent travel with an escort. A more targeted focus on this group could help reduce seasonal fluctuations and preserve jobs even during the off-season (Kuzmenko et al., 2023). Understanding the specific needs of these tourism participants can also provide a competitive advantage for tourism service providers in the post-COVID period and terms of the company's demographic development. Therefore, it is essential to make cultural and historical monuments, natural sites, and tourism facilities accessible. The accessibility of a destination is determined by its least accessible infrastructure and superstructure (Skare et al., 2023).

It is essential to consider each individual's diverse abilities and physical or mental states, as everyone goes through unique stages in life and has specific needs. Health conditions and the environment can influence an individual's needs. It is estimated that up to 70% of health limitations are not visible, leading to the misconception that individuals without visual disabilities do not have specific needs.

Inclusion and accessibility are crucial tourism aspects that impact visitors and residents. It is essential to acknowledge that this issue has a regional impact, especially in the context of the role of regions in national competitiveness. Investing in an accessible environment for all residents, including the Liberec region, enhances its appeal and its services.

The consideration of accessibility is critical due to the social challenges that humanity is facing. Specifically, 16% of the world's population lives with some form of disability (World Health Organization, 2023). With the population ageing and the prevalence of chronic diseases increasing, this number is expected to rise in the coming years (Ferri Sanz et al., 2019). In the EU, persons with disabilities comprise 27% of the population (European Council, 2022). Approximately 13% of the population in the Czech Republic has a disability (Czech Statistical Office, 2018). It is noteworthy that the United Nations General Assembly only established a Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2001. The UNCRPD was officially adopted by the EU in 2008.

The article aims to map the Liberec region from the perspective of visitors with special needs and provide recommendations for the future development of accessible tourism in the region. Our article contributes to the tourism industry by examining the needs of people with medical disabilities, as well as targeting other groups such as mothers with strollers, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with dietary restrictions etc. This comprehensive approach fills a gap in academic works, which often only focus on disabled individuals. Our work aims to broaden perspectives and reflect the diverse needs of travellers, which has the potential to strengthen inclusivity in tourism and contribute to a better understanding of the specific needs of different groups of people when travelling.

The article is structured into the following sections. The first section provides an introduction to research problems. The second section is a literature review focusing on people with specific needs and related terms. The third section covers the methodology, research implementation process, and a brief description of the research sample. The fourth section presents the results and discussion of the paper, where the hypotheses are statistically verified to formulate conclusions. This section also includes the characteristics of the Liberec region

and recommendations for the future development of accessible tourism in the area. In the final chapter, we presented the limitations of our research, outlined the direction for future research, and provided answers to our research questions.

2. Theoretical background

When considering the participation of individuals with specific needs in tourism, it is essential to reflect on the concepts of 'accessibility' and 'inclusion,' which encompass aspects of accessible and inclusive tourism. The term accessibility can be used in many different ways. Accessibility is often associated with a sole target group, specifically individuals with disabilities. Approximately 16 % of the worldwide population experiences some form of disability, a statistic that continues to increase, mainly due to the ageing demographics of the world (World Health Organization, 2023). When it comes to the tourism industry, individuals with disabilities often encounter disregard and alienation, affecting not only them but also their extended social network, including relatives, companions, and caretakers. This issue is not limited to only people with disabilities but also affects those with specific needs in the tourism industry. The increasing visibility of the issue of accessibility in tourism for individuals with specific needs is a positive development (UNWTO, 1999; UN Convention, 2001; European Commission, 2023; Liberecký kraj, 2023c). This suggests that accessibility challenges are encountered by nearly a third of the world's population (United Nations, 2021). From a business perspective, the absence of one potential visitor may imply the loss of several.

Accessibility can be understood as barrier-free access to accommodation and gastronomy facilities, tourist attractions, etc. According to international regulations, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Convention, 2001), the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (UNWTO, 1999), European Convention on Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights, 1950), and national legislation in European countries, the right to tourism belongs to everyone, regardless of nationality, gender, age, or religion. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (UNWTO, 1999) says that tourism activities should respect the equality of men and women; they should promote human rights and, more particularly, the individual rights of the most vulnerable groups, notably children, older people, the handicapped, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. Family, youth, student and senior tourism and tourism for people with disabilities should be encouraged and facilitated.

Accessibility, including barrier-free access, must be considered comprehensively throughout a destination's entire tourism service chain - not only in tourism. The accessibility of the offering has various components (Kazuist, ENAT, NRZP, Trianon, 2010; Milfait, 2020; European Commission, 2023). Physical accessibility refers to buildings, environments, transportation, and infrastructure. Information accessibility is concerned with the reliability of information and the provision of accessible communication channels alongside standards for assessing accessibility. Communication accessibility ensures that staff can communicate effectively with customers. Economic accessibility regards the different price levels, giving people the freedom to choose. ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) is working to improve accessibility in the tourism sector by consolidating existing knowledge in the universal design of environments, products and services and giving all actors the opportunity to put this knowledge to use through collaboration (ENAT, 2023).

Accessibility is not only about people with disabilities (as will be shown further on) but also about the elderly (seniors), families with young children, people with short-term or chronic illnesses, pregnant women, people with dietary restrictions, and people with communication disabilities. In Europe alone, this represents an estimated 130 million customers for the tourism industry. In contrast to the significant number of tourists demanding accessible tourism facilities, only 1.5% of restaurants and catering facilities, 6.5% of accommodation facilities, and 11.3% of tourist attractions are reported by Member States as accessible - at least for wheelchair users. According to the UN, an estimated 650 million people in the world live with disabilities. Together with their families, this means that approximately 2 billion people – a third of the global population – are directly affected by disability (European Commission, 2023).

When discussing accessibility and people with special needs, it is also necessary to define and explain the concept of inclusion. While accessibility is generally the key term in our article, inclusive approaches and attitudes have been identified as key to providing accessibility (Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Zallio & Clarkson, 2021). An emphasis on inclusivity facilitates analytical connections between the declared ambitions of global policymaking and various grassroots initiatives. These initiatives comprise diverse stakeholders seeking to broaden the demographic of those producing, consuming, and benefiting from tourism. Often, such initiatives involve subverting existing tourism geographies. Inclusive tourism development strives to broaden access to consumption, production, and benefit-sharing at current tourism sites while redesigning the tourism landscape to create new areas of experience and interaction (Saura, Palacios-Marques & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023). The full inclusion of people with special needs means increasing their activity in public spaces, including improving accessibility of various leisure activities (Gavurova et al., 2021; Załuska, Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha & Grześkowiak, 2022; Androniceanu, Georgescu, & Mirică (Dumitrescu), 2022).

Inclusion is a core principle of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ratified in September 2015 worldwide. As noted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), exclusion from development is faced by many individuals based on their gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, or poverty. Only when all groups of people contribute to creating opportunities, share development benefits, and participate in decision-making can development become inclusive, thereby reducing poverty (UNDP, 2016). Viewed in this context, an emphasis on inclusive tourism development would involve prioritizing the participation of previously marginalized voices in decisions concerning tourism and ensuring a wider distribution of the advantages of tourism.

Inclusive tourism provides individuals with special needs access to all elements of tourism, irrespective of their limitations (Slocum (Ed.), 2023). More recently, there has been a broader adoption of the term "inclusive tourism," as defined by Biddulph and Scheyvens (2018) as *"tourism that is transformative, involving marginalized groups in ethical tourism production or consumption and sharing its benefits"*. While there are advantages to defining marginalization as inclusive of all forms of marginality and intersectionality, such as gender, sexuality, and indigeneity, we contend that the conceptualization of marginalization and accessibility are not convergent but divergent, hence the necessity to concentrate exclusively on accessible tourism for those with specific accessibility requirements that are not shared with other marginalized identities.

Since 2011, the Czech Republic has consistently addressed tourism for individuals with particular requirements. Noteworthy authors include Navrátilová (2011), Hamarneh (2020), Linderová (2012), Šedivá Neckářová (2016). In the realm of tourism, there is current discussion surrounding a comprehensive and inclusive framework encompassing accessible tourism, sustainable tourism, and social tourism, featuring social responsibility (Crîșmariu, 2017; Hamarneh, 2020; United Nations, 2020). This holistic approach to travel strives for universality, considers social elements, and seeks to safeguard the environment.

Because of the tourism industry's fragile structure to crises, disasters and crises (Lincényi & Bulanda, 2023; Beha, 2023), the developments in sustainable tourism have been very crucial policies that policymakers have prioritized (Vasanicova et al. 2021; Streimikiene, 2023). Sustainable tourism strategies have emphasized the importance of the tourism industry on national economies (Navickas et al., 2022). Sustainable tourism is also closely linked with society and the environment (Vavrova, 2022). This is because sustainable tourism enables the reduce regional disparities that improve the life quality of citizens and economic growth (Matijová et al., 2023), thus, it provides socioeconomic development for territories (Shpak et al., 2023; Devkota et al., 2023) and might be an engine of economic growth for different regions of a country (Vašaničová et al., 2023). The tourism industry's sustainability is also related to the innovative posture of individuals and firms' executives (Khalifa et al., 2023). Sustainability of a territory also increases the competitiveness of enterprises (Folgado-Fernandez et al., 2023). This is because firms implementing sustainability practices can provide more quality services (Cheng et al., 2022).

By being major drivers of the global economy (Agboola et al., 2023), labour creation (Ključnikov et al., 2022; Civelek et al., 2023), economic development of sectors (Rozsa et al., 2022) and nations (Ključnikov et al., 2022; Saleh & Manjunath, 2023), SMEs also play crucial roles in the sustainability practices (Tapang & Enongone, 2023) including technological innovations (Muthee & Maina, 2023; Civelek et al., 2023). Innovative attitudes of SMEs also increase their development and ability to export (Ključnikava, 2022), which puts them under the spotlight. Innovative behaviour also increases competitiveness (Ključnikov et al., 2021; Civelek et al., 2021; Dušek & Sagapova, 2022).

Accessible tourism allows individuals worldwide to participate in and enjoy tourism experiences (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020; Devile & Kastenholtz, 2018). As defined by the World Health Organization, accessible tourism is an umbrella term encompassing physical impairments, activity restrictions, and participation limitations. While some disabilities are apparent, many are not, resulting from long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2013) has created a guidebook for tour operators and recreational industries. Quality assurance ISO certification (ISO, 2021) is also accessible. UNWTO (2023) has provided insights into applying ISO 21902 to tourism growth.

Several sources agree that incorporating accessibility is beneficial for everyone. In this context, we are referring to 'tourism for all'. Tourism for all aims to provide travel services, attractions, and environments suitable for a wide range of individuals, regardless of their age, health, or abilities (Hamarneh, 2020; Bizzarri, 2021). Tourism for all promotes inclusive tourism activities and services that involve all individuals, including guests and residents, in the same activities while fostering dialogue, peace, and human development (Gavurova et al. 2022, 2023).

The traditional model of a tourist destination is characterized by tourist attractions and associated infrastructure, often excluding the local community. Resorts and villages were conceived to entertain tourists, but they needed to engage the local population adequately. Nowadays, tourism and resorts are evolving, and many destinations are embracing a new concept of tourism that empowers the local community. This approach enables locals to support individuals with special needs, allowing them to travel independently while feeling like residents of the area (Zhang et al., 2021).

Facilitating the movement of tourists with varying accessibility needs is crucial to developing effective tourism policies (Loi & Kong, 2015; Cassia et al., 2020; ENAT, 2023). This involves not only providing accessible infrastructure, which is fundamental to tourism participation, but also overcoming any information barriers that individuals with disabilities may encounter. For these individuals, it is essential to provide information on the current accessibility characteristics of a destination (Eichhorn et al., 2008; Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020; Kolodziejczak, 2019). Their information needs typically include clear information on accessible tourism facilities, availability of support services for people with disabilities in various destinations, and training of tourism employees on their special needs (Loi & Kong, 2015; Fryer, 2020; ENAT, 2023).

There is a growing societal emphasis on inclusivity and equal opportunities for all in the present era (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018; ENAT, 2023; Slocum (Ed.), 2023). It is increasingly apparent that accessibility in tourism for individuals with specific needs is urgent. This includes not only offering accommodation services and transportation but also engaging activities catering to their requirements during their visits. Focusing on this segment has immense potential for economic advantages for destinations due to their loyalty and tendency to travel frequently with companions. By prioritizing this segment, destinations can mitigate seasonal fluctuations, safeguard jobs (especially during off-peak seasons), and establish a more stable tourism economy (United Nations, 2020; UNWTO, 2023). Understanding the unique needs of these participants in tourism can confer a competitive edge to service providers, especially in the post-COVID era as the industry adapts to changing demographics. Ensuring accessibility to cultural and historical landmarks, natural sites, and tourism facilities is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for sustainable tourism development (Bizzarri, 2021; UNWTO, 2023).

3. Research objective and methodology

The article aims to map the Liberec region from the perspective of visitors with special needs and provide recommendations for the future development of accessible tourism in the region. To achieve the objective of the paper, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: What is the correlation between the age of the respondents and the type of disadvantage/disability?

Q2: What is the relationship between respondents' disadvantage and their participation in travel?

Q3: What are the priorities for selecting a destination, and what travel obstacles do individuals with specific needs face in the Liberec region?

The research questions were formulated to address essential aspects related to accessibility and inclusivity in tourism. In the current context, where tourism plays a vital role in economic growth, adopting sustainable and inclusive tourism practices is essential. By incorporating accessibility and universal design principles from the outset, the initial investment costs can be reduced. Incorporating a commitment to equality promotes sustainability in tourism businesses and increases their appeal, attracting new visitors. Additionally, by including functional diversity within the workforce, businesses can create new opportunities and differentiate their products. Ensuring accessibility for all tourism facilities, products, and services should be a fundamental aspect of responsible and sustainable tourism policies at both national and regional levels.

The research questions align with the following considerations. Firstly, it is essential to understand the correlation between respondents' age and their specific disadvantages or disabilities to recognize age-related patterns in disability types. Secondly, examining how these disadvantages or disabilities influence individuals' travel participation helps determine the impact of such factors on tourism engagement. Finally, examining the priorities in selecting a destination and the challenges faced by individuals with specific needs in the Liberec region reveals important factors influencing their travel decisions and experiences.

For the first research question, Q1, Hypothesis H1 posits that there is a relationship between the age of the respondents and the type of disadvantage/disability. The chi-square test will be employed to test this hypothesis. For the second research question, Q2, Hypothesis H2 posits that there is a correlation between respondents' disadvantage and their willingness and ability to travel. A frequency table will be employed to test this hypothesis.

Descriptive statistics, including the arithmetic mean (M), sample coefficient of variation (CV), and sample skewness (S), will be used to answer the third research question, Q3. These tools are parametric. The responses regarding non-barriers/barriers aspects were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 being least important and five being most important). Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and authors' observations. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to gain insight into the lived experiences of the interviewers. A word cloud was created for visual display.

The paper utilized both primary and secondary data sources. The latter consisted mainly of professional books, journal literature, publications, and reports from tourism organizations that address travel for individuals with specific needs. Additionally, recommendations from UNWTO, international documents on accessible tourism, and relevant legislative regulations of the Czech Republic were consulted. The study utilized information from various sources, including tourist information centres, web portals of tourism facilities, destination management organizations in the Liberec region, and specialized portals for disabled individuals such as vozejkmap.cz and jedemetaky.cz, helpnet.cz, deafttravel.guide, and haptické.mapy.cz.

The quantitative methodology involved a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was developed based on a literature review and preliminary discussions with in-field experts and participants in the Visegrad Fund project. The questionnaire included various questions, such as Likert scale, single or multi-choice, and open-ended questions. Between April and November 2023, 140 questionnaires were completed in the field, and 440 forms

were submitted electronically. The questionnaire aimed to characterize a specific group of tourism participants regarding their travel requirements and gather their opinions on the accessibility of the Liberec region for barrier-free tourism. The survey helped identify suitable candidates for semi-structured interviews using qualitative methods. Respondents were selected based on their experience with travel barriers specific to their needs and familiarity with the Liberec region. It is important to note that the representation of age and gender was not evenly distributed. The contact took place in person at various locations, including Liberec, Harrachov, Jablonec nad Nisou, Turnov, and Česká Lípa, as well as electronically. The questionnaire survey is representative because of its unique approach in the Czech Republic. It focuses on a wide range of groups of individuals with specific needs, not just on persons with physical disabilities. The selection of respondents is random to reach a diverse range of respondents, not just those with a disadvantage. As existing surveys often cover the entire Czech Republic, our survey focuses on the regional level, a specific characteristic. This approach allows for a more detailed analysis of the region-specific factors. The recommended sample size for qualitative research varies among authors, ranging from 5 to 25 (Creswell, 1998) to an undefined number based on the research purpose (Patton, 1990). We conducted 25 semi-structured interviews.

We used a mixed research approach with primary data sources to achieve the stated goal and answer the research questions. This study employs qualitative and quantitative research methods to better understand the issue under investigation. The research methods are triangulated to ensure validity.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The Liberec region and its characteristics

The Liberec region is located in the north of the Czech Republic. Among its neighbours are the Ústí nad Labem Region, the Central Bohemian Region, the Hradec Králové Region, the German federal state of Saxony and the Polish Lower Silesian Voivodeship. It is the second smallest territorial region of the Czech Republic, occupying an area of 3 163 km². According to CSO data, 450 000 inhabitants lived here in mid-2023. It is among regions with a higher proportion of children and a lower proportion of older people.

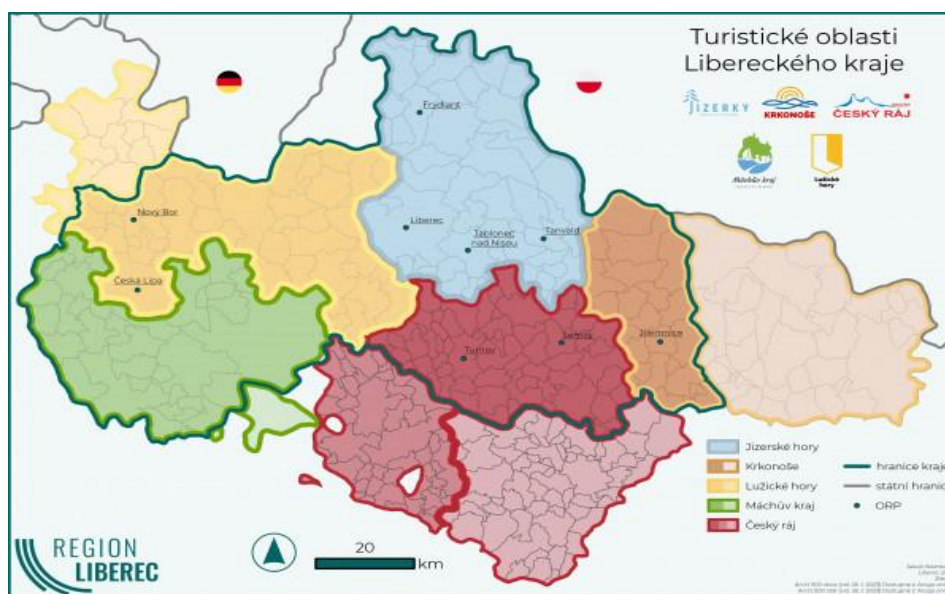
The Liberec region administratively consists of the districts of Liberec, Česká Lípa, Jablonec nad Nisou and Semily. The seat of the region is the city of Liberec. The district has a predominantly industrial nature. The glass and jewellery industry, the production and processing of plastics, engineering and processing industries are primarily developed with close ties to the production of cars. The traditional textile industry has lost its dominant position due to the slowdown in recent years. The Liberec region has much to offer in the field of study. The presence of universities in the Liberec region must thus be mentioned. The Technical University in Liberec has a Faculty of Engineering, Textiles, Economics, Pedagogy, Architecture, Mechatronics, and Interdisciplinary Engineering Studies. Furthermore, the youth have the opportunity to study at many secondary schools.

The Liberec region offers outstanding natural and cultural conditions for tourism, both in the winter (alpine as well as cross-country skiing – Krkonoše, Jizera Mountains, Ještěd ridge, but also the Luž mountains) and in the summer. Practically any activity is available for summer tourists – walking and cycling (in both the mountains as well as low-lying areas – e.g. the former military training area of Ralsko), mountain climbing (rock-ribbed cities in the Bohemian Paradise), bathing (Mácha Lake, water flows), urban tourism (Liberec, Turnov, Frýdlant in Bohemia, Jilemnice, etc.), and heritage sight-seeing (fortresses, castles, urban conservation areas, rural heritage reservations and zones). The most popular fortresses and castles are Bezděz, Zákupy, Lemberk, Frýdlant, Sychrov, Hrubý Rohozec, and Valdštejn. Spas also play an important role and are often sought by foreign visitors. Its rich cultural and historical tradition is reflected in its large number of historic buildings, monuments and cultural facilities, and it lures hundreds of thousands of visitors to the region annually. The unique structure of the Ještěd hotel has become a symbol for the region at large, which received a Perret's prize.

ZOO Liberec and iQLandia Science Center are the most visited attractions in the Liberec region. Among the TOP 3 categories of visited destinations in the Liberec Region were the categories castles and chateaux (23.15%), science and technology (21.14%), and ZOO/gardens and aquariums (17.93%) (Tourdata, 2023).

Good transport links with Prague and the border location of the Liberec Region make the Liberec Region an interesting destination for both domestic visitors and foreign participants in the tourism industry. Based on data from the Czech Statistical Office on the capacity of collective accommodation facilities in 2022, the Liberec Region occupied a solid position compared to other regions of the Czech Republic, with 992 mass accommodation facilities and 47 155 beds. Compared to the other areas, this was an above-average position. Only three regions – South Bohemian region, Hradec Králové region, and South Moravian region – had a higher number of collective accommodation facilities (Czech Statistical Office, 2023).

In 2022, 1 113 981 guests visited the Liberec Region, of which 159 749 were foreign. Czech visitors thus made up 85. 7% of all guests. From the point of view of collective accommodation facilities monitoring, 2022 was the most successful year in the last ten years. The source countries from which foreign participants in the tourism industry traditionally include Germany, Poland, Slovakia, the Netherlands and Austria (Tourdata, 2018-2019). From the point of view of tourism management in the Liberec region, the Department of Tourism, culture, and Sports of the Municipality of Liberec and the Department of Culture, Monument Preservation and Tourism of the Regional Office of the Liberec Region play a key role. The Liberec region has five marketing tourist areas (See Picture 1). From the point of view of destination management certification, five regional destination management organizations operate in the Liberec region (CzechTourism, 2023). Nine local action groups in the Liberec region developed the region based on the European Union's LEADER initiative principles (Liberecký kraj, 2023b).



Picture 1. Tourist areas in the territory of the Liberec region

Source: Liberecký kraj, 2023a

The Neisse - Nisa - Nysa Euroregion was created in the area of the Three Borders, i.e., in the border area between the Czech Republic, Poland, and Germany, extending into the territory of the Liberec Region. One of the critical development goals is the creation of a Joint, Integrated Holiday and Tourism Region (TRN) and a "Joint Planning Area ERN" (EUROREGION neisse-nisa-nysa, 2023). Within cross-border projects from 2014 to 2020, the topic of disability appears.

Regarding disability, the Regional Office of the Liberec Region has developed a Regional Plan for Equalizing Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2024. Although this document is primarily aimed at residents of the region, some principles in the area of making buildings, transport, and information accessible in the vicinity of culture, leisure activities, employment, and educational activities could also be applied in the development of tourism in that destination (Liberecký kraj, 2023c). However, certified destination management

organizations, except one, do not reflect the topic of accessibility in their strategic documents. The Liberec region offers other specific activities to support accessible and inclusive tourism. As outlined in the Liberec Region 2021–2027 Development Strategy, the region aims to be an attractive destination for visitors by providing barrier-free accessibility, including awareness of tourist destinations and services.

The article's authors found that the Liberec region has significant tourist potential and a diverse range of attractions that are easily accessible, even for people with specific needs. The study shows that the region has sufficient barrier-free cultural facilities, monuments, and tourist routes for people with mobility restrictions. Public transport systems, particularly those in larger cities, are well-equipped with low-floor vehicles that cater to the needs of people with reduced mobility. Internet portals, such as www.ceskyrajbezbarier.cz and bedekr.liberecky-kraj.cz, www.kudyznudy.cz/kampane/bezbarier/bezbarierove-zazitky?region=liberecky-kraj provide information about individual objects and support the development of barrier-free tourism in the region. However, giving barrier-free services in the catering and accommodation sectors must be improved. Many dining establishments do not provide wheelchair access, and accommodations often offer only a limited number of wheelchair-accessible rooms. Information centres need more information and promotion in the field of barrier-free tourism. Although some information centres have barrier-free access, staff often provide information only verbally because they lack the necessary printed materials.

Based on the research between the years 2013 and 2016 it can be stated that Ústí nad Labem Region, Liberec Region, Carlsbad Region and Prague are the regions with the highest share of barrier-free accommodation facilities (Linderová & Janeček, 2017) in the Czech Republic. The Liberec region offers a wide range of accommodation and catering facilities with barrier-free features. These include barrier-free access to hotels, boarding houses, and restaurants, reserved parking, barrier-free social facilities, and specially equipped rooms for wheelchair users that meet all technical requirements (Sýrovátková, 2011).

4.2 Research results

It is essential to recognize that each group of people with specific requirements has special needs and requires an individualized approach and consideration from tourism service providers. This section describes the results gathered from the research.

140 respondents were approached through a personal questionnaire, while 440 respondents participated in an online questionnaire survey. The following data is compiled from 140 questionnaires collected from the field. The online questionnaire survey yielded similar results. The research was conducted in the Liberec region from April to November, 2023.

Profile of respondents:

Of the total number of respondents (140), 61% are women. The structure of respondents by age is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
up to 20 years	4	2.9%
21–30 years	31	22.1%
31–40 years	40	28.6%
41–50 years	20	14.3%
51–60 years	14	10.0%
61–70 years	17	12.1%
71 years and over	14	10.0%
Total	140	100.0%

Source: own elaboration by the authors

The majority of respondents do not report any limitations. However, over 25% of respondents were parents with a child in a stroller. The second largest group of individuals with specific needs were people with a dietary restriction (food intolerance or allergy), as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. People with special needs

Person with special needs	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Person with a mobility disability	26	18.6%
Person with a visual disability	5	3.6%
Person with a hearing disability	3	2.1%
Person with a dietary restriction (food intolerance or allergy)	32	22.9%
Person with a dietary restriction (alternative way of eating)	5	3.6%
Person with a mental disability	3	2.1%
Parents travelling with a child in a stroller	36	25.7%
Pregnant women	7	5.0%
Person does not belong to any of the listed groups	51	36.4%

Source: own elaboration by the authors

When evaluating the dependence between the age of the respondents and the type of disadvantage, the statistical null hypothesis H_0 = There is no statistically significant dependence between age and type of disadvantage, and the alternative hypothesis H_1 = There is a statistically significant dependence between age and type of disadvantage.

Of the 140 respondents we observed, 26 identified as having a mobility disability. Due to the expected frequencies not meeting the requirements of the chi-square test (expected frequency less than 2), the youngest age groups (up to 20, 21–30 years) were merged into the age category 'up to 30 years'. At a significance level of 5%, we cannot confirm the null hypothesis that the age distribution of the selected group of respondents with mobility disabilities matches the age distribution of all respondents. The test criterion is 21.9 (see Table 3), which falls outside the acceptable range at five degrees of freedom $\{0;11.07\}$. Therefore, we reject the hypothesis of good agreement with the predicted distribution, as the incidence of physical disability is age-dependent.

Table 3. Respondents with a mobility disability

Age	Observed categories	Expected categories	Test criterion
up to 30 years	3	6.5	1.9
31–40 years	2	7.4	4.0
41–50 years	3	3.7	0.1
51–60 years	3	2.6	0.1
61–70 years	8	2.6	11.2
71 years and over	7	3.2	4.7
Total	26	26.0	21.9

Source: own elaboration by the authors

Of the 140 respondents, 32 reported some food allergy or intolerance. To ensure a more accurate analysis, the two youngest age groups were merged into one interval for those younger than 30 years, similar to the approach taken for respondents with mobility disability.

Using a 5% significance level, the null hypothesis that the age distribution of the selected group of respondents with food allergy or intolerance matches the age distribution of all respondents was confirmed. The test criterion is 6.6 (see Table 4), which falls within the five-degree-of-freedom acceptance range $\langle 0; 11.07 \rangle$ at the 5% significance level. The hypothesis of good agreement with the predicted distribution is not rejected, indicating that the incidence of food allergy/intolerance is not dependent on age.

Table 4. Respondents with a dietary restriction (food intolerance or allergy)

Age	Observed categories	Expected categories	Test criterion
up to 30 years	10	8.0	0.5
31–40 years	4	9.1	2.9
41–50 years	8	4.6	2.6
51–60 years	2	3.2	0.5
61–70 years	4	3.2	0.2
71 years and over	4	3.9	0.0
Total	32	32.0	6.6

Source: own elaboration by the authors

Consumer behaviour of respondents:

Most of the respondents travel occasionally. If they do not travel, the main reason is a lack of finances, not a physical or psychological disadvantage. The primary motive for travelling is to explore new places, and the most frequently visited attractions include bodies of water, nature parks and gardens, and cultural and historical sites. Respondents showed little interest in visiting places associated with active sports. According to the survey, respondents under 50 are most likely to seek travel inspiration from social networks, while those aged 50 over-rely on print and television. Travel websites are a source of inspiration for all age groups.

When evaluating the relationship between disability and respondents' willingness to travel, we tested the statistical null hypothesis H_0 : Disability does not affect respondents' participation in travel against the alternative

hypothesis H₁: There is an effect of disability on respondents' participation in travel. Based on the data presented in Table 5, which is a frequency table, it can be concluded that disability does not affect participation in travel.

Table 5. The relationship to travel

Person with special needs	Travelling is my hobby (I like to travel often)	I travel occasionally	I do not travel
Person with a mobility disability	4	21	1
Person with a visual disability	2	3	0
Person with a hearing disability	0	3	0
Person with a dietary restriction (food intolerance or allergy)	18	14	0
Person with a dietary restriction (alternative way of eating)	2	3	0
Person with a mental disability	1	2	0
Parents travelling with a child in a stroller	18	18	0
Pregnant women	2	5	0
Person does not belong to any of the listed groups	33	17	1

Source: own elaboration by the authors

Priorities for destination selection and travel barriers:

The mean score for the appeal of the specific destination category is slightly above average at 3.64. However, the accessibility scores, which reflect respondents' perceptions of the destination's suitability for their specific needs, averaged 2.58, indicating a lower overall rating.

The 'specific destination' category exhibited a relatively lower coefficient of variation at 33.96% when considering the variability in ratings. The data suggests respondents had a more consistent perception of the feature mentioned. However, the coefficient of variation for 'accessibility of the destination' was notably higher at 63.95%, indicating a wider range of opinions among respondents. This suggests a greater divergence in perceptions of accessibility based on individual needs.

Additionally, the skewness values provide insights into the distribution of ratings. The category 'specific destination' exhibits a skewness of 0.0051, indicating a nearly symmetrical data distribution around the mean. In contrast, the skewness for 'accessibility of the destination' is 0.236, suggesting a slight skew towards higher ratings. This may indicate a tendency for respondents to rate accessibility relatively higher than other categories.

Table 6. Important aspects to consider when choosing a destination

Category	M	CV	S
Specific destination, regardless of how well it meets the respondent's needs	3.64	33.96%	0.0051
Accessibility of the destination from the perspective of the respondent's specific needs	2.58	63.95%	0.236

Source: own elaboration by the authors

When planning their trips, respondents consider the credibility of information published on the Internet the most important factor. Additionally, they place high importance on information regarding the prices of accommodation services and transportation options at their destination.

The CV values range from 39.35% to 50.38%, indicating a medium to high variability in the perceived importance of different types of travel information. There is a diversity of opinion regarding the relevance of this information to the specific needs of travellers.

The S data suggest that certain types of travel information may be perceived as more important than others. A negative skewness value for some categories indicates that the ratings are more dispersed towards lower importance. In contrast, for other categories, a skewness value near zero indicates a higher symmetry in the perception of the importance of the information.

Table 7. Importance of travel information for specific needs

Category	M	CV	S
Accommodation options that meet specific needs in the destination	3.36	47.47%	-0.3754
Up-to-date information on accommodation options in the destination meeting specific needs	3.22	49.41%	-0.2289
Information on the prices of accommodation services meeting specific needs in the destination	3.50	41.76%	-0.52578
Information on transport options that meet the needs to the destination	3.44	44.65%	-0.49941
Information about parking options at the destination	3.16	50.38%	-0.26252
Information on catering options in the destination meeting specific needs	2.91	49.84%	0.092139
Information on the prices of meals that meet specific needs at the destination	3.24	44.06%	-0.28711
Information on the possibilities of using attractions in the destination that meet specific needs	3.58	39.53%	-0.6108
Credibility of information published on the Internet	3.61	39.35%	-0.66114

Source: own elaboration by the authors.

Respondents identified a lack of information regarding accommodation, catering, sanitary facilities, and unhelpful staff as the most significant barriers to travel. In contrast, they found the absence of assistance services, inadequate toilet facilities, and psychological barriers to be the least important obstacles.

The CV is evaluated based on the variability of its categories. Most categories have medium variability, with a CV of around 45%-55%, indicating consistent evaluations in these areas. Categories with a coefficient of variation above 55% show a more excellent dispersion of ratings, suggesting different opinions regarding these aspects. Conversely, categories with a CV below 45% have less variance in ratings, indicating a higher agreement in how the areas are perceived. The skewness value (S) provides information about the asymmetry of the data around the mean, as previously mentioned. Categories with S values close to zero indicate a symmetrical distribution of ratings around the mean, indicating less variation among rating outcomes. For instance, no information regarding transport or leisure activities results in a nearly balanced rating. Conversely, categories with S values greater than zero indicate more significant asymmetry in the data. This means that ratings are either higher or lower than the mean. For instance, the lack of information on accommodation or sanitation needs exhibits more significant asymmetry, with some ratings significantly lower while others are significantly higher than average. This analysis indicates that specific categories have less consistent ratings, while others exhibit more excellent agreement in the distribution of ratings around the mean value.

Table 8. Barriers to travel

Category	M	CV	S
Lack of information about transport options, parking	3.25	46.41%	-0.23048
Lack of information about accommodation, catering, sanitary facilities	3.54	39.10%	-0.58425
Lack of opportunities to spend free time in the destination in terms of specific needs	3.28	45.69%	-0.21624
Limited financial resources	3.14	41.03%	-0.06627
Failure to adapt the transport to specific needs	2.76	55.01%	0.194471
Failure to adapt the accommodation to specific needs	2.77	50.72%	0.210253
Not adapting the diet to the requirements	2.56	53.79%	0.456804
Not adapting the toilets to the requirements	2.24	62.57%	0.793714
Failure to adapt the bathroom to the requirements	2.39	56.87%	0.472567
Failure to adapt the options for spending free time in the destination to my requirements	3.31	44.26%	-0.32457
Unhelpful staff	3.54	40.63%	-0.54537
Untrained staff (in terms of the specific needs)	2.76	55.67%	0.271589
Own state of health	2.68	54.90%	0.283406
Absence of assistance services	1.8	68.03%	1.368265
Missing travel partner	2.74	54.33%	0.252563
Psychological barriers (fear of travel, fear of drawing too much attention, fear of traffic, etc.)	2.27	55.85%	0.718814
Difficult terrain at the destination	2.84	52.26%	0.098808
Language barriers in the destination	2.47	55.43%	0.443834

Source: own elaboration by the authors

The responses to the open-ended question, 'What obstacles do individuals with specific needs face when travelling in the Liberec Region?' have been simplified and presented visually in Picture 2.



Picture 2. Word cloud

Source: own elaboration by the authors.

The interpretive phenomenological analysis of the interviews (twenty-two of which took place, with at least one representative from each category of people with specific needs) revealed several main points:

- Respondents emphasized the variety of their needs when travelling, including aspects such as accessibility, transport, and financial possibilities. However, many of these needs remain unaddressed, complicating their travel.
- Transport and accessibility are significant barriers for people with mobility impairments. Physical access to public transport and insufficient design of stops and platforms significantly affect their ability to move.
- Respondents also highlighted the growing financial burden of travelling for people with disabilities. Improving financial support for this group of travellers is crucial.
- Respondents expressed interest in off-season travel but noted significant barriers to access and information during this period. Problems with catering services in the off-season also affect the quality of travel.
- Additionally, proposals were made to improve public transport in the Liberec Region, including adapting stops and vehicles for people with mobility impairments. It is essential to involve volunteers from various sectors to enhance holiday stays.
- Respondents stress the significance of travel information, including competition details, recommendations from disability organizations, and colleague advice. Respondents with dietary restrictions request more information from the staff regarding catering facilities' nutritional options. The respondents consider well-informed staff essential to meet their dietary requirements. They also value precise details on a destination's suitability and physical demands and information about local restaurants and attractions. Respondents find it challenging to locate this information, and providing it on accommodation or destination websites would be highly beneficial.
- The respondents have emphasized the need for radical changes in the approach to travellers with specific needs. They suggest that society reconsider and adjust its attitude and approach to these individuals, especially in public transport, by providing accessible and pleasant environments and information. This proposal highlights the importance of including and respecting this group in everyday life, including their travel. They desire to feel fully integrated and supported in all aspects of life, including their travel experiences.

The results of the analysis could offer valuable insights for enhancing tourism services in the Liberec region to cater to the requirements of people with specific needs.

4.3. Recommendations for future development of accessible tourism in Liberec region

Based on the information found, the following recommendations can be made for the future development of barrier-free tourism in the Liberec region.

It is essential to recognize that each group of people with specific needs has its requirements and requires an individualized approach from tourism service providers. The diversity of needs of passengers with special needs, including accessibility, transport, and financial means, should be considered.

Improving destination awareness: Special emphasis should be placed on providing information on locations suitable for off-season travel and dining and accommodation options during this period. Ensuring sufficient information for travellers with specific needs, mainly through destination websites, including information on locations, dining, and availability of city attractions and services.

Public transport and infrastructure support: Improving public transport and adapting stops and vehicles for people with mobility impairments in the Liberec region. Involving volunteers from different areas is essential to enhance the travel experience.

Expanding the range of barrier-free services: This proposal aims to increase the accessibility of catering and accommodation establishments. To achieve this, premises should be made more accessible, the number of barrier-free rooms and social facilities should be increased, and catering establishments should provide sufficient options for people with food intolerances.

Additionally, information centres should expand their range of services. Information centres play a crucial role in providing information about wheelchair-accessible attractions. These centres must be equipped and adapted to provide information to tourists with specific needs effectively.

It is recommended that regional destination management organizations consider accessibility in their strategic documents to improve destination strategies. Incorporating accessibility and barrier-free tourism could enhance services for travellers with specific needs in the Liberec region and boost visitor numbers overall.

A shift in societal attitudes is necessary, particularly in public transportation and creating a welcoming and accessible environment. To improve accessibility and services for travellers with specific needs, including this group in everyday life, and ensure their full inclusion and support in all aspects of life, including travel.

These recommendations represent the direction the Liberec region could go, strengthening its position as an attractive tourist destination.

5. Conclusion

Tourism plays a key role in economic development and brings many benefits. However, tourism must be sustainable and inclusive. Incorporating accessibility and universal design principles from the outset, investment costs can be kept to a minimum; by committing to equality, tourism businesses become more sustainable, attract new visitors, and employ people with functional diversity, creating business opportunities and more excellent product differentiation. Accessibility to tourism facilities, products, and services should be a central part of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy at the national and regional levels.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

Q1: What is the correlation between the age of the respondents and the type of disadvantage/disability? The incidence of physical disability is age-dependent, and the incidence of food allergy/intolerance is not dependent on age.

Q2: What is the relationship between respondents' disadvantage and their participation in travel? Disability does not affect participation in travel.

Q3: What are the priorities for selecting a destination, and what travel obstacles do individuals with specific needs face in the Liberec region?

When planning their trips, respondents consider the credibility of information published on the Internet the most important factor. Additionally, they place high importance on information regarding the prices of accommodation services and transportation options at their destination. Respondents identified a lack of information regarding accommodation, catering, sanitary facilities, and unhelpful staff as the most significant barriers to travel.

The research questions relate to three main considerations. Firstly, it is essential to understand the relationship between respondents' age and their specific disadvantages or disabilities to identify age-related trends in types of disabilities. Secondly, examining how these disadvantages or disabilities affect individuals' participation in travel helps to assess the impact of these factors on their engagement in tourism. Finally, examining the factors that influence destination selection and the challenges faced by individuals with specific needs in the Liberec region reveals crucial elements that shape their travel decisions and experiences. The identified priorities and obstacles indicate crucial areas for improvement to promote more accessible and inclusive tourism experiences.

The investigation into the accessibility of the Liberec region for tourists with specific needs has revealed a landscape rich in cultural, natural, and recreational offerings. However, it has also highlighted areas that require improvement. The region's appeal lies in its diverse attractions, ranging from historical monuments to natural wonders, providing a promising foundation for inclusive tourism. However, to create a genuinely welcoming environment for travellers with diverse needs, these assets must be complemented by enhanced accessibility measures.

The study revealed that the Liberec region offers a variety of destinations and services suitable for visitors with varying accessibility requirements. Nevertheless, gaps still need to be addressed, particularly in accommodations, gastronomy establishments, public transport, and information centres. Although some progress has been made, it is necessary to take further steps to bridge these gaps and create an environment where all travellers feel empowered to explore and engage with the region's offerings.

The recommendations presented in this study provide a blueprint for the region's advancement toward becoming an inclusive and sought-after tourist destination. To ensure a seamless and enjoyable experience for travelers with specific needs, it is essential to tailor services to meet the distinct needs of different groups, increase destination awareness through comprehensive information dissemination, and strengthen infrastructure and services.

By prioritizing accessibility in accommodations, gastronomy establishments, public transport, and information centres, the Liberec region can establish itself as a model of inclusive tourism. Implementing these recommendations enhances the region's appeal and encourages a change in societal attitudes, promoting inclusivity as a fundamental value in the tourism industry and beyond.

In summary, the journey towards making the Liberec region an accessible destination involves implementing structural changes and fostering a culture of inclusivity and support. These efforts will enable the region to welcome diverse travellers and offer enriching experiences to all who wish to explore its treasures.

One fundamental limitation of our research is the inadequate representation of age and gender groups among the respondents. This issue requires attention in future research to ensure that the age and gender structure of the respondents correspond to the demographic composition of the population in the Czech Republic. Increasing the number of respondents would be appropriate. Additionally, future research could include a group of parents with long-term sick children to expand and deepen our knowledge.

The research makes a dual contribution. Firstly, it provides academic insights and perspectives from the Liberec region, which can deepen understanding of the situation of people with specific needs in the area and is crucial for further academic research and analysis. Secondly, the research has practical implications for the Municipality of Liberec, other municipalities, and destination management organizations. This information can be used to communicate effectively with entrepreneurs and support the inclusion of people with specific needs and interests in strategic plans. By doing so, tourism and tourism activities can be better tailored to the needs of a diverse group of visitors, improving the experience and benefits for all parties involved.

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