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Exploring the Potential of E-Tourism in Enhancing Accessibility for Disabled and Elderly Travelers

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the extent to which existing opportunities are being harnessed, particularly focusing on the current and potential applications of novel technologies in the tourism sector for individuals with special needs. The study employs logical-compartmental analysis and observation as its primary research methods, providing a structured approach to understanding the integration of technology in this context. The main findings indicate that the development of the knowledge-based economy and the subsequent research and practical implementation of its results offer numerous untapped opportunities. One such opportunity lies in the broader application of e-tourism to cater to the specific needs of disabled individuals, the elderly, and other often-overlooked groups. These groups have historically been underrepresented in economic analyses, yet they represent a significant segment of the population that can benefit immensely from technological advancements in tourism. The study emphasizes that the potential of e-tourism to meet the needs of people with special requirements remains largely unexploited. As the tourism industry evolves, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of inclusivity and accessibility, necessitating innovative approaches to service delivery. This includes the creation of new business models that are specifically designed to accommodate the unique needs of these groups. Practical implications of the research suggest a pressing need for developing and implementing novel business models within the e-tourism sector. These models should consider national requirements and domestic capabilities to effectively serve people with special needs. By doing so, the tourism industry can become more inclusive, offering tailored experiences that enhance the quality of life for all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. In conclusion, this article highlights the critical importance of leveraging technology to create accessible tourism experiences and underscores the need for ongoing innovation in this area to fully realize the potential benefits for people with special needs.

Keywords: E-Tourism, Accessibility, Special Needs, Inclusive Tourism, Technology in Tourism

JEL Codes: L83, O33, J14

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays a significant role in the social life of both developed and developing countries, contributing to economic growth, cultural exchange, and personal well-being. Recreation, which encompasses any activity or experience aimed at refreshing the body or mind, includes a wide range of pursuits such as leisure, entertainment, and relaxation. Tourism, often associated with travel for both pleasure and business, is one of the most prominent forms of recreation. Whether through sightseeing, exploring new cultures, or simply unwinding in a different environment, tourism provides an opportunity for individuals to recharge and experience the world beyond their everyday routines. As a result, it is recognized not only as a recreational activity but also as a vital part of the global economy, promoting cultural awareness, social interaction, and individual well-being. The evolving nature of work organization and cultural norms has profoundly transformed how societies view and experience free time. In earlier eras, leisure was often a luxury reserved for the wealthier social classes, with only those who had the means and resources enjoying extended periods of rest, travel, or recreation. The working class and lower-income groups typically had limited opportunities for leisure, as they were primarily focused on fulfilling work and family obligations. However, in modern times, this paradigm has shifted significantly.

Improvements in labor laws, employment benefits, and cultural shifts have led to a greater appreciation for work-life balance. The introduction of paid vacations, mandatory rest periods, and public holidays has democratized access to leisure and recreation. Now, free time is not just the privilege of the affluent but a common feature of everyday life for a wide range of people. This includes students, who enjoy long summer holidays; employees, who are entitled to paid leave and public holidays; and retirees, who have more flexibility to engage in leisure activities. Cultural phenomena like the emergence of "long weekends" have also become an integral part of this shift. Many countries have adopted policies that align public holidays with weekends, resulting in extended breaks that encourage travel, relaxation, or family time. Furthermore, there is widespread advice and strategies available on how to maximize time off from work, with many people learning how to 'earn' extra time at home by strategically using leave days in combination with public holidays. This has created a culture where extended leisure time is actively sought and celebrated.

Technology has also contributed to this shift. Remote work options, flexible hours, and advancements in communication

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have allowed people more control over their work schedules, facilitating a better integration of personal time and professional commitments. These changes reflect an increasing societal recognition of the importance of mental and physical well-being. Consequently, free time has become a valued aspect of life that supports personal fulfillment, relaxation, and health. The impact of this cultural shift goes beyond individuals; it influences entire industries. Tourism, recreation, and entertainment sectors have grown exponentially as a result of this expanded access to free time. People now plan vacations more regularly, enjoy short getaways, or engage in local leisure activities with greater frequency. The travel and hospitality industries, in particular, have benefited from this societal change, as people increasingly seek opportunities for recreation, whether through domestic or international travel. In essence, free time is no longer viewed as an exclusive reward for the wealthy, but as a fundamental component of a balanced and fulfilling life for all social classes. This broad societal shift reflects a deepening recognition of the value of rest, leisure, and recreation in maintaining overall well-being and quality of life. The omnipresence of free time and the growing need to use it creatively have made leisure a critical factor in the development of local communities, culture, and the economy. The way individuals and groups engage with their free time has multidimensional impacts, crossing social, economic, environmental, and technological boundaries. These varied factors create a rich area for academic inquiry and practical exploration, not only in terms of societal development but also in shaping new markets and economic opportunities (Dąbrowska, 2005). As leisure time becomes more accessible and essential, industries, especially those related to tourism, recreation, and entertainment, have responded by tailoring their offerings to meet the needs and preferences of the average consumer, including the "average Pole" in this context. The proliferation of leisure options underscores the expanding role that free time plays in modern life, not just as a personal experience but as a driver of broader economic and cultural trends.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while free time and tourism are increasingly available to many, not every individual has the same level of access to these opportunities. A significant portion of the population, particularly people with special needs, often faces substantial barriers to fully engaging in leisure and tourism activities that are readily accessible to others. These barriers may be physical, economic, or related to specific personal limitations, making it challenging or even impossible for them to participate in standard tourist offers. This creates a distinct need for dedicated approaches to organizing tourism for this demographic, ensuring that leisure opportunities are inclusive and accessible to all members of society. This article aims to investigate the extent to which available tourism opportunities are being effectively exploited, with a particular focus on people with special needs. By exploring both current offerings and potential avenues for inclusive tourism, the article seeks to highlight gaps in the market and propose ways to make tourism more accessible. The goal is not only to understand how tourism can be adapted to meet the specific needs of this group but also to examine the broader implications for society, local economies, and cultural development when inclusive tourism practices are prioritized.

The study of inclusive tourism is a growing area of interest because it touches on issues of equality, social justice, and economic development. Ensuring that people with special needs can participate in tourism has the potential to open up new markets, create job opportunities, and foster a more inclusive society. This focus also aligns with global trends emphasizing the importance of accessibility in all areas of public life, including leisure and tourism. By understanding the challenges and possibilities within this sector, policymakers and industry leaders can work toward creating a more equitable and accessible tourism landscape, benefiting not only individuals with special needs but society as a whole. A number of analyses have explored the role of tourism services in how different societal groups—whether defined by profession, culture, or other demographic factors—spend their free time. These studies often examine the changing dynamics of the tourism services market. While spending free time through tourism is typically categorized as a form of consumption, it can also be viewed as an investment. For instance, family trips might contribute to children's education and intellectual development, while active forms of leisure, such as hiking or sports tourism, can lead to improved health and, consequently, higher work effectiveness in the long run. This dual nature of tourism—both as consumption and investment—demonstrates its broader impact on individuals and society.

Pedagogy and sociology have also underscored the importance of how free time is spent, highlighting the links between tourism and other aspects of personal development, such as physical education, intellectual growth, moral values, and aesthetics. For example, methods like those used in scouting emphasize the developmental benefits of structured leisure activities, integrating both physical and intellectual stimulation (Tauber & Siwiński, 2002; Pięta, 2004). In this context, efficient planning of free time becomes a critical aspect of professional and social competencies. It's not just about managing work and organizing tasks, but also about the ability to rest effectively and regenerate one's mental and physical energy. This ability to balance work and leisure, and to recharge efficiently, is increasingly recognized as a key factor in personal and professional success. In fact, it could provide a competitive advantage in the modern workplace, where chronic stress and burnout are becoming more common.

The importance of free time and leisure is further highlighted by health concerns that are increasingly relevant in today's society. For instance, stroke, which is now one of the leading causes of disability, affects not only older individuals but also younger people, sometimes even under 30. Similarly, chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) has become a widespread condition, exacerbating the need for better time management and structured rest. The ability to manage free time for leisure and recuperation is therefore not just a luxury, but a necessity for maintaining long-term health and productivity. A major issue in the current tourism market is the tension between mass-market tourism and personalized offers. On one hand, the tourism industry has popularized tourism on a massive scale, creating generic packages that are designed to appeal to a broad customer

base. While this allows for economies of scale and affordability, it often means that the unique preferences or needs of individual travelers are overlooked. On the other hand, personalized, tailor-made travel experiences, which could better meet the specific desires or requirements of individuals, tend to be rare or prohibitively expensive, placing them out of reach for the average consumer, particularly for many in Poland. This creates a paradox in the tourism market. The widespread availability of affordable travel packages democratizes access to leisure and travel, but at the same time, it limits the ability of individuals to seek experiences that are truly personalized and enriching. This gap between standardized offerings and exclusive, individualized experiences reflects broader issues of inequality in access to high-quality leisure activities. As a result, many people find themselves choosing from a limited range of options that may not fully satisfy their personal or cultural interests, despite the overall expansion of the tourism market. While tourism continues to evolve as a key component of how people spend their free time, challenges remain in ensuring that everyone has access to meaningful and personalized travel experiences. Addressing these issues may require innovative approaches to tourism planning and the development of more flexible, affordable models that cater to a diverse range of customers. Furthermore, recognizing the role of leisure as both consumption and investment can help societies and individuals better appreciate the value of time spent in tourism, not just for relaxation, but for its broader contributions to health, intellectual development, and social well-being.

2. TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT

Leisure has often been defined as either a quality of experience or simply free time, but for many disabled and elderly individuals, traditional forms of leisure can be inaccessible, often leaving them excluded. As a result, efforts to address these exclusions and make leisure more inclusive are highly valuable. One of the key developments aiding in this inclusion is the increasing accessibility of the Internet, particularly through mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers. The use of global positioning systems (GPS) has also revolutionized the way people plan and engage in leisure activities, especially in the realm of local tourism. What used to be an "imaginary tour using a map" has now transformed into immersive virtual tours, enabling individuals to experience places digitally before visiting them in person or even as a substitute for those unable to travel. In addition to these technological advancements, intense competition in the travel and tourism sector has pushed companies to continuously innovate and offer new services and experiences to meet the evolving expectations of both current and future customers. These innovations are increasingly driven by advancements in technology, particularly in the realm of e-health and e-tourism. The importance of these technologies is expected to grow as their applications become more widespread and their impact on customer experience intensifies.

E-tourism, also known as "travel technology" or "e-travel," encompasses nearly all traditional forms of tourism-related services. This includes services directly related to tourism, such as accommodations, transportation, and hospitality, as well as those indirectly linked to organizational processes like improving service potential, efficiency, loyalty programs, and discount systems (Reformat, 2015). E-tourism operates on multiple levels, from individual customers and single companies to groups of companies offering integrated services (e.g., booking transport, lodging, and activities together), and even on broader market levels, influencing national strategies where tourism plays a vital role in the economy (Flis, 2009; Buchalis, 2008; Pawlicz, 2012). A notable impact of e-tourism is the shift in booking and payment systems, where digital platforms have become the norm for reservations and transactions, creating more streamlined and accessible experiences for customers (Dąbrowska & Janoś-Kresło, 2010). The adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) by both tourists and businesses has reshaped the tourism industry, revolutionizing its operational processes and restructuring value chains (Buhalis, 2003). This integration of ICT has allowed for greater flexibility and convenience in planning trips, managing bookings, and personalizing travel experiences, making tourism more accessible and responsive to the needs of a diverse clientele, including those who may have previously been excluded.

E-tourism has also emerged as the dominant category in e-commerce, leading all sectors in terms of transaction volume. This reflects the growing reliance on digital platforms and services in the tourism industry, where consumers increasingly prefer the convenience of online travel planning and booking. As e-tourism continues to expand, it is expected to drive further innovation in how travel services are marketed, sold, and delivered, ultimately enhancing the accessibility and inclusiveness of leisure and tourism activities for all individuals, regardless of their physical capabilities or geographical limitations. This growing trend underscores the critical role that technology plays in making leisure and travel more inclusive, efficient, and adaptable to the ever-changing needs of modern consumers.

3. SPECIAL NEEDS

Tourism services designed for people with special needs, which until recently were considered niche, are now gaining increasing popularity. These services range from camps for children with diabetes and holidays for people with disabilities or the elderly to more specialized offerings such as extreme tourism for wheelchair users, company awaydays, pilgrimage tourism, and spa treatments aimed at those wanting to lose weight or build muscle. For instance, a recent initiative by Jarosław Kuźniar, involving a website (GoForWorld) catering to travelers seeking affordable, unconventional experiences, highlights the growing potential of this market, especially when supported by Internet and mobile technologies. The diverse needs of travelers in Poland create new opportunities for a rapidly expanding tourism sector. This development is not limited to high-end services but also opens the door to personalized tourism that can be both affordable and highly tailored to individual preferences. As a result, the tourism market is becoming demassified, allowing smaller companies and regional tourism

sectors to engage in innovative and locally focused solutions that are original yet cost-effective. This shift provides significant opportunities for regional development, particularly in rural or less traditionally tourist-attractive areas. Many local communities are embracing this opportunity with pride, as they seek to elevate the status of their “little homeland” and attract more visitors. Interestingly, local rivalries between neighboring resorts can even foster healthy competition, driving innovation and improvements in service offerings. The potential for accessible tourism is vast, particularly as populations age, especially in developed countries. In Poland alone, there are currently 2.5 million disabled people and 6 million elderly individuals, with projections estimating that by 2030, the elderly population could reach 10 million. Globally, over 1 billion people live with disabilities, and an additional 2 billion are indirectly affected, including family members and caregivers. It is estimated that by 2020, up to 25% of tourism-related spending could come from disabled and elderly individuals, along with their families and caregivers. A particularly interesting segment of this market is the so-called “new consumers.” These are individuals who are open to innovative and marketable services, are experienced in using digital platforms, make careful and frugal purchasing decisions, and frequently use online price comparisons and group shopping services. This group is highly responsive to the emerging trends in e-tourism and represents a significant potential for growth in specialized travel services.

However, the diversity within the special needs population poses a challenge to creating universal tourism solutions. The varied needs, demands, and expectations of disabled individuals and their families mean that one-size-fits-all solutions are unlikely to work. Tourism services must be tailored to the source, type, and severity of a person’s disability, while also taking into account factors such as age, physical or cognitive development, and other personal characteristics. This diversity necessitates further research to better understand and meet the needs of different subgroups within the special needs tourism market. The growing recognition of accessible tourism is evidenced by events such as the Wheelchair Miss of France contest (organized by the Jedyna Taka Foundation), the International French Championships of Wheelchair Dance, and the achievements of Paralympians, which continue to inspire people around the world. Notable figures such as Jaś Mela, a double amputee who reached both poles and competed in “Dancing with the Stars,” Mark Inglis, who summited Mount Everest despite losing his legs, and the late Stephen Hawking, who experienced zero gravity, demonstrate that the boundaries of what is possible for people with disabilities are constantly being pushed further.

Local communities play a critical role in making tourist destinations more accessible and disability-friendly. This involves not only legal regulations and infrastructure adjustments but also ongoing monitoring and supervision to ensure these changes are effective. For people with disabilities, access to physical environments, transportation systems, information, and public facilities is essential. Common barriers include inaccessible tourist environments, inadequate transportation services, language difficulties, and a general lack of awareness about the needs of people with disabilities within the tourism sector. At the core of accessible tourism is the philosophy of “independent living,” which emphasizes the need for disabled individuals to participate in tourism and leisure activities on their own terms. Achieving this requires a holistic adjustment of communication strategies, infrastructure, attitudes, and technologies to respect the abilities and independence of participants. By focusing on these areas, tourism services can become more inclusive, allowing people with disabilities to enjoy the same enriching travel experiences as others, while also opening up new opportunities for economic growth and social development.

4. LIMITATIONS

Traditional supply and demand models in tourism, and indeed many other industries, are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by more dynamic and hybrid models, such as the supply-demand framework proposed by Kwaśnicki (2003). In the modern digital marketplace, new economic phenomena have emerged, particularly in sectors like e-tourism. For example, digital copies, such as software, e-books, or travel guides, can often hold the same monetary value as original physical goods. Similarly, the sale of data sets, access to information, and licensing agreements are replacing traditional material goods in some sectors. This shift represents a profound transformation in how value is perceived and exchanged, particularly in industries closely tied to technology, such as tourism. The development of e-tourism is shaped by a combination of local and global factors. On a global scale, key influences include the ever-growing role of the Information Society, or Knowledge-Based Society, which emphasizes the importance of technological advancements and the digital economy. Tools such as smartphone apps, smartbands, and smartwatches—initially popular among niche groups like runners—have become integral to how consumers engage with tourism services. These advancements allow for improved service quality and the availability of low-cost, high-efficiency solutions, which align with broader global trends towards personalization and consumer empowerment (Kleer, 2009; Toffler, 2006).

The ability to identify each customer individually, monitor their needs, and semi-automatically personalize offers has revolutionized customer engagement. In fact, these global technological advancements allow businesses to cater to customers with the same level of detail and responsiveness once reserved for local interactions. As a result, from the customer's perspective, global factors—such as access to cutting-edge technologies, digital convenience, and tailored offerings—can feel as personalized as local factors. This blurring of the lines between global and local dynamics enables companies to build stronger identification with their customers by taking into account demographic trends, psychosocial profiles, and consumer openness to new solutions. At the same time, local factors remain crucial to the success of e-tourism. These are unique to particular areas, regions, or communities and include the local environment, cultural heritage, and economic conditions. However, with modern technology, local factors are no longer restricted to traditional constraints. Advances in digital

marketing, customer relationship management (CRM), and online communication have enhanced the ability of local communities to promote their unique tourism offerings effectively. The potential of each local area is no longer defined solely by physical resources or geographic appeal, but also by how well they integrate innovation and modern technologies into their tourism strategies. Local economic policies and institutional frameworks play a crucial role in this process, ensuring that local tourism industries can compete and thrive in a globally connected marketplace. Furthermore, e-tourism products often require a high degree of collaboration across various sectors and levels. This includes cooperation among governments, international agencies, tour operators, and local businesses, as well as specialized stakeholders such as persons with disabilities, their families, and care attendants. The success of e-tourism depends on these interconnections, which allow for the creation of inclusive, accessible, and innovative travel experiences. By engaging diverse groups of stakeholders, e-tourism can address a wide range of needs and preferences, making it more adaptive and responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities of the digital age. The intersection of global and local factors is reshaping the tourism industry, particularly through the lens of e-tourism. The hybrid supply-demand models being employed today offer new ways to connect with and serve customers by blending advanced technology with localized experiences. As e-tourism continues to evolve, it will likely become increasingly essential for companies to balance these global and local influences, fostering innovation and inclusivity while harnessing the potential of both digital and physical resources.

5. CONCLUSION

The development of the information society in Poland, along with related studies and the practical implementation of their findings, presents numerous untapped opportunities. The rise of digital technology and e-services has not only transformed how businesses operate but has also opened new avenues for growth, particularly in tourism. E-tourism, with its vast potential, is one such area where novel business models and innovative practices can be applied to meet the specific needs of various consumer groups, especially those with special requirements, such as individuals with disabilities or elderly travelers. The broader application of e-tourism to cater to these special needs creates exciting new possibilities for the development of local communities and the consumer market. By utilizing digital platforms, local businesses and tourism operators can better tailor their services to individual needs, offering more personalized and accessible experiences. This includes everything from virtual tours that allow people to explore destinations before traveling, to enhanced booking systems that accommodate specific accessibility requirements, or digital guides that assist travelers with mobility challenges in navigating new locations. Moreover, the integration of e-tourism into local economic strategies encourages community-driven tourism development. By adopting e-tourism solutions, local communities can leverage their unique cultural, historical, and environmental resources in ways that attract a broader audience, including those with special needs. This not only diversifies the local economy but also promotes inclusive tourism practices, fostering a more equitable and sustainable tourism industry. The proliferation of e-tourism also contributes to consumer empowerment by providing them with greater access to information, flexible options, and customized travel experiences.

Through the use of digital tools, consumers can more easily compare services, prices, and accommodations, making informed decisions that match their personal preferences and needs. This creates a more competitive market that pushes businesses to innovate and improve service quality continuously. Overall, the development of the information society in Poland and the application of e-tourism to address special needs offer significant opportunities for local community development and the expansion of the consumer market. By embracing these digital advancements, Poland can create more inclusive, accessible, and innovative tourism experiences that not only meet the specific needs of diverse travelers but also strengthen the economic and social fabric of local communities. This article serves as an introduction to further studies in the area of e-tourism and its role in meeting special needs and driving local community development. Several key perspectives and stakeholders are involved in this field, offering diverse insights and responsibilities. Among them are destination managers and policymakers, who play a critical role in shaping tourism strategies and ensuring that tourism infrastructures are inclusive and accessible. These stakeholders are essential in implementing policies that promote e-tourism and integrating digital solutions to enhance the tourism experience for all, including those with special requirements. Additionally, researchers and students, particularly those involved in tourism and hospitality programs, are key contributors to advancing knowledge in this area. They explore and analyze the evolving trends and challenges within the tourism sector, investigating how digital transformation, such as e-tourism, can be harnessed to meet the growing demand for accessible and personalized services.

These academic efforts help to identify best practices, potential barriers, and innovative models that can be adopted to optimize tourism offerings. As e-tourism continues to expand, collaboration between these stakeholders will be crucial in shaping the future of tourism and ensuring it is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to both global trends and local needs. Further studies will be needed to deepen the understanding of how digital technologies can be better utilized to meet special needs and foster regional development, contributing to a more equitable and competitive tourism industry. Moreover, there is a pressing need for deeper interdisciplinary studies that examine the crucial role played by communication and information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the tourism and hotel industry sectors, particularly in relation to e-tourism applications, technologies, and practices. As the tourism industry becomes increasingly digitalized, the ability to effectively communicate with customers through online platforms and the strategic use of ICTs becomes essential for enhancing customer experiences and meeting diverse needs. Several often-overlooked elements could significantly impact the success of e-tourism initiatives. For instance, the analysis of content quality is vital for ensuring that the information provided to

potential travelers is accurate, engaging, and relevant. High-quality content helps build trust and encourages customer engagement, while poor content can deter potential visitors. Additionally, online monitoring of the reputation of tourist destinations is becoming more important, as travelers increasingly rely on reviews, ratings, and social media feedback to make decisions. Destinations must actively manage their online presence to ensure that their reputation aligns with their service offerings and customer expectations. Furthermore, cultural translation and localization of messages are essential in ensuring that the content and communications used in e-tourism platforms are accessible and meaningful to international and diverse audiences. This includes adapting promotional materials, websites, and booking platforms to reflect cultural nuances, languages, and local customs, making them more user-friendly for global travelers. These practices not only enhance the customer experience but also open up destinations to a broader range of tourists. To address these emerging needs, there is a clear requirement for the development of new training courses aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of professionals within the tourism, hotel services, and hospitality sectors. These courses should focus on equipping workers with the ability to leverage new technologies, understand the importance of digital content and reputation management, and appreciate the nuances of cultural translation. By doing so, the industry can ensure that it is well-prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the growing field of e-tourism, fostering innovation and inclusivity across the sector. In conclusion, interdisciplinary studies and advanced training programs will be crucial in enabling the tourism and hospitality industries to fully capitalize on the potential of e-tourism. This approach will enhance the quality of service offerings, improve communication with diverse audiences, and create a more competitive and sustainable tourism landscape.

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