

# **Accessible and Inclusive Tourism for Persons with Hidden Disabilities: A Systematic Literature Review**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tourism plays a pivotal role in the global economy and significantly contributes to gross domestic product (GDP) and employment. Its swift rebound after the COVID-19 pandemic underscores its resilience and interconnection with various sectors, such as construction, agriculture, and telecommunications, amplifying its economic impact. Tourism has traditionally been concerned with the people who participate. However, studies are increasing with the implementation of accessible tourism programs that aim to reduce barriers, enabling persons with disabilities (PWD) access to more leisure activities and addressing the need for access by PWD, thereby ensuring equitable access. This paper identifies available literature on accessible and inclusive tourism for persons with hidden disabilities (PwHD) to determine processes put in place by the tourism industry to manage PwHD. This conceptual paper used a systematic literature review methodology to identify relevant literature on hidden/invisible disabilities using Google Scholar and an academic university's database. The finding of the paper aims to synthesize the tourism industry and the barriers related to travel for PwHD.

## **KEYWORDS**

Accessible Tourism, Persons with Disabilities (PWD), Persons with Hidden Disabilities (PwHD).

## **ARTICLE HISTORY**

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism plays a pivotal role in the global economy, significantly contributing to GDP and employment while nurturing connections with sectors such as construction, agriculture, and telecommunications. Its swift rebound after the COVID-19 pandemic underscores its resilience and the role it plays in sustainable economic growth, ensuring that tourism remains a crucial driver of global prosperity (Castro, 2024; UNWTO, n.d.). Tourism is a multi-stakeholder industry that incorporates the government, the business sector, the private sector, and the global society, experiencing exponential growth in recent years (Wijayanti & Damanik, 2019). In 2023, South Africa welcomed four million tourists, marking a 44.5% increase in air travel arrivals in South Africa (George Herald, 2023). However, despite the growth in travel, there remains a significant segment of the population whose travel experiences are often overlooked (Darcy et al., 2020). Have you ever wondered how people with disabilities travel? In 2023, more than 4 million tourists visited South Africa, indicating an increase of 78.2% from 2022 (George Herald, 2023). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023, 2024), disabilities affect a considerable portion of the global population, with approximately 16% of people living with some form of disability (Wiltshire, 2023). Within the African context, it is estimated that about 80 million (20%) people live with some form of disability (Duri & Luke, 2022).

The WHO and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPWD) define a PWD as a person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that hinder social interaction (UN, 2024). This definition can, however, be extended to include persons with hidden disabilities (PwHD), such as medical problems, for example, diabetes and epilepsy, and other less visible conditions, such as ADHD, autism, visual disabilities, and mental disease presenting unique challenges for individuals and parents with children suffering from hidden disabilities (WHO, 2024), thus making participation of such individuals, low in tourism, as they are often neglected from activities as they require more assistance and attention.

The medical and social models of disability present two distinct perspectives on understanding and addressing the challenges faced by PWD. The medical model views disabilities as an individual defect, often leading to an emphasis on treatment and cure. In contrast, the social model identifies societal structures and prejudices, advocating systemic changes to foster inclusion. These models advocate for ongoing dialogue on best supporting and empowering individuals with disabilities (Calitz, 2020).

Accessible tourism ensures inclusivity by applying universal design principles across transport, accommodation, attractions, and services, promoting independence, dignity, and equal opportunities (Kim & Adu-Ampong, 2023). It is increasingly recognized for its ethical and economic benefits, as highlighted by the 2023 International Accessible Tourism Forum in Seoul, which emphasized its role in advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering an inclusive tourism industry (Heng, 2023; UNDESA, n.d.-a).

Accessibility is vital for sustainable development, benefiting both persons with disabilities and society at large. However, disability inclusion is often influenced by personal connections, which can lead to inconsistent practices. This lack of practical understanding, particularly among South African tourism professionals, creates challenges in implementing inclusive measures effectively (Makuyana, 2022). This brings to mind Ronald Mace, who faced challenges after contracting at nine. He revolutionized architecture with “universal design,” creating functional, appealing products for diverse abilities (Woodward, n.d.). His work influenced key legislation like the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities (ADA.gov, 2024).

Universal Design (UD) creates accessible products for people with diverse abilities, preferences, and sensory or environmental limitations. It reduces dependence on assistive technology, enhances compatibility with such tools, and improves usability for all, including individuals without disabilities (Center for Excellence in Universal Design.org, 2024). It focuses on creating accessible, practical, and user-friendly products for diverse populations, surpassing traditional accessibility by addressing varying needs and perspectives. Its three main principles include: i) Recognition exclusion (acknowledging biases that unintentionally exclude groups due to disabilities, social barriers, or temporary impairments (Interaction-design.org, n.d.); ii) Learning from diversity (incorporating input from individuals of different ages, abilities, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds during the design process enhances accessibility and usability

(Interaction-design.org, n.d.); iii) Extension solutions (designing for one group often benefits others, such as, providing an option to listen to content supports visually impaired users and those seeking convenience or relief from screen fatigue (Interaction-design.org, n.d.)).

The study was conducted through a systematic literature review of articles to provide a comprehensive and unbiased overview of existing tourism literature that mentions persons with disabilities, specifically hidden disabilities. It followed a structured methodology to ensure that relevant literature was identified, evaluated, and integrated based on specific keywords.

## 2. Problem Statement and Objective

Disability includes diverse experiences, with hidden disabilities significantly impacting daily life despite being invisible. Barriers like insufficient wheelchair access and poor infrastructure limit inclusion and accessibility is often neglected for persons with hidden disabilities (PwHD), complicating accessible tourism (Wiltshire, 2023). But what of persons living with a hidden disability? Tourism presents both challenges and opportunities for PwHD as the symptoms are invisible, resulting in misunderstanding and stigmatization. Another is the lack of staff training and awareness, which may lead to communication challenges. While improvements in tourism services and awareness are needed, adaptive experiences, supportive networking, and companion inclusion can greatly enhance travel for PwHD, making destinations more welcoming for all (Kara, 2023; WTM.com, 2023).

South Africa's tourism sector is advancing accessible tourism, but issues like poor signage and communication still hinder PwHD participation. Misunderstanding and neglect of PwHD needs contribute to inequalities in tourism and employment (Duri & Luke, 2022; Schultz, 2023). Despite efforts, barriers continue to challenge PwHD travel experiences, emphasizing the need for inclusive solutions. This paper focuses on the unique challenges and opportunities for PwHD.

This conceptual paper aims to identify available literature on accessible and inclusive tourism for persons with hidden disabilities (PwHD). The systematic review aims to identify barriers, best practices, and gaps in existing literature to ensure an accessible tourism experience for PwHD. This conceptual paper used a systematic literature review methodology to identify relevant literature on hidden/invisible disabilities using Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and an academic university's database to identify academic and peer-reviewed articles.

## 3. Methodology

Although there are several significant articles on hidden/invisible disabilities, there appears to be a disconnect between what is written and how the tourism industry addresses the aspects of PwHD. This conceptual paper used a systematic literature review methodology to identify relevant literature on hidden/invisible disabilities using Google Scholar and an academic university's database, and to determine processes put in place by the tourism industry to manage PwHD.

Bibliometric research involves specific steps to ensure a comprehensive literature analysis. The way to identify literature on tourism for PwHD and to determine processes put in place to manage this unique group of tourists. The literature used Google Scholar and an academic university's database, which comprised searches across Scopus, Web of Science, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) using the following main key terms: Invisible disabilities, hidden disabilities, persons with disabilities (PWD) and persons with special needs (PwSN). Aspects outside of these main key terms were excluded. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of searches per category:

**Table 1.** Number of Searches Per Category

Search term	Persons with disabilities	Persons with special needs	Hidden disabilities	Invisible disabilities
Number of articles	13,990	2,801	384	288

Source: Own Elaboration

The articles in the categories were screened to identify relevant titles linked to tourism and PWD. The abstracts of these articles were further screened to determine relevance to persons with hidden/invisible disabilities and PwSN. The author identified one hundred and forty articles from the abstracts that were relevant to the topic. Table 2 provides an overview of articles referenced in this paper that link tourism search terms with PWD, persons with hidden/invisible disabilities, and persons with special needs.

**Table 2.** Link to Tourism, Persons with Hidden/Invisible Disabilities, and Persons with Special Needs

Author(s)	Publication date	Article title	Link
Ali, L., Kalic, H. and Ozturen, A., 2023	2023	From disabled tourists to impaired cyborg tourists: What would it take to transform?	Barriers to accessible tourism
Calitz, E. C.	2020	The invisible made visible: Disability Tourism in South Africa – a comparative perspective [dissertation].	The medical and social models of disabilities.
Carneiro, M. J., Alves, J. P., Eusebio, S., Saraiva, L. and Teixeira, L.	2022	The role of social organizations in promoting recreation and tourism activities for people with special needs.	Advocate for better accessibility and provide direct support to PwHD.
Correa, S. C. H. and Gosling, M. S.	2021	Almatourism	Contributes to a collective memory of the place, enriching the person's experience.
Darcy, S., McKercher, B. and Schweinsberg, S.	2020	From tourism and disability to accessible tourism: A perspective article.	From tourism and disability to accessible tourism.
De Pascale, A., Abbate, T. and Meleddu, M.	2021	Exploring the propensity to travel of people with disabilities: a literature review.	Physical obstacles that impede PWD' access to facilities and services.
Duri, B. and Luke, R.	2022	Transport barriers encountered by people with disabilities in Africa: An overview.	Transport barriers are misunderstood and disregarded, leading to inequality in tourism.
Eaton, W. W., Bienvenu, O. J. and Miloyan, B.	2018	Specific phobias	Linked to specific phobias and their implications for accessible tourism of PwHD.
Heng, M.	2023	Accessible tourism solutions to make destinations and traveler experiences more inclusive.	Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and an equitable tourism industry.
Kara, N.	2023	A systematic literature review on tourist experience of people with disabilities in the hospitality and tourism sector.	Infrastructure can significantly impact the travel experience of PWD.
Kim, S. and Adu-Ampong, E. A.	2023	Disabilities, functioning, and capabilities: The capability approach in accessible tourism.	Accessible tourism to cater to PWD (travelers) to enhance their travel experience.
McIntosh, A. J.	2020	The hidden side of travel: epilepsy and tourism.	Consultation with healthcare providers to develop a travel plan that considers the specific health needs of PwHD.
McKercher, B. and Darcy, S.	2018	Re-conceptualizing barriers to travel by people with disabilities	To understand the nature and effect of travel constraints faced by PWDs.
Makuyana, T., Du Plessis, E. and Chikuta, O.	2022	Literature profiling on tourism, impairment, and disability issues: A future directional guide.	Challenges in effectively integrating inclusive practices in tourism.

Author(s)	Publication date	Article title	Link
Reindrawati, D. Y. Noviyanti, U. D. E. and Young, T.	2022	Tourism experiences of people with disabilities: Voices from Indonesia	The perceptions from other abled tourists stress the importance of a holistic approach to tourism development that prioritizes accessibility and inclusivity.
Rubio-Escuderos, L., Garcia-Andreu, H. and De La Rosa, J. U.	2021	Accessible tourism: origins, state of the art, and future lines of research.	Identify three factors that limit the participation of PwHD in tourist activities and their interaction with the environment in which they travel.
Sarmah, B., Kamboj, S. and Chatterjee, R.	2022	Linking the intrinsic and environmental constraints with tourists with disabilities' behavioral intentions towards a travel destination: mediating the role of learned helplessness.	The influence of individual attributes such as personality traits and communication abilities.
Singh, R., Sibi, P. S., Yost, E. and Mann, D. S.	2021	Tourism and disability.	Improving the quality of life for PWD by providing better travel experiences.
Theofanous, G., Thrassou, A. and Uzumboyulu, N.	2024	Digital inclusivity: advancing accessible tourism via sustainable E-commerce and marketing strategies.	Artificial Intelligence (AI) modernizes e-commerce in support of environmentally responsible practices.
Wijayanti, A. and Damanik, J.	2019	Analysis of the tourist experience of management of a heritage tourism product: A case study of the Sultan Palace of Yogyakarta.	Tourism and economic growth.
Wiltshire, D.	2023	Understanding students with disabilities in online higher education courses and their retention.	The broad spectrum of disabilities emphasizes the need for tailored approaches to accommodate the varying needs of PWD.

Source: Own Elaboration

As noted in the articles referenced, there is a gap in terminology where the generic term “persons with disabilities” is used. The term is holistically linked and does not indicate applicability to PwHD.

## 4. Findings of the Literature Review

The literature surrounding the management of PWD in the tourism industry is rich and varied, reflecting the multifaceted challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting accessibility and inclusivity. This expanded review delves deeper into key themes and insights derived from organisations with PWDs, shedding light on the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of PWD in tourism (UNWTO, n.d.).

The literature on managing persons with disabilities (PWD) in tourism highlights both challenges and opportunities in fostering accessibility and inclusivity. Tourism provides unique sensory experiences, especially for visually impaired individuals, such as tactile connections to nature and history. However, gaps in disability-friendly infrastructure, such as unclear wheelchair paths and remote tourist sites, underscore the need for inclusive design (UNWTO, n.d.; Kara, 2023).

Insights from Surabaya, Indonesia, emphasize a holistic approach to accessible tourism, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote equal opportunities for PWD and persons with hidden disabilities (PwHD) (Reindrawati et al., 2022). Addressing these needs ensures tourism is inclusive for all. The 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aim to address various global challenges. As a signatory, South Africa is committed to integrating the SDGs into its policies (Castro, 2024; UNDESA, n.d.-a, UNDESA, n.d.-b).

These SDGs present a critical framework for fostering global development, particularly for PwHD. Through the promotion of inclusivity and sustainability, tourism contributed to economic growth and equal opportunities. Where accessible tourism promotes the enjoyment of travel, leisure, and therapeutic

activities, enhancing relaxation and mental health for PwHD, linking to SDG 3, good health and well-being. With the aid of assistive technology (AT) PWD and PwHDs have the chance to take control of their life by improving their well-being and lessening mental problems such as depression (Senjam & Manna, 2024). SDG 4 equips tourism employees with quality education, training, and awareness to manage diverse travelers, thus ensuring inclusive service delivery. AT allows PWD and PwHD to read documents and information on screen readers or Braille software in order to assist travelers with hidden disabilities (Senjam & Manna, 2024).

Robust and adaptable infrastructure forms the backbone of thriving communities, where SDG 9.8. addresses universal access to information and communication technology (UN, n.d.). Numerous smartphone applications on various devices offer innovative features to enhance communication and information access for PWDs, (Theofanous et al., 2024). Technologies such as Optical Character Recognition (OCR), voice recognition, color and contrast enhancement, touch and gesture inputs, and screen magnification are seamlessly integrated into portable devices and applications that allow PWDs to interact with content in formats they can easily understand (Senjam & Manna, 2024).

The incorporation of universal design principles (SDG 11, sustainable cities) ensures inclusive and accessible systems, thus taking cognizance of the unique requirements of PwHD, ensuring that all individuals can use and enjoy facilities equitably and sustainably. Furthermore, partnerships and collaboration (SDG 17) between governments, industries, and small businesses build networks that promote accessible and inclusive tourism practices (Castro, 2024; UN, n.d.; United Nations Tourism (UNT), n.d.).

Integrating SDGs in tourism leads to the development of accessible and inclusive tourism practices. It fosters economic opportunities (SDG8), allows technology to promote accessible tourism (SDG 9), reduces social inequalities (SDG 10), ensures welcoming, inclusive urban communities (SDG 11), and promotes health and well-being (SDG 3) through engaging leisure and therapeutic experiences (UN, n.d.).

## 4.1 Understanding the Spectrum of Disabilities

Central to the discourse on accessible tourism is recognizing the diverse nature of disabilities. As highlighted by Wiltshire (2023), disabilities encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from physical impairments to hidden disabilities such as mental, cognitive, and intellectual challenges. This multifaceted nature of disabilities underscores the need for a tailored approach to accommodate the varying needs and preferences of PwHD in tourism settings.

Several studies have underscored the importance of recognizing and addressing hidden disabilities, which may not be immediately apparent but can significantly impact an individual's travel experience. For instance, Reindrawati et al. (2022) emphasizes the challenges faced by persons with sensory impairments, such as blindness or deafness, in navigating tourism environments as they encounter difficulties in accessing information, communicating with service providers, and engaging in leisure activities, highlighting the need for enhanced support.

## 4.2 Hidden Disabilities

Hidden disabilities significantly impact travel experiences in the tourism industry despite being invisible. They include conditions such as cognitive dysfunctions, chronic pain, mental disorders, hearing and vision impairments, anxiety, depression, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and dyslexia. These can affect individuals' ability to handle stress, adapt to new environments, engage socially, or process information (Invisible Disabilities Association, 2023; Kara, 2023).

As stated by Dos Santos et al., (2025), there are various types of disabilities, of which hidden disabilities are particularly noteworthy. These invisible conditions include traits that are not immediately apparent, such as mental health issues, autoimmune disorders, neurological conditions, or chronic pain (CDC, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Hidden disabilities also encompass developmental disorders, which impact cognitive processes and are classified as hidden due to their lack of physical manifestations that make them easily identifiable (Couzens et al., 2015). Examples include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities, multiple sclerosis, lupus, epilepsy, fibromyalgia, arthritis, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and hearing impairments or deafness (CDC, 2025).



Epilepsy is a neurological disorder causing recurrent seizures that vary in severity and frequency and presents unique challenges for individuals when traveling, particularly concerning safety and accessibility. Research by McIntosh (2020) highlights the concerns of individuals with epilepsy regarding access to emergency medical services and the availability of accommodations to manage their condition while traveling. Issues such as access to medication, seizure response training for tourism staff, and awareness of seizure triggers are crucial considerations for individuals with epilepsy when planning and participating in tourism activities (McIntosh, 2020).

Diabetes is a hidden disability that can pose challenges for individuals traveling. Managing blood glucose levels, medication administration, and dietary considerations are essential aspects of diabetes self-care that travel could complicate. Individuals with diabetes often face difficulties accessing appropriate food options, monitoring blood sugar levels, and obtaining necessary medical supplies while traveling. Furthermore, concerns about language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliar healthcare systems can exacerbate the challenges faced by individuals with diabetes when navigating tourism environments (Diabetes.org, n.d.).

Mental disorders such as major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, and dementia have their own challenges. Jiang et al. (2025) highlight the importance of tailored approaches to address the unique needs of tourists with mental disorders. The complexity of these conditions is evident in research into the travel experiences of individuals with pervasive developmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorders) and degenerative disorders (e.g., dementia) (Jiang et al. 2025).

Specific phobias, such as fear of heights (acrophobia) or enclosed spaces (claustrophobia), are common hidden disabilities that can impact an individual's ability to participate in certain tourism activities. For individuals with specific phobias, the fear of encountering triggering stimuli can severely limit their options for leisure and recreational activities while traveling. Research by Eaton et al. (2018) highlights the impact of specific phobias on individuals' travel experiences, including agoraphobia, avoidance behaviors, heightened anxiety, and reduced enjoyment of tourism activities. Strategies for managing specific phobias in tourism settings may include providing alternative activities, offering exposure therapy in a controlled environment, and ensuring clear communication and support from tourism staff.

Globally, over 2.2 billion people face visual challenges, with 1 billion cases preventable or requiring attention (World Health Organization, 2023). Visually impaired tourists often travel with family or in groups, strengthening bonds and enhancing safety through companion support, including descriptions of scenery (Qiao et al., 2023; Shaw & Coles, 2004; Su et al., 2020; Small et al., 2012). Group tours are organized by participants, non-profits, or travel agencies (Su et al., 2021). While most prefer traveling with companions, some opt for solo trips using guide dogs despite challenges (Qiao et al., 2023).

Visually impaired individuals enrich their travel experiences through senses like hearing, touch, and smell, aided by sensory replacement technologies such as Sensory Substitution Devices (SSDs) and electronic travel aids (Rombaux et al., 2010; Lloyd-Esenkaya et al., 2020; Qiao et al., 2023). While aesthetic perception is central to tourism, visual impairments do not exclude individuals from appreciating beauty. Their perception of the world, shaped by other senses, challenges traditional notions of "completeness" and emphasizes emotional rather than visual experiences (Mills et al., 2008; Xie & Fan, 2017; Xie et al., 2023; Qiao et al., 2023; Kirillova, 2023).

These hidden disabilities can affect the daily life of a tourist, impacting their focus and behavior. They may struggle to pick up on social cues or have difficulty following verbal commands and directions. They may even find it difficult to express themselves verbally. Recognizing and addressing the needs of individuals with hidden disabilities is essential for promoting accessible tourism and ensuring the full participation of all travelers.

### 4.3 Accessible Tourism

The literature underscores the importance of addressing the diverse needs of PWD. Darcy et al. (2020) advocate programs to reduce barriers and enhance the participation of PWD in leisure activities. Similarly, Wiltshire (2023) highlights the broad spectrum of disabilities, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to accommodate the varying needs of PWD. Furthermore, Reindrawati et al., (2022) underscore the challenges faced by PwHD, particularly sensory impairments, in navigating tourism environments.

These studies emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies to enhance accessibility and inclusivity within the tourism industry, highlighting the importance of including PwHD. It examines the importance of accessibility and inclusion of travel for all travelers, focusing on understanding the factors that enable or hinder PwHD travel experiences, aiming to create a more inclusive sector. While PWD share the same travel aspirations as others, there is a need for more profound research on how disability is perceived and addressed in tourism. Such efforts could improve the quality of life for PWD by enhancing their travel experiences, reducing isolation, and alleviating stress (Singh et al., 2021).

Accessible tourism represents a shift in perspective, recognizing the importance of inclusivity in travel experiences. It extends beyond the focus of disabilities, embracing a broader understanding that caters to all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive conditions. The evolution in the tourism industry reflects a growing awareness and commitment to ensuring that leisure and travel are enjoyable and feasible for everyone, aligning with “tourism for all” principle, fostering a more welcoming and diverse tourism environment (Kim & Adu-Ampong, 2023). The transition to accessible tourism reflects a growing awareness and commitment to inclusivity in the travel industry. Regions like Catalunya, Singapore, Flanders, and Cairns are leading the way by upgrading their facilities and services to accommodate travelers with disabilities. This not only fosters a more inclusive environment but recognizes the economic contributions of this unique market segment, enriching the entire tourism ecosystem with diversity and opportunity (Darcy et al., 2020).

Qiao et al. (2023) state that accessible tourism for visually impaired travelers is a crucial factor to consider, including accessing dependable information and transportation (Zhao et al., 2023). The availability of accessible infrastructure and supportive companions, such as family, friends, or guide dogs, plays a vital role in enabling tourism participation, where guide dogs help overcome access barriers, fostering independence and self-confidence (Rickly, 2022). Additionally, they improve mobility and encourage social interaction while traveling (Audrestch et al., 2015; Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016).

Kim and Adu-Ampong (2023) describe the capability approach in tourism as a valuable conceptual framework for accessible tourism, emphasizing the importance of individual agency and choice. It shifts the focus from merely providing access to ensuring that PWDs have the freedom to pursue a life they find fulfilling. Concentrating on removing barriers and enhancing personal capabilities leads to more inclusive and empowering tourism experiences. Kim and Adu-Ampong (2023) focus on three areas of tourism that could benefit PWD, emphasizing the importance of non-market resources and socio-economic factors in travel opportunities. It underscores the significance of personal choice in the tourism experience, advocating for a deeper understanding of how these elements affect travel opportunities for PwHD and their overall well-being. Furthermore, it prompts scholars to critically assess policies and initiatives, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to tackle social inequality and ultimately to recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of travelers.

To develop accessible tourism, destinations must move beyond temporary solutions and embrace universal design principles, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, can use and enjoy amenities fairly and sustainably (UN, n.d.). Furthermore, the Global North (countries in places such as Europe, North America, and parts of Asia) has recognized accessible tourism as a key strategy for post-COVID-19 recovery. Researchers like Darcy et al. (2020) have highlighted the shift from viewing disability tourism as a niche market to recognizing it as a mature and accessible market. Improving accessibility supports PwHD and benefits all members of society by fostering inclusivity and participation across demographics.

#### 4.4 Social Organizations

Social organizations are crucial in supporting PwHD by reducing barriers and facilitating their participation in tourism activities. Non-governmental organizations, charities, and cooperatives provide essential services that enable PwHD to engage in tourism activities (Carneiro et al., 2022). They are vital in promoting inclusive tourism by advocating for better accessibility and providing direct support to PwHD. Despite their importance, limited research exists on the role of social organizations in accessible tourism, where most studies examine the needs and behaviors (Carneiro et al., 2022).



The medical and social models of disability present two distinct perspectives on understanding and addressing the challenges faced by PWD. The medical model views disabilities as an individual defect, often leading to an emphasis on treatment and cure. In contrast, the social model identifies societal structures and prejudices, advocating systemic changes to foster inclusion. These models advocate for ongoing dialogue on best supporting and empowering individuals with disabilities (Calitz, 2020).

The evolution of thought in accessible tourism reflects a significant shift from viewing disability through a medical lens to a more inclusive social perspective. The medical model emphasizes personal limitations and medical interventions and has given way to the social model that recognizes disability as a result of societal barriers. This paradigm shift underscores the importance of designing inclusive environments that accommodate all individuals rather than expecting people with disabilities to adapt. The growing body of research advocating for the social model highlights a collective move towards a more equitable and accessible world for everyone (Kim & Adu-Ampong, 2023).

The social model highlights the significant role societal structures play in PWD's lives. It emphasizes that it's not the individual's condition but the environmental, attitudinal, and structural barriers that create disadvantages. For instance, these barriers can manifest as discriminatory attitudes from service providers and the general public, as well as physical and cognitive obstacles that impede access to facilities and services (De Pascale et al., 2021). Hidden disabilities such as anxiety disorders, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and learning disabilities like dyslexia affect tourism participation, underscoring the need for inclusivity and awareness (Invisible Disabilities Association, 2023).

#### 4.5 Barriers to Accessibility

Barriers to accessibility persist in the tourism industry, limiting the participation of PWD, especially PwHD. Physical barriers, such as inadequate wheelchair access and poorly designed infrastructure, limit the mobility and participation of leisure activities in tourism. As previously mentioned, stigmatization and stereotyping are significant due to societal misconceptions, which may lead to social isolation. Moreover, hidden disabilities, including mental, cognitive, and intellectual impairments, often go unrecognized, further exacerbating these challenges with aspects such as communication barriers and limited comprehension of signage, further complicating navigating tourism environments. Communication barriers are another challenge due to the hidden nature of deafness that leads to misunderstanding (CDC, 2025). These barriers restrict access to leisure activities and contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginalization among PwHD. Darcy et al. (2020) highlight the importance of addressing physical barriers through the implementation of accessible tourism programs and the adoption of universal design principles in tourism infrastructure. Where this is often still absent, PwHD are deterred from traveling, resulting in their under-representation in tourism.

Travelers with disabilities, often accompanied by companions, represent a unique market with notable spending power. Current research on tourism and disability primarily focuses on environmental barriers through the social model of disability. In addition, exploring the intrinsic barriers from the medical model of disability is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the limitations faced by PWD. Identifying and researching unexplored topics within this field is crucial for developing a more inclusive and equitable tourism sector.

Research shows tourists with cognitive disorders often face challenges such as social withdrawal and barriers to certain locations or participating in specific tourism activities (Sedgley et al., 2017; Connell & Page, 2019). Travel stressors may exacerbate existing conditions, cause mood fluctuations, or even lead to new mental health issues (Felkai et al., 2020; Cooper & Buckley, 2022). Prejudice, discriminatory practices, and restricted access further degrade their travel experiences (Sedgley et al., 2017; Gillovic et al., 2024). Tourism has been recognized as an effective method for improving the well-being and quality of life for PWD and PwHD (Wen et al., 2023). Encouraging active participation in tourism promotes inclusivity and advances in accessible tourism practices, aligning with broader sustainability and equity goals in the industry (Jiang et al. 2025). With detailed travel planning, caregiver assistance, medical guidance, and assistive technologies, safe, enjoyable travel is possible for PwHD (Ali et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2023).

Accessible tourism is a progressive approach that ensures travel and tourism experiences are enjoyable and feasible for everyone, including PwHD. It promotes universal design, creating products and environments that are usable to PWD without needing adaptation or specialized design through smart tourism to enhance the overall quality of the tourist experience (Theofanous et al., 2024). Smart Tourism Destinations are at the forefront of revolutionizing the travel experience by harnessing the power of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), creating interconnecting hubs that enhance the tourism journey. This interaction between technology and tradition makes the visit more efficient, enjoyable, and personalized, enriching the travel experience (Correa & Gosling, 2021).

Research indicates that South Africa still has infrastructure that is not readily accessible to PWD, such as inadequately designed public spaces and challenging transportation. Often, when confronted by tourists about a facility's lack of accessibility, people in charge have a very negative attitude. The solution is accessible accommodation, other infrastructure, and well-trained and well-informed staff in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Ralph Smith first noted the concept of accessibility tourism in his paper entitled "Leisure of the disabled tourist: barriers to participation" (Smith, 1987), which previewed the concept of three different factors limiting PWD participation in tourist activities, namely: (1) Intrinsic factors related to a person's level of cognitive, physical, and psychological performance; (2) environmental factors of limitations placed upon PWD by their environment; and (3) interactive factors involving the interaction between the PWD and the travel environment (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). Several challenges hinder effective disability inclusion in the South African tourism context: i) Misunderstanding of disability inclusion: Tourism stakeholders often struggle to accommodate the needs of guests with disabilities due to a lack of understanding; ii) Policy gaps: Mainstream tourism policies and legislative frameworks often lack provisions for disability inclusion, offering guidance on physical and visible disabilities, and no guidance on hidden disabilities; iii) Discriminative attitudes: Tourists with disabilities frequently encounter systemic discrimination when engaging with tourism products and services; iv) Unmet market needs: The market for accessible tourism remains underdeveloped, with the needs and expectations of tourists with disabilities often unmet; v) Intuitive management: Tourism educators and industry professionals often rely on intuition rather than formal training, leading to approaches that can be either apathetic or overly sympathetic, which may not be effective (Makuyana, 2022).

Further research suggests barriers themselves may not solely hinder the travel experience for PwHD; instead, learned helplessness influences travel constraints, intentions, and expectations. The theory posits that repeated exposure to uncontrollable events can lead to a sense of helplessness, reducing motivation. Intrinsic constraints such as personality traits and communication abilities further shape this relationship by connecting travel limitations with an individual's willingness to travel and engage fully in travel activities (Sarmah et al., 2022).

#### **4.6 Future of Tourism for an Aging Population, PwHD**

Universal design is increasingly becoming the norm in the hospitality industry, ensuring that facilities are accessible to all guests. Key features include amenities such as (1) Adjustable-height furniture, (2) Tactile room markers, and (3) Induction loop systems for guests with hearing aids. Notable examples include Scandic Hotels, which offers rooms with adjustable beds and accessible bathrooms featuring sliding doors and grab rails. Walt Disney World Resorts also prioritizes accessibility, providing rooms with roll-in showers and attractions designed for various disabilities (Red Sea Global, 2024).

Advocacy plays a vital role in promoting accessible tourism, including key initiatives such as The European Union's Accessibility Act, mandating accessibility standards across various sectors, including tourism. Australia's Disability Discrimination Act ensures equal access to public accommodations. Additionally, advocacy from UN Tourism pushes for global accessibility standards (Red Sea Global, 2024). In South Africa, the Tourism Act No. 72 of 1993 and the Tourism Act No. 3 of 2014 promote tourism and regulate the tourism industry. While these Acts aim to improve tourism, they do not address the issues of disabilities, leaving a crucial gap in South African legislation (SAGov.za, 1993; SAGov.za, 2014).

Awareness and training are essential for improving accessibility, and the tourism industry should increase its focus on staff training related to the needs of PWD. Furthermore, advances in assistive tech-

nologies are rapidly evolving, offering more options for travelers with disabilities, such as advanced mobility aids and AI-powered assistance devices that enhance independence. Cities like Tokyo showcased these technologies during the 2020 Paralympics, while Helsinki uses adaptive audio technologies in public transport to assist visually impaired passengers (Red Sea Global, 2024).

Inclusive tourism development aims to engage people with disabilities. However, PWD face limited access to the labor market and lack accessible workplaces. There is minimal research evidence of their engagement in tourism, with most studies focusing on their employment in the hospitality sector, particularly in hotels. These studies examine barriers, challenges, benefits, and human resource practices related to employing people with disabilities. Guest and consumer perspectives are less studied. While the focus has been on the hospitality sector, similar studies could be conducted in the broader tourism sector. One major challenge is encouraging responsible tourism production by existing businesses. Social barriers and industry attitudes continue to hinder the engagement of PWD as tourism producers. Greater attention is needed to involve them in these roles (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020).

Virtual technologies and virtual tourism democratize travel by enabling individuals with diverse impairments to virtually visit landmarks and sites that may be difficult to access physically, motivating individuals to overcome travel barriers. Research by Ye et al. (2022) shows that high-quality virtual tourism experiences significantly promote travel intentions, aiding governments and tourism companies in policy development and recognizing virtual tourism as a positive force. Ali et al. (2023) explore the transformation from tourists with mobility disabilities to “cyborg tourists” using assistive devices and technological implants, highlighting the benefits and challenges of these technologies. Tourism 4.0 and smart tourism focus on making tourism accessible to the masses. Leading this field, Industry 5.0 technologies and virtual reality have made tourism more attractive and sustainable, easing travel decision-making and enhancing accessibility through virtual tours, increasing destination competitiveness and brand awareness (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

The future of tourism will be shaped by advancements in technology, with increased investments in 5G bridging the digital divide and creating equitable access for extended tourist experiences. This technology will also bring transparency and openness to businesses. Future tourists will be more informed and ready to experience tours in various formats, using every tour as a business opportunity through sharing on virtual platforms. As such virtual tourism will appeal to those who avoid physical travel due to constraints, minimizing risks and enhancing motivation for actual travel. Technological advancements will influence tourists’ investigative abilities, leading them to become the most credible sellers in the market. These future technologies will not be disruptive but create jobs and expand market reach. Industry 5.0 will positively impact tourism, benefiting developed and developing nations to help revive the tourism sector in developing countries facing security challenges, allowing them to compete globally (Chaudhary & Islam, 2023).

## 5. Discussion

This article aimed to identify the literature gaps to offer a comprehensive understanding of PwHD. As most studies relate to the generic terminology of PWD, addressing the physical disabilities only, focusing on travel eligibility, constraints, and accessibility of PwHD. Thus, previous studies have failed to address the interdisciplinary nature of tourism for PwHD and lack direction, resulting in a disconnected research landscape.

Despite the persistent challenges, there is growing recognition of the importance of promoting accessibility and inclusivity in the tourism industry regarding PwHD. Scholars and practitioners have highlighted various initiatives and best practices to enhance travel experiences for PWD, with no specific mention of PwHD. These interventions require addressing various barriers that PwHD face, such as (1) informational challenges in finding reliable travel details; (2) architectural obstacles in transportation and public spaces; (3) political barriers; (4) cultural barriers; (5) relational barriers; (6) technological barriers; and (7) entrepreneurial myopia. These barriers arise from a lack of accessible information on travel options, accommodation, and activities essential for making informed decisions. Therefore, the emerging development of accessible tourism standards and guidelines is a promising strategy for promoting uniformity and consistency when providing accessible services and facilities across tourism destinations (Stankov et al., 2024).

The gap in research on accessible tourism for persons with disabilities is indeed a critical oversight. Training and education programs for tourism professionals should be identified as essential in raising awareness and understanding of disability issues. By equipping service providers with the knowledge and skills necessary to interact effectively with PWD and PwHD, these programs can help foster a culture of inclusivity and sensitivity within the tourism industry.

Recent academic interest in tourism and mental disorders is growing (Wen et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2025), yet this research remains underdeveloped due to fragmented literature (Wen et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). The diversity of mental disorders and their unique challenges spanning across the interdisciplinary field of tourism, public health, psychology, and social work, creating a disconnected research landscape, requiring additional research, where each domain bringing its own methodologies, further contributing to fragmentation (Sedgley et al., 2017; Sadlon et al., 2021; Buckley, 2023; Hu et al., 2025).

Prior studies have explored specific aspects, like travel eligibility, constraints, caregiving for children with ASD, airport service, website accessibility, and dementia-friendly destinations (Dattolo et al., 2016; Sedgley et al., 2017; Connell & Page, 2019; Chiscano, 2021; Hu et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024). Understanding the perspectives of PwD and PwHD is essential for inclusive tourism. While many studies focus on their roles and experiences, their needs and challenges are often neglected in tourism planning. Addressing these unique requirements enhances accessibility and improves the travel experience, promoting well-being and fostering equity and diversity in the tourism industry (Jiang et al., 2025). Although Jepson et al. (2024) reviewed neurodiversity in tourism, a comprehensive synthesis of research on tourists with various mental disorders is lacking. Regardless, the gap in literature persists despite calls for a holistic approach to support vulnerable tourists (McKercher & Darcy, 2018; Zhao et al., 2023; Park et al., 2024).

Furthermore, incorporating universal design principles in tourism infrastructure has gained traction to create environments accessible to all individuals, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Universal designs emphasize the importance of designing products and environments usable by the broadest range of people without needing adaptation or specialized features. Beyond these initiatives, there is a growing emphasis on promoting awareness and advocacy for disability rights within the tourism sector. To ensure true transformation, it is imperative to implement robust policies specifically focusing on the needs of PwHDs, as current initiatives fall short of addressing these unique needs. Comprehensive policies should be mandated across the tourism spectrum, ensuring PwHD are recognized and accommodated.

Seven goals can be used universally throughout the tourism chain to ensure globally accessible tourism and could be explored in further research studies, namely: (1) tourism destination management; (2) tourism information and advertising; (3) urban and architectural environments; (4) modes of transport; (5) food services, accommodation, and conference facilities; (6) cultural activities; and (7) other tourism activities, (UNWTO, 2013). By engaging in dialogue with policymakers and industry leaders and embedding these requirements into legislation, the tourism industry would create a tangible impact that ensures equal access for all travellers.

## 6. Conclusion

Accessible and inclusive tourism for persons with hidden disabilities requires concerted efforts to address the multifaceted barriers that hinder their participation. While progress has been made in promoting accessible tourism, much remains to be done to achieve true accessibility and inclusivity for all PWD, including PwHD. By prioritizing accessibility, fostering awareness, and implementing inclusive policies, future tourism initiatives should focus on integrating advanced technologies, innovative design, and sustainable practices to improve the travel experience for PwHD. This will also promote social inclusion and ensure that future tourism is indisputably accessible to everyone.

The literature on managing persons with disabilities in the tourism industry highlights the complex interplay of factors shaping the travel experiences of PwHD. Future tourism must evolve and integrate cutting-edge artificial intelligence technologies to create innovative tourism solutions, enhance accessibility, and provide real-time assistance. Additionally, trends such as personalized travel experiences and virtual reality tours would cater to the unique needs of PwHD. This forward-thinking approach paves the



way for the future tourism industry to fully embrace diversity and promote travel equity to ensure that all travellers, regardless of their abilities, enjoy an enriching and barrier-free travel experience.

## 6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the literature review, several recommendations are proposed to enhance accessibility and inclusivity for PwHD in the tourism industry: i) Improving infrastructure: Invest in upgrading infrastructure to ensure accessible transportation and barrier-free environments; ii) Enhancing communication: Provide accessible information and signage to facilitate navigation and communication for PwHD; iii) Promoting awareness: Increase awareness and understanding of disability issues among tourism stakeholders through training and education initiatives related to PwHD; iv) Implementing inclusive policies: Develop and implement inclusive policies and standards to ensure equal access to tourism experiences for PwHD; v) Technological advancement: The potential to enhance accessibility through the use of virtual reality devices and artificial intelligence (AI); vi) Policy initiatives: Inclusivity in the regulatory frameworks supporting accessible tourism for PwHD; vii) Social awareness: Paradigm shifts in public attitudes towards disability stigmatization.

Tourists with hidden disabilities often face anxiety and stress due to delays, cancellations, and other factors beyond their control, even with thorough planning (Chiscano, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). Although airports and airlines offer informative materials such as videos and booklets explaining the travel process, these resources only partially meet the needs of PWD, whose primary challenges occur in person during the journey (Van Holstein et al., 2024). Stress caused by unpredictable procedures can be alleviated through prior communication by travel agencies with PWD (Hamed, 2013; Van Holstein et al., 2020). Some studies have emphasized the importance of priority access at check-in, security, and boarding to help mitigate the stress induced by noisy environments, long lines, and unfamiliar contexts (Chiscano, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023; Tata et al., 2024; Dos Santos et al., 2024). In addition, creating mitigating sensory stimuli in public environments for individuals with cognitive or sensory disabilities by reducing noise. As would introducing clear, visible, and readable signage, visual guides on floors, and improved lighting, especially natural lighting, to aid users with location difficulties (Bosch & Gharaveis, 2017; Yeung, 2021; Biglieri, 2021; Small et al., 2023). Clear textual and symbolic signage, including large, standardized letters, color contrast, and proper lighting is crucial to reduce cognitive stress, particularly for individuals with sensory or intellectual disabilities (Hunter-Zaworski & Hron, 1999; O'Reilly & Shepherd, 2016; Symonds, 2017; Dos Santos et al., 2024).

Complementary strategies such as tactile, auditory, or vibrational cues and accessible online maps also support spatial orientation. Quiet waiting areas, like sensory rooms in high-traffic zones, benefit those with sensory or cognitive disabilities. These spaces often feature calming elements such as appropriate lighting, silence, and trained staff to assist passengers and companions (Chiscano, 2021). Additionally, providing tranquil spaces in common areas is recommended as a more inclusive alternative, especially for individuals with ASD (Peterson et al., 2022; Dos Santos et al., 2024).

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