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INCLUSIVE TOURISM DESIGN: BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP FACED BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores challenges and opportunities in designing inclusive tourism experiences for people with disabilities (PwD), with a specific focus on the early stages of the tourism journey. Drawing on both qualitative and evaluative methodologies, the study investigates key dimensions of accessibility through web accessibility assessments of major online travel agencies (OTAs) and a thematic analysis of user-generated content from the TripAdvisor forum "Travel with Disabilities." The research maps the primary barriers faced by PwD, ranging from insufficient digital accessibility and fragmented information to a lack of tailored services and support. The findings reveal that current OTAs do not properly address the specific information and planning needs of PwD, often reinforcing exclusion rather than enabling autonomy. This paper opens the discussion on the information gap faced by PwD and the associated costs they incur when participating in

the tourism journey and offers design recommendations aimed at fostering greater equity, accessibility, and empowerment within the tourism sector.

Keywords: People with disabilities; tripadvisor; social inclusion; accessibility; digital platforms; online travel agencies

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry plays a crucial role in fostering cultural exchange and economic growth. It serves as an essential conduit for promoting global cultural understanding, enhancing social cohesion, and facilitating interactions between diverse groups of people. According to the United Nations (2019), accessible tourism expands these benefits by ensuring that tourism opportunities are inclusive, allowing people of all abilities to actively engage and benefit from cultural exchanges. Furthermore, tourism significantly contributes to economic development by creating employment opportunities, stimulating local economies, and encouraging investments in infrastructure and services (Li et al., 2018). By fostering inclusive and accessible tourism practices, the industry not only fulfills social responsibility but also ensures sustainable growth (Aquino et al., 2018; Darcy et al., 2010).

However, despite its numerous benefits, the tourism sector continues to face substantial challenges, particularly in ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for PwD (Agovino et al., 2017; Domínguez Vila et al., 2024; Michopoulou et al., 2015). Bélanger and Jolin (2011) emphasize the significance of a more inclusive and accessible tourism, advocating for the universal right to holidays and tourism as fundamental aspects of human well-being and social integration. Initiatives in this direction not only enable equitable access to leisure and travel but also contribute to the reduction of social inequalities, thus fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society (Wu et al., 2024).

Despite the growing attention and efforts toward creating inclusive tourism, PwD still face numerous barriers and constraints (Portales, 2015). These barriers, ranging from inadequate physical infrastructures and digital accessibility to informational gaps, align closely with the hierarchical model of leisure constraints described by Crawford et al. (1991). Their framework identifies intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural barriers that sequentially affect individuals' participation in leisure activities, which is particularly relevant for understanding the complexities faced by PwD in tourism contexts. Tourism for PwD extends beyond the need for physical accessibility and

delves into a more complex understanding of how digital infrastructures and service design can ensure an inclusive experience. In this regard, McKercher and Darcy (2018) advocate for reconceptualizing disability-related travel barriers by emphasizing a more comprehensive view that incorporates environmental, societal, and personal factors, highlighting the multifaceted nature of these obstacles.

For PwD, traveling remains a significant challenge due to persistent accessibility barriers. The necessity for inclusive tourism has been widely acknowledged, yet many structural barriers remain unaddressed (Bramwell & Lane, 2008; Coleman, 2018). Physical obstacles, inadequate digital information, and a lack of standardized accessibility details create difficulties for PwD in planning and enjoying tourism experiences.

These barriers are present not only during the experience itself but also manifest during the initial planning phase of the tourism journey (Darcy, 2010). While digital technologies have created new opportunities for enhancing accessibility and personalizing travel experiences, they have also introduced additional barriers, particularly when platforms are not designed with inclusivity in mind (Singh & Sibi, 2021). In this regard, investigating the accessibility of OTAs is crucial, as they have become central actors in shaping how tourism services are marketed, booked, and experienced globally throughout the tourism journey (Park et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2021). As intermediaries between service providers and travelers, OTAs significantly shape the planning and decision-making processes of tourists, including PwD (Domínguez Vila et al., 2024).

Despite global efforts to improve accessibility, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, many OTA and general travel service providers fail to provide adequate information and solutions to PwD (Domínguez Vila et al., 2024; Vila & Darcy, 2025). This limitation is not attributable to a lack of technological advancement. On the contrary, despite significant progress in digital innovation, many OTAs still exhibit substantial accessibility barriers. These include non-intuitive navigation structures, inadequate alt-text for images, lack of keyboard navigation support, and incompatibility with screen readers and other assistive technologies (Lazar & Jaeger, 2011; Singh & Sibi, 2021). Such design shortcomings can severely hinder the ability of PwD to independently search for information, compare options, and complete bookings. As a result, what should be an empowering digital tool often becomes a source of exclusion, reinforcing systemic inequalities in access to tourism opportunities.

This study enters this debate and seeks to analyze the accessibility of OTAs and examine the concerns expressed by PwD through online travel forums.

Investigating OTAs' accessibility helps identify specific shortcomings and highlights the unique concerns and experiences of PwD, which are frequently discussed within online travel forums. By examining both technical accessibility through evaluation tools and qualitative insights from user-generated content, researchers can pinpoint precise areas for improvement. Ultimately, addressing OTAs' accessibility enhances inclusivity and equality in tourism, empowering PwD to independently embark on their travel journeys with confidence and ease.

Addressing these complex and layered constraints directly supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities within and among countries, and SDG 11, which is dedicated to creating inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements. Efforts in overcoming these challenges can significantly enhance the inclusivity, equity, and sustainability of the tourism industry, ultimately promoting a more accessible and empowering tourism experience for PwD.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The tourism industry plays a pivotal role in fostering cultural exchange, promoting mutual understanding, and stimulating economic growth globally (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). By enabling individuals to immerse themselves in diverse cultural settings, tourism actively enhances global interconnectedness, fosters cross-cultural empathy, and promotes tolerance and respect among different communities (Reisinger & Turner, 2012; UNWTO, 2020).

Beyond cultural enrichment, tourism significantly contributes to local and national economies by generating employment opportunities, spurring infrastructure improvements, and increasing consumer spending (Dwyer et al., 2009; Škare et al., 2021). The influx of tourists helps sustain local businesses; encourages investment in facilities such as transportation networks, hotels, and attractions; and can stimulate regional development (Binns & Nel, 2002; Page & Connell, 2020). Furthermore, tourism often acts as a catalyst for preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and natural resources, promoting sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and local communities (UNESCO, 2021; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Therefore, cultivating an inclusive and accessible tourism industry not only drives economic prosperity but also reinforces social cohesion and cultural appreciation worldwide (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Michopoulou et al., 2015; Rao & Lai, 2025).

Despite these benefits, PwD often encounter a range of constraints and barriers that limit their full participation in tourism experiences. These obstacles emerge at various stages of the travel journey, from the initial planning phase to the actual destination experience, and can vary in nature, encompassing intrapersonal (e.g., self-perception or lack of confidence), interpersonal (e.g., lack of support or social isolation), and structural (e.g., inaccessible infrastructure or discriminatory practices) barriers and constraints (Crawford et al., 1991; McKercher & Darcy, 2018).

Among the most persistent and overlooked barriers is the information gap, which significantly undermines the autonomy and decision-making capacity of PwD throughout the tourism journey. This gap is not merely a matter of limited content availability, but also of how information is presented, often in inaccessible formats, lacking essential details on accessibility features, or buried within complex digital interfaces (Eichhorn et al., 2008). As a result, PwD are frequently left without the critical knowledge needed to assess the suitability of destinations, accommodations, and services, forcing them to rely on third parties or to take on disproportionate levels of uncertainty and risk when traveling. Addressing this informational asymmetry is essential for creating inclusive tourism ecosystems that support equitable access and participation (Domínguez Vila et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2013).

In this debate, tourism providers and OTAs might play a central role. Park et al. (2024) underscore that for travelers with disabilities, uncertainty surrounding service accessibility is a central concern throughout the entire travel journey, from the planning stage to the experience itself. Their study reveals that PwD often rely on online platforms to seek and share information that reduces this uncertainty, particularly concerning mobility, safety, and comfort-related services. These issues include accessible transportation options, lift availability, and ADA-compliant facilities, all of which are indispensable for travel but are frequently underrepresented in available travel information. Bridging this information gap is not only a matter of improving digital accessibility but also a critical step toward empowering PwD to make informed travel decisions, thereby fostering a more equitable and inclusive tourism environment. Information barriers pose another critical issue in inclusive tourism: digital accessibility.

In what follows, we investigate the accessibility of selected OTAs using standardized web accessibility tools and analyze thematic content from the "Travel with Disabilities" forum on TripAdvisor. This dual-method approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both the technical and experiential barriers faced by PwD in the early stages of their tourism journey.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology comprises two primary components: an evaluation of web accessibility and an analysis of information accessibility through user-generated content. The web accessibility evaluation was conducted in February 2024 and focused on assessing the digital usability of seven popular OTAs to determine how well they adhere to WCAG 2.0 guidelines. This involves the application of tools such as AChecker[1] and WAVE[2] to measure elements such as readability, navigation ease, the presence of alternative text for images, and compatibility with screen readers. Compliance is assessed to Level A (minimum level), AA (mid-range), and AAA (highest level), which provide a benchmark for understanding how well digital platforms meet the needs of users with visual, auditory, and cognitive impairments. The target OTAs websites were defined by selecting the five most frequently used OTAs,[3] and supplementing them with two OTAs dedicated to ensuring accessible structures for PwD, namely Bookingbility[4] and Fairbnb.[5] The home pages of the selected OTAs website were chosen for the web accessibility assessment, due to their pivotal role in user navigation experience.

Simultaneously, a qualitative analysis explores the lived experiences of PwD by examining contributions to the "Travel with Disabilities" forum on TripAdvisor. This platform serves as a valuable repository of firsthand travel experiences, concerns, and advice shared by PwD. Forum data from January 2019 to December 2023 were systematically collected and cleaned to eliminate irrelevant, duplicate, or promotional entries. The cleaned dataset (N = 332) was imported into NVivo software, where thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring challenges and concerns. Themes were coded to map the most prominent needs, constraints, and desires in information access and service usability, allowing us to explore barriers to inclusive touristic experiences.

[1] AChecker is used to evaluate HTML content for accessibility problems by entering the location of a web page, uploading an html file, or pasting the complete HTML source code from a Web page. AChecker produces a report of all accessibility problems for your selected guidelines.

[2] WAVE is a suite of evaluation tools that helps authors make their web content more accessible to individuals with disabilities. WAVE can not only identify many accessibility and Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) errors but also facilitate human evaluation of web content.

[3] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1215457/most-visited-travel-and-tourism-websites-worldwide/.

[4] https://it.bookingbility.com/.

[5] https://fairbnb.coop/it/.

Together, these methods enable a multifaceted analysis of both the technical shortcomings and user-experienced limitations in OTA platforms. This integrated approach not only validates the existence of accessibility issues but also provides user-informed insights to guide the design of more inclusive tourism platforms.

RESULTS

The findings from the web accessibility evaluation reveal significant shortcomings in OTA compliance with WCAG 2.0 standards. Across the selected platforms, as we can see from Tables 3.1 and 3.2, common accessibility violations include the absence of alternative text for images and interactive elements (i.e., non-text content), low contrast ratios that hinder readability for users with visual impairments, and non-descriptive link text, which obstructs effective navigation for screen reader users. Additionally, multiple pages lacked proper heading structures and label instructions, creating a disjointed browsing experience for users dependent on assistive technologies. Platforms like Booking and Airbnb were notably deficient in key Level A and AA criteria, as presented in Table 3.2, including keyboard navigability and content clarity. However, these platforms perform similarly to, or even better than, those specifically designed to target PwD and promote inclusion, such as Bookingbility and Fairbnb (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2). These findings highlight the systemic digital barriers preventing PwD from independently accessing essential travel information.

The thematic analysis of user-generated content from the "Travel with Disabilities" forum further underscores these technical deficiencies by illuminating the everyday challenges experienced by PwD. First of all, users frequently report difficulties in obtaining detailed accessibility descriptions for accommodations, transportation options, and tourist sites. Many also express frustrations with contradictory or misleading information provided by service providers.

By exploring the word cloud generated from the forum data (Fig. 3.1), finding highlights recurring themes such as "accessible," "need," "wheelchair," "hotel," "help," and "looking," suggesting that core concerns revolve around physical accessibility and the reliability of service information. Frequent complaints centered on inaccurate descriptions of accommodations, lack of staff training, and discrepancies between advertised and actual accessibility features. Users expressed a strong reliance on peer reviews and personal stories to fill these information gaps, underlining the importance of trust and

Table 3.1. AChecker Standards Evaluation.

	Success Criteria	Booking	Agoda	Bookingbility	Fairbnb	TripAdvisor	Airbnb	Expedia
Level A	1.1.1 Non-text Content	5				0	N/A	0
	1.3.1 Info and Relationship			9			N/A	
	2.4.2 Page Titled		1				N/A	
	2.4.4 Link Purpose (In Context)			4	1		N/A	
	3.1.1 Language of Page						N/A	
	3.3.2 Labels or Instructions	1		8			N/A	
Level AA	1.4.4 Resize Text			35			N/A	
	2.4.6 Headings and Labels			1	1		N/A	

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 3.2. Wave Standards Evaluation.

	Success Criteria	Booking	Agoda	Bookingbility	Fairbnb	TripAdvisor	Airbnb	Expedia
Level A	1.1.1 Non-text Content	13	4	12	98	3	25	2
	1.3.1 Info and Relationship	2	4	12	24		22	3
	2.4.1 Bypass Blocks		4		2			
	2.4.2 Page Titled		2					
	2.4.4 Link Purpose (In Context)		4	4	27	3	24	
	3.3.2 Labels or Instructions	2		12	22		1	2
	4.1.2 Name, Role Value						1	1
Level AA	1.4.3 Contrast (Minimum)	9	24		11			
	2.4.6 Headings and Labels	2	4	12	24		1	2

Source: Authors' elaboration.

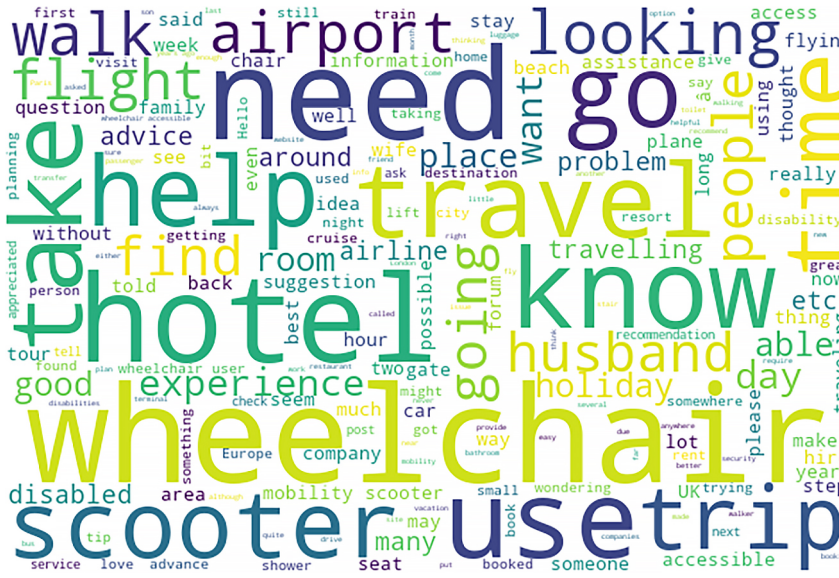

Fig. 3.1. Word Cloud of Barriers, Constraints, and Targeted Needs.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on "Travel with Disabilities" forum.

transparency in accessibility reporting. Persons with disabilities, or, in many cases, their caregivers, as indicated by references such as "husband," frequently rely on firsthand reviews from other travelers to assess the credibility of accessibility-related claims. This indicates a fundamental gap in how accessibility information is communicated by OTAs and other service providers. The need for more transparent, detailed, and standardized accessibility information is evident from these findings. These results affirm that digital inaccessibility is not merely a technical flaw but a substantial barrier to equitable tourism participation.

The keywords visualized in the word cloud can be qualitatively grouped into two meaningful clusters. The first cluster relates to different stages of the tourism journey, including terms such as "hotel," "booking," "airport," "transport," "room," and "trip." These terms reflect the temporal and logistical flow of travel, highlighting where accessibility barriers commonly arise. The word cloud vividly illustrates how the lack of clear, accessible, and reliable information can act as a fundamental barrier, beginning as early as the planning phase of the tourism journey. For PwD, this phase is critical, as it involves assessing key elements such as accommodation suitability, transport availability, and mobility-related services. Without accurate and accessible digital information, PwD face heightened uncertainty, which can deter them from initiating travel altogether. This uncertainty not only undermines their

ability to make informed decisions but also perpetuates exclusion by reinforcing dependence on informal sources or trial-and-error approaches. The clustering of terms in the word cloud reveals that the planning phase is not just a logistical step – it is a gateway that either enables or obstructs inclusive tourism experiences. As such, bridging the information gap is not merely a technical necessity but a pivotal factor in empowering PwD to travel with confidence and autonomy.

The second cluster centers around disability-specific considerations, with terms such as "wheelchair," "step," "mobility," and "walk" appearing prominently. This vocabulary underscores the dominant visibility of physical and mobility-related concerns within the discourse, highlighting the central role of adaptive infrastructure, such as ramps, lifts, and accessible restrooms, in shaping the tourism experiences of wheelchair users and individuals with mobility impairments. However, the absence or underrepresentation of terms related to other types of disabilities, such as sensory, cognitive, or invisible disabilities, raises important questions. The dominance of mobility-related terms in user-generated content may reflect not only the urgent needs of this user group but also the structural invisibility of other disability types in digital planning tools. Are these travelers less likely to use or benefit from online planning tools due to barriers that are not immediately apparent in the data? Or is their presence underreported because the tools themselves are not designed with their needs in mind? This observation prompts a deeper reflection on the inclusiveness of current digital tourism platforms. It also calls for broader participatory approaches that actively engage individuals with diverse disabilities in the design and evaluation of digital tools, ensuring that tourism accessibility is truly comprehensive and equitable across all needs and abilities.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study underscore the persistent and multifaceted barriers that PwD face in accessing tourism experiences, particularly in the early stages of the travel journey (Loi & Kong, 2017; Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2024). Both the technical assessment of OTAs and the thematic analysis of user-generated content reveal that significant gaps remain in the digital infrastructure that supports inclusive tourism planning, particularly regarding information access.

The web accessibility evaluation reveals substantial non-compliance with WCAG 2.0 standards across major OTAs, suggesting that many platforms are not fully compatible with assistive technologies and inadequately serve

users with visual, auditory, or cognitive impairments. These technical deficiencies hinder PwD from independently searching, planning, and booking their travel, thereby reinforcing dependence on others and limiting their autonomy. These findings echo existing research that critiques the tourism industry's slow and uneven adoption of inclusive digital design practices (Darcy et al., 2010; Domínguez Vila et al., 2024; Michopoulou et al., 2015).

The thematic analysis of user-generated content from the "Travel with Disabilities" forum complements the technical assessment by shedding light on the lived experiences of PwD navigating these digital environments. Prominent themes related to physical accessibility (e.g., "wheelchair," "elevator," "step-free") and service-related information (e.g., "staff," "booking," "transport") point to ongoing deficiencies in both infrastructural provision and information clarity.

Notably, the clustering of keywords into stages of the tourism journey – planning, booking, transport, and accommodation – reinforces the importance of addressing accessibility as a continuum rather than a one-time consideration. The findings support the arguments of Park et al. (2024) related to the fact that uncertainty surrounding service accessibility is a critical factor in tourism decision-making for PwD and that reducing this uncertainty through accurate and accessible information is fundamental to enabling participation.

Importantly, the qualitative data also reflect limitations in the digital user experience for individuals with non-mobility-related disabilities. Although less frequently represented in the discourse, the challenges faced by people with sensory, cognitive, or invisible impairments are equally pressing and highlight a broader systemic oversight in current accessibility strategies. The fact that these challenges are less frequently addressed can be the result of limited web accessibility presented by the analyzed OTAs. The results highlight indeed a potential bias in the visibility of certain types of disabilities. The predominance of mobility-related terms in both the word cloud and forum discussions suggests that digital platforms and tourism services may be inadvertently prioritizing the needs of wheelchair users, while the needs of individuals with sensory, cognitive, or invisible disabilities remain underrepresented. This raises important questions about the inclusiveness of existing platforms and suggests a need for further research into how different disability groups engage with digital tourism tools.

Overall, the study affirms that digital inaccessibility is not merely a technical flaw but a structural barrier that limits equal participation in tourism. Addressing this issue requires a systemic approach that combines technological upgrades, inclusive design practices, and participatory engagement with PwD in both the development and evaluation of tourism services.

What if the digital revolution we so proudly celebrate is silently excluding millions? Despite the global push for inclusivity, the tourism industry still fails to meet the most basic accessibility needs of PwD, not because the technology is lacking, but because the will to design inclusively is absent. If people with sensory, cognitive, or invisible disabilities are not reflected in the data, is it because they are not traveling, or because they have given up trying? The absence of their voices in forums may be the clearest sign of digital exclusion.

Finally, the reliance on peer reviews rather than official sources to access critical accessibility information reveals a failure of institutional communication. Why must PwD rely on anecdotal evidence to plan a trip in 2025? Why haven't OTAs implemented standardized and certified accessibility filters, despite years of advocacy and available guidelines? This highlights a broader systemic issue: accessibility in tourism remains a fragmented promise rather than an industry-wide standard.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the pressing need to improve accessibility in the tourism industry by addressing digital, informational, and attitudinal barriers. The dual-method findings indicate a clear disconnect between the accessibility needs of PwD and the current design and communication strategies of major OTAs. Addressing these gaps through standardized accessibility features and authentic, user-driven content is essential to fostering an inclusive digital tourism ecosystem.

In response to the identified gaps, this study proposes to prioritize enhanced digital accessibility, standardized accessibility information, and participatory research methods. Ensuring compliance with WCAG 2.0 guidelines is fundamental to creating an inclusive digital environment that allows PwD to access necessary travel information seamlessly. Standardized accessibility reporting mechanisms should be introduced across OTAs, hotels, and tourism service providers to ensure consistency and reliability in accessibility details. Engaging PwD in participatory research and feedback mechanisms can further enhance inclusivity in the sector. By encouraging direct contributions from PwD, service providers can gain valuable insights into the real-world challenges they face and develop more responsive solutions.

Moreover, training programs for tourism professionals should also be implemented to improve awareness and ensure that accessibility considerations are integrated into service design.

This study makes clear that accessibility in digital tourism is not only a technical issue, but also a matter of equity, autonomy, and social justice. If we are to build an inclusive tourism ecosystem aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 10 and 11), then structural and systemic reforms must follow.

For policymakers, the priority should be to legislate mandatory accessibility standards for digital tourism platforms, similar to physical access laws. Public authorities should fund audits, certifications, and co-design programs that include people with different disabilities from the earliest stages of service development. Accessibility should not be aspirational; it should be enforced.

For OTAs, there is a critical opportunity and responsibility to lead innovation in inclusive design. OTAs must go beyond minimal compliance with WCAG standards and invest in universal design principles that embed accessibility into every user interface. Introducing certified filters for accessibility features (e.g., step-free entry, visual alarms, sensory-friendly environments) and ensuring machine-readable accessibility metadata will empower all users, not just those with disabilities.

For tourism practitioners, including hotels, attractions, and transport operators, the call is to recognize that accessibility is not a niche market; it is a growing global demand. Transparent, standardized communication of accessibility features should become part of every booking description. Staff training and digital communication protocols must be updated to reflect diverse needs, especially for non-visible disabilities.

Most importantly, all stakeholders must embrace a participatory approach, actively involving PwD in testing, reviewing, and co-designing both services and digital platforms. Inclusion cannot be retrofitted; it must be embedded from the start.

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