

Accommodation experience of visually impaired people

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<p>Visually impaired people are a customer segment that is often forgotten in the tourism industry, including accommodation businesses. This results in missing out on potential revenue for tourism businesses and visually impaired people feeling left out of tourism. In a world with increasing awareness about accessibility, this is a topic that should be given more attention.</p> <p>This thesis aims to analyse the current tourism experiences of visually impaired people in Finland, focusing on accommodation, and based on those, make suggestions on how to improve the situation. It also explores whether there is interest in accommodation primarily for visually impaired people.</p> <p>The first half of the theoretical framework introduces the topic of accessible tourism and considers it from multiple points of view. The second part discusses the role of senses in experiences, and how lacking one sense affects the whole experience.</p> <p>The research method used in the thesis is quantitative. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with visually impaired people who travel so that they use accommodation services at least sometimes. The interviews were done in November and December 2019.</p> <p>Based on the interviews, there are many aspects in the Finnish accommodation market that are in need of improvement. Accessibility is often thought of in terms of mobility-related disabilities, which means that visually impaired people frequently find it lacking. However, there is no significant interest in accommodation that is primarily targeted for visually impaired people as it makes them feel othered. Instead, there should be more focus on implementing universal design as it would benefit everyone, not just one customer segment.</p> <p>As there is currently a lack of research on the accommodation experiences of visually impaired people in Finland, it would be beneficial for accommodation providers and researchers alike to continue work on this topic.</p>	
Keywords Visual impairment, hospitality experiences, accessibility, accommodation	

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1 Introduction

As the accommodation industry grows, all kinds of special hotels and accommodation businesses with varying target groups and services are being opened. There's the Henna hotel in Japan where all the employees are robots, Zoku, where the bed is no longer the center of the room, and many more. However, many of the new innovations in the accommodation field rely heavily on visual effects to differentiate themselves from the competition. This raises some questions.

Is the way a hotel looks the most important part of it? Why aren't other senses used as much in delivering accommodation experiences to guests? What does the emphasis on visuality mean to visually impaired guests? If you can't even see the elements that make the hotel special, does it really matter where you're staying?

The inspiration for this thesis came from observing accommodation businesses in Finland and how many of them seem to overlook blind people as a customer segment. The author wanted to analyse what accommodation businesses are already doing, and what kind of changes blind customers themselves are hoping for to make their accommodation experiences more enjoyable.

The main objective of the thesis is to analyse, and based on the analysis, give suggestions on how blind people could be better taken into consideration as a customer segment when designing new accommodation businesses. In order to find out how, there are research questions that the thesis answers.

- What is the present accommodation experience of visually impaired people?
- How does the emphasis on visual effects in hotel design affect the accommodation experience of blind people?
- Is there a lack of independence in traveling when blind or visually impaired?
- Is there a need or interest for a hotel for blind people in Finland?

Early on, the author decided to limit the thesis in that it only explores accommodation experiences from the point of view of visually impaired customers, employees are not included. Deaf and hard of hearing people were also left out, even though their inclusion was considered for a time. Another limit is that the thesis focuses only on the Finnish accommodation market, although the results might be relevant for the global market as well.

To learn about the actual lived experiences of blind and visually impaired people, interviews are the best way to collect data. The author contacted Näkövammaisten liitto to find interviewees and got eight people to participate. Setting up the interviews and conducting them was relatively quick, taking less than month as a whole. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning there were topics that the author wanted to include in every interview, but the interviewees were also allowed to make free comments that weren't covered by the questions. The questions used in the interviews are included as appendices.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: the first part after the introduction is the theoretical framework, which is divided into two sections, accessible tourism and senses as part of experience. The latter also includes discussion of what it means for an experience when a person lacks one sense, in this case sight. The theory is followed by the empirical part, which includes description of the methodology as well as the actual research results. The final part is the discussion which consists of consideration of the results, suggestions for future work and evaluating the thesis process itself.

2 Accessible tourism

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), an estimated 15% of the world's population, about 1 billion people, lives with a disability of some kind (2016). The number is higher than WHO's previous estimate from the 1970s, when it was about 10%, and will likely continue to increase due to the aging of population and the measuring methodologies of disabilities becoming more accurate and reliable. As such, taking accessibility into consideration also within the tourism industry will be of increasing importance in the future.

There is no one universally accepted definition of accessible tourism (also referred to as universal tourism and inclusive tourism). Darcy & Dickson (2009, 34) define accessible tourism as follows: "[it] enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments". This definition also includes families with babies, pregnant people, and senior citizens, who often have limited mobility and therefore benefit from the same kinds of services and products as physically disabled people. Buhalis & Darcy (2011) added onto this definition by specifying that it includes both permanent and temporary disabilities. Furthermore, the goal of accessible tourism should be to deliver a comprehensive accessible experience that takes into account all stakeholders' perspectives (Buhalis, Darcy & Ambrose 2012, 13).

There are other definitions that are not based on Darcy and Dickson's. For instance, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) defines accessible tourism as "tourism and travel that is accessible to all people, with disabilities or not, including those with mobility, hearing, sight, cognitive, or intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, older persons and those with temporary disabilities" (2009). According to Gómez (2002, in Alén, Dominguez & Losada 2012, 145), accessible tourism can be defined as "the variety of activities occurring during the free time devoted to tourism by people with restricted capacities, which enables them to fully integrate their functional and psychological perspectives and achieve individual satisfaction and social development".

While accessible tourism has not quite become a mainstream topic yet, there are several organisations trying to raise awareness about it. The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states that accessibility should be a "central part of any responsible and sustainable tourist policy for all tourist facilities, products, and services" (UNWTO website). UNWTO's General Assembly has adopted several resolutions, declarations and recommendations on accessibility to make it a wider known issue, the latest in 2013. The European Network for Accessible Tourism (from here on referred to as ENAT) was established in 2006 and has been

working to promote accessibility in tourism within Europe since then (ENAT website). The European Commission is also “committed to increasing accessibility in travel through a number of actions” (European Commission website).

On UNWTO’s World Tourism Day 2016, the theme was Tourism for All – Promoting Universal Accessibility. The purpose was to remind everyone that disabled people deserve to have the experiences traveling offers just as much as everyone else, and to bring awareness to the lack of accessibility tourism still has in many places (UNWTO website).

Since the importance of accessibility in tourism is already recognised and there are measures to increase it, why isn’t it yet the norm? Eichhorn & Buhalis (2011, 51) identify three barriers to accessible tourism: physical access constraints, attitudinal barriers and lack of information.

The accessibility of the physical environment in tourism destinations primarily affects those with mobility disabilities, and the more severe the disability, the more important physical accessibility becomes (Eichhorn & Buhalis 2011, 51; Burnett & Bender Baker 2001, 10). Making sure a tourism destination is accessible also means ensuring accessible transportation to the location. Disabled customers prioritise travel infrastructure of high quality (Zsarnoczky 2017, 37). After all, the experience as a whole cannot be considered fully accessible if some steps of the customer journey aren’t (European Commission 2014a, 4). How could someone in a wheelchair enjoy, say, a historical site they cannot safely and comfortably get to?

However, having an accessible physical environment isn’t enough if staff members do not greet guests with accessibility needs with appropriate respect. In fact, attitude is the reason behind lack of accessibility more often than inadequate physical resources (Bowtell 2015, 207-208; McKercher, Packer, Yau & Lam 2003, 469). There are negative perceptions of disability by the able-bodied population which influence both decisions on building construction and the way disabled people get treated (Eichhorn & Buhalis 2011, 55). Some travel agents even believe that any disability, no matter how mild, “effectively excludes people from traveling” (McKercher & al. 2003, 470). Muloin (1992, in Eichhorn & Buhalis 2011, 56) goes as far as to claim that these negative attitudes are the “roof of all barriers to outdoor participation for persons with a disability”.

On the other hand, guests with accessibility needs tend to be loyal when they find an establishment that treats them right (Burnett & Bender Baker 2001, 11; Department for Cul-

ture, Media and Sport 2010, 3; Darcy 1998). Disabled guests want destinations to be “sensitive to their needs while not being patronizing” and would travel significantly more if there were more disability-friendly destinations (Burnett & Bender Baker 2001, 10). Guest satisfaction in customer service also contributes to increased revenue (Zsarnoczky 2017, 33).

The most effective way to get staff to do better on accessibility needs is training them (European Commission 2014a, 11). The training should be implemented not only for front office employees but also for management. At the moment, there aren't many places that offer such training. However, in 2011, ENAT launched a program called European Training Certificate - Access for All in the Tourism Sector (ETCAATS). The program consists of an online training platform, after which it's possible to get face-to-face training from one of ENAT's training partners across Europe, and its aim is to “provide a Europe-wide reference for future training courses in accessible tourism, leading to a moderated, effective and efficient delivery and certification of access training in the tourism sector” (ENAT 2009).

Another sign of accessible tourism becoming more recognised is that the European Union (EU) has even made it part of their official tourism strategy for 2020 to increase training on accessible tourism (figure 1). According to this strategy, the first step is to estimate the current demand and to make forecasts about the future, and to then constantly monitor the demand for changes. The second step is to map out the needed job and skill requirements and then offer EU-wide support in training staff accordingly. The third step is to monitor the quality of the accessible tourism supply to ensure the quality is high enough and consistent across the union. Of course, these measures would only be taken into use within the EU, so while they set a very good standard for accessible tourism, it might take a while before accessibility is at an equal level everywhere globally.

ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN THE EU TOURISM 2020 STRATEGY



Figure 1. The EU tourism strategy 2020 (European Commission 2014a)

However, the process of accessibility-sensitive training could be started even before entering the work force. Being educated about disability during tourism studies could change attitudes towards disabled people. A study by Bizjak, Knežević & Cvetrežnik proved that already short lectures about the topic showed statistically significant positive differences in tourism students' attitudes towards disabled people (2010, 852). Therefore, classes on how to service customers with accessibility needs for tourism and hospitality students might be the key to increasing accessible tourism in the future, at least by increasing positive attitudes towards disabled travelers.

Eichhorn & Buhalis are not the only ones who have reported on lack of information being a barrier to accessible tourism. Pühretmair & Buhalis (2006, 970) found that missing or inaccessible accessibility information is often at the core of why products or services do not attract tourists with accessibility needs and their market potential remains untapped. Many people with accessibility needs would travel more if information about accessible destinations was easier to find (Burnett & Bender Baker 2001, 10). Visually impaired people often have to rely on their travel companions to gather information prior to the trip as it isn't accessible for them (Packer, Small & Darcy 2007, 19).

Accessibility information should be easy to find with other information about the facilities and services and detailed enough that customers with access needs will for sure know whether a destination is suitable for them or not (Project NEWS CAT 2019). Many countries

include accessibility info on websites aimed at inbound tourists (e.g. Visit Finland). However, websites that collect data of accessible travel destinations all around the world make the information easy to access and compare to find the most suitable option. One such website is Pantou, managed by ENAT, which was created to answer to “the need for a reliable and comprehensive international guide to all kinds of accessible tourism services” (Pantou 2017). The Pantou website has a register of accessible tourism suppliers that any tourism provider can apply for, and if a company is on the registry, customers with accessibility needs can be sure it’s not false advertising, as all accepted tourism suppliers must adhere to the defined and verified criteria referred to as Accessibility Information Schemes (AIS). The AIS vary somewhat by country, although there are also international ones.

The internet is not the only means of spreading information. Visually impaired people feel a sense of security when they receive information verbally (Poria, Reichel & Brandt 2010). This could be achieved by calling a hotel to ask about their accessibility features, for example. Word of mouth is another effective way to share information since people with accessibility needs often rely on others’ recommendations when planning their trips (Zsarnoczky 2017, 37).

Catering to customers with accessibility needs is at its core no different from targeting any other specific customer group. In fact, dividing the market into groups where people have similar needs and wants allows tourism businesses to understand what is important to consumers and therefore create unique products and services (Buhalis, Eichhorn, Michopoulou & Miller 2005, 51). Thinking of customers with accessibility needs as a customer segment might reduce the stigma and make tourism providers more willing to cater to them as a means of increasing their profit. At the moment accessible tourism is still rare enough that providing it gives a chance of gaining a competitive advantage (Buhalis & al. 2005, 51).

There is a stereotype that people with disabilities have “significantly less disposable income and are more likely to be dependent on a pension” than the general population (Luiza 2010, 1155), and as a result many tourism providers don’t see them as a viable market segment. In reality, the situation is quite different. In a study conducted by the University of Surrey (2014), it was found that the European Union was losing billions in potential revenue due to lacking resources in accessible travel. The total value of the accessible travel market in Europe is estimated to go up to 88,6 billion euros by 2025, an increase of 65% from 2005 (Bowtell 2015, 210). As many as 70% per cent of the population with accessibility needs have both the financial as well as the physical capabilities to travel (Bowtell 2015, 203). Project NEWSCAT (2019) found that with improvements to accessibility, the total economic

contribution generated by EU tourists with access needs could increase by approximately 36% compared to the current situation.

It is true, however, that most disabled people are careful with their financial decisions, even if they have money to spare (Burnett and Bender Baker 2001, 10). They are also mindful of the cost-value ratio (Zsarnoczky 2017, 37). Conversely, travelers with accessibility needs are more likely to travel with someone, an average of 1,9 companions (Project NEWSCHAT 2019), and stay an average of four days as opposed to the average three of the general population (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2010, 3), which means that they bring in more revenue per trip than the general population.

In 2012, 51.8% of disabled people in the EU made day trips and 58.1% overnight trips (European Commission 2014b). 97.5% of the day trips were either domestic (87.1%) or to another EU country (10.4%). Of the overnight stays, 87.5% were either domestic (60.1%) or within the EU (27.4%). Out of all EU citizens, 49.1% made trips of 4 nights or longer in 2012 (Statista 2019). In 2015, the percentage of EU citizens aged 15 and over participating in tourism had gone up to 61.4, with an average stay of 5.1 nights (UNWTO 2018).

From a legal standpoint, accessible tourism is also a human rights issue. Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is “[to] enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance” (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006). Not providing accessibility features in a tourism destination, including accommodation businesses, violates this article.

In the EU, in addition to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the main accessibility regulations that are followed are The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET), Council of Europe recommendation on ageing and disability, Council of Europe resolution on universal design to achieve full participation, Committee of the Ministers recommendation on the action plan to promote the rights and participation of the disabled, and European Commission regulation on rights of disabled people in air travel. Furthermore, each member country also has their own national laws (European Commission website).

In Finland, there is no national legislation specifically about accessible tourism. There are, however, other regulations on accessibility, for instance Valtioneuvoston asetus rakennuksen esteettömydestä (241/2017). This decree has been enforced since March 2018 and defines the minimum accessibility requirements building projects in Finland must meet,

which does have an impact on accessible tourism as well as it affects accommodation providers' ability to ensure accessibility at their properties.

Currently, accessibility in hotels is still seen as something of an extra service or luxury, not an in-built feature. That doesn't mean it has to stay that way, especially considering this kind of change has been previously seen in other services provided by hotels. In early 2000s, wi-fi was just starting to spread into use in hotels. Only after the first iPhone was released in 2007 did wi-fi start being commonly offered in hotels (Eleven software 26 June 2018). It wasn't always a given that it was included in the room rate though. In a matter of few years, wi-fi became a critical factor to customer satisfaction and retention (Lee & Tusyadiah 2010). Accessibility should go through the same process to ensure everyone equal tourism opportunities.

To fulfil the criteria of accessible tourism, there must infrastructure with easy access as well as a variety of accessible products provided by tourism suppliers (Bowtell 2015, 207). This could be achieved by implementing universal design. It is defined as "design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design 2008). Universal design benefits everyone regardless of age, size and abilities, not just disabled people. As the name suggests, universal design would entail thinking about accessibility already in the design phase rather than when the space is already in use. This would keep the cost of construction down as accessibility would be an in-built feature rather than an added service.

The problem with universal design is that there are a wide variety of disabilities, and therefore catering to everyone's needs is difficult. Buhalis & Darcy (2011) state that it is central to accessible tourism to understand the heterogeneity of access needs. However, some hotel chains in Finland are already making efforts to be able to cater to as wide an audience as possible.

The Finnish S Group, a network of companies in the retail and service sectors, has a responsibility programme called Best Place to Live which was launched in 2017. It consists of 100 acts that affect environment and society, both "small everyday improvements and acts that are ground-breaking even on an international scale" (S Group 2017). The programme is operating in its current state until the end of 2020, and its results are monitored and reported on annually. At the end of 2018, one third of the acts had been implemented and roughly half were proceeding according to plan.

As part of the programme, their hotel chain Sokos Hotels is undergoing an inspection with the aim of increasing accessibility. The entire customer journey is mapped out with the help of representatives from disability organisations. The changes are not going to be implemented all at once but rather little by little over time, however, in future Sokos Hotel projects accessibility will be taken into consideration already during the planning phase (S Group 2017).

Scandic, the largest hotel operator in the Nordic region, has had an accessibility director since 2003. In addition, Scandic is doing a lot more for accessibility than many other big chains, and has won several awards for it, the latest in 2018. Their efforts include considering accessibility already when planning new hotels and having accessible rooms in every hotel. Scandic is also the first hotel chain in the world to offer detailed accessibility information on every single hotel on their web page and to launch online training on disability. This training is available for everyone who visits the Scandic website, not just staff members or guests staying at their hotels (Scandic hotels website).

However, as stated before, having accessible accommodation isn't enough if there is no accessible transportation to the destination. Most public transportation providers in Finland offer some accessibility services as long as they are informed of accessibility needs before the trip (Invalidiliitto 2019). For more international travel, the EU Disability Card was taken into use in Finland in June 2018. The purpose of the card is to make it easier for disabled people to prove their disability status and their need for an assistant, for example in public transport or at cultural and sports events when traveling within the EU (Kela 2018).

Despite all these measures towards accessibility, Finnish travel agencies seems to focus only on mobility disabilities when discussing accessible travel. For instance, Tjäreborg lists accessible destinations on their website, however, only for mobility-related disabilities (Tjäreborg website). Aurinkomatkat, another popular Finnish travel agency, only has a page about mobility-related accessibility (Aurinkomatkat website). Apollomatkat has a page titled accessible travel, but again the only accessibility features mentioned are for wheelchair users (Apollomatkat website). Kaleva Travel has no information about accessibility on their website at all (Kaleva Travel website).

There are no official statistics on how many disabled people there are in Finland, and the numbers vary quite drastically depending on the source. Only 7% of working-age Finns receive disability benefits but one study from 2012 found the number of disabled Finns aged 16-64 to be as high as 29% (THL-blogi 10 March 2016).

In 2018, 91% of Finns aged 15-84 made at least one leisure trip. Of the people who didn't travel at all, about one third said they had no interest in traveling as the reason not to travel, a bit under one third cited health, and 19% financial reasons (Tilastokeskus 2019). Given that the chance of disabled people falling into poverty is about 10 times more likely than the general population (Teittinen 2018), it is quite likely that a significant amount of the people who don't travel due to financial reasons are disabled or have a disabled family member.

Many people use the internet nowadays to book their trips. For disabled people, even that can be a problem as many websites have not been designed to be accessible. However, in the EU, there is a web accessibility directive 2016/2102 that has been in force since 22 December 2016. According to the directive, all websites created after 23 September 2018 are required to have become accessible to all disabled people by 23 September 2019. Sites created before 23 September 2018 need to be accessible by 23 September 2020, and mobile apps by 23 June 2021 (Valtiovarainministeriö 2019). Directives like this can be a step in the direction of making traveling more accessible for many people with accessibility needs.

3 Senses as part of experience

There are several definitions for the word experience. Gupta & Vajic define experience as “the outcome of participation in a set of activities within a social context” (2000, 3). According to Caru & Cova (2007, 40), an experience is “a subjective episode that customers live through when they interact with a company’s product or service offer”. Bateson (1995, in Zehrer 2009, 335) holds a similar view; “when a customer purchases a service, they purchase an “experience”, which is created in the service operation of a service organisation”.

According to Scott, Gao & Ma (2017, 7), in an experience there is a process of “cognition and appraisal [that] stands between perception of sensory stimuli and consequent psychological outcomes or reactions”. These outcomes can be feelings, learning or evaluation of value, for instance. An experience could also be seen as “normal processes of consciousness”, as the “process of attention, perception, cognitive appraisal, emotion elicitation, reaction and memory” (Scott & al. 2017, 9) is the same as that which takes place every moment of normal life.

A general framework for the process of an on-site experience, or the psychological model of a tourist experience (Scott & al. 2017, 8), can be seen in figure 2. The first step of the process is prospection, or the anticipation of the experience. The next step is customer inputs. These are the motivation and goals of the visitor, which influence their interest and engagement in, absorption of, and what they pay attention to during the experience. These are driven by cultural background, recalled stories, attitudes and attributes, as well as symbols that are relevant to the context and prior knowledge (Scott & al. 2017, 8).

The stage of co-creation process is where the experience actually takes place. In on-site experiences, visitors always engage in the co-creation process at more or less intensity (Scott & al. 2017, 8). In practice this means that service providers cannot sell a ready-made experience, but rather set the stage for customers to create their own experiences (Huang & Hsu 2007, 80-81). This is also the stage where all the relevant stimuli are perceived and appraised according to the customer inputs. In theory, the variety of customer inputs could result in two people of different backgrounds potentially having entirely different recollections of the same experience.

The immediate outcome of an experience is emotional, spiritual, psychological or learning, and for this to be remembered, it needs to be encoded into memory (Scott & al. 2017, 8). More emotional experiences are easier to remember; only a small amount of experiences go from short-term memory to long-term memory, and these are referred to as memorable

experiences. The long-term outcomes of an experience are therefore memories connected to a place and the perceived value of an experience.

The last step of the psychological model of a tourist experience is retrospection. Even after returning home, customers “continue to imagine, to re-live their experiences and the images built, neglecting some aspects (positive or negative), but nevertheless creating their own stories of the holiday” (Matos, Mendes & Pinto 2015, 145). However, only the experiences that have moved into long-term memory can be looked back on, and therefore the last step does not apply to all experiences.

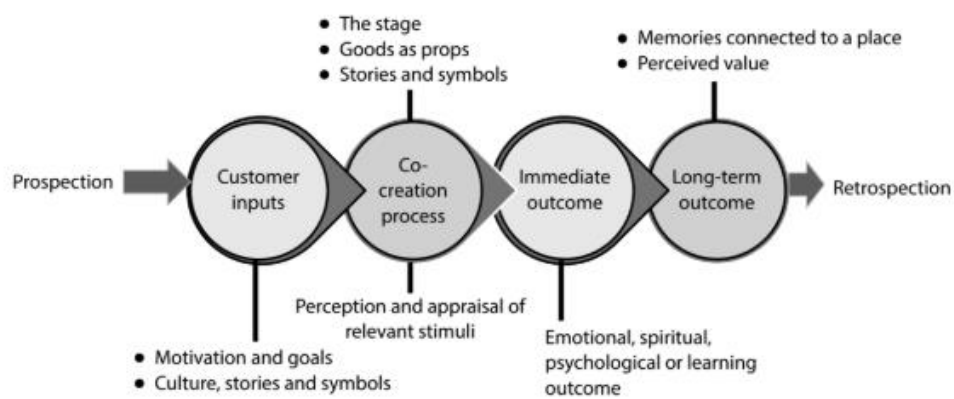


Figure 2. Psychological model of a tourist experience (Scott et al. 2017, 8)

Service providers have focused on creating satisfying and memorable customer experiences for a long time (Zehrer 2009, 333). Humans have five basic senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Appealing to as many of them as possible is an important factor in creating positive, memorable guest experiences (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 104). Of course, depending on the type of business, the focus should be on different senses. A restaurant should put more effort into taste than a travel agency, for instance. That doesn't mean a restaurant should only think about taste; background music that doesn't fit the overall theme of the restaurant can be just the thing that makes an otherwise enjoyable night unpleasant (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 103).

However, using multiple senses is not just about the enjoyability of an experience. It can also have an impact on how engaged a customer is, and thereby affect the memorability of it. This is supported by the theory of the four realms of an experience, introduced by Pine & Gilmore (1998).

Pine & Gilmore are internationally recognised business thought leaders who pioneered the concept of experience economy in the late 1990s. Studying and exploring these ideas live with clients around the world since then have given them “unparalleled levels of insight into the nature of staging experiences and the evolution of how companies provide value” (Strategic Horizons 2019), and their work is still used as learning material by many who work in the experience industry or research it.

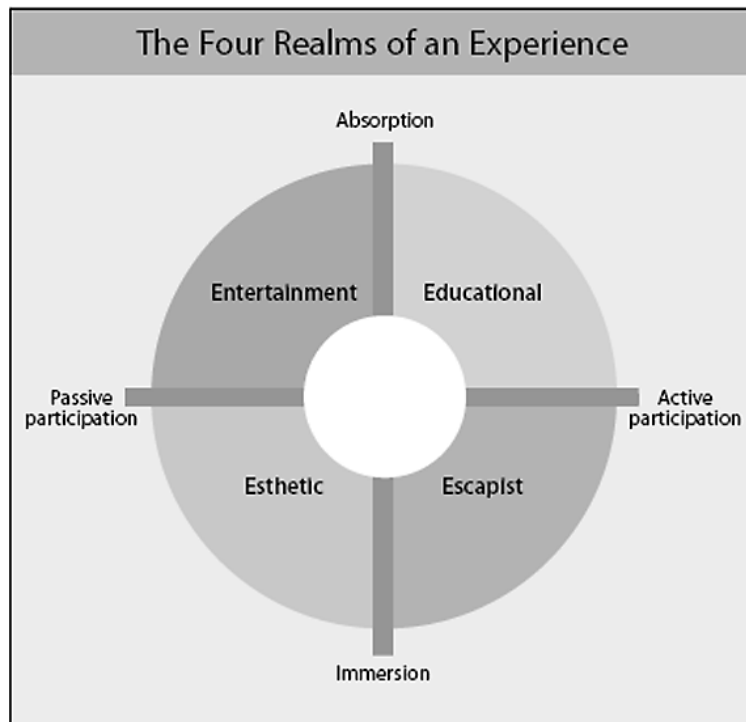


Figure 3. The four realms of an experience (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

According to Pine & Gilmore, experiences can be thought to have two dimensions, customer participation and connection to the experience (see figure 3). Customer participation can be passive, where the customer doesn't affect the experience in any way but rather passively spectates it. The other end is active participation, where customers play an active role in the creation of an experience.

Connection is about the environmental relationship a customer has to an experience. Someone spectating a sports event from the back of the audience would be absorbing it, whereas someone standing in the field would get all of their senses engaged and therefore be immersed (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 102).

The intersections of these two dimensions create the four realms. An experience where the participants are passive and absorbed is entertainment, for example watching television, whereas a passive but immersive one is aesthetic, like attending an art exhibition. An active

but absorbed experience, such as taking a class, is educational; finally, active and immersive experiences are escapist. This would, for example, include acting in a play (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 102).

For a fully immersive experience, it's important that as many senses as possible are being stimulated, ideally all five. In fact, Pine & Gilmore say that engaging all five senses is a key design element for memorable experiences (1998, 104). This is not only to support and enhance the theme of the experience but also to improve its memorability. Engaging all senses can be what separates a business from its competitors, both in good and in bad.

Pine & Gilmore are not the only ones to acknowledge the importance of senses in an experience. The experience pyramid (figure 4) helps to “analyse and understand the experience content of products in the tourism, cultural and entertainment industries alike” (Tarssanen 2009). In the experience pyramid, multi-sensory experience is listed as one element of a meaningful experience, similar to Pine & Gilmore’s views. However, for Tarssanen, the other elements are individuality, authenticity, story, contrast and interaction.

Multisensory perception is about tying all the senses into the experience. This improves immersion as well as strengthens the story. However, it is important to make sure the sensory experiences complement each other, otherwise the whole customer experience may suffer from the clash.

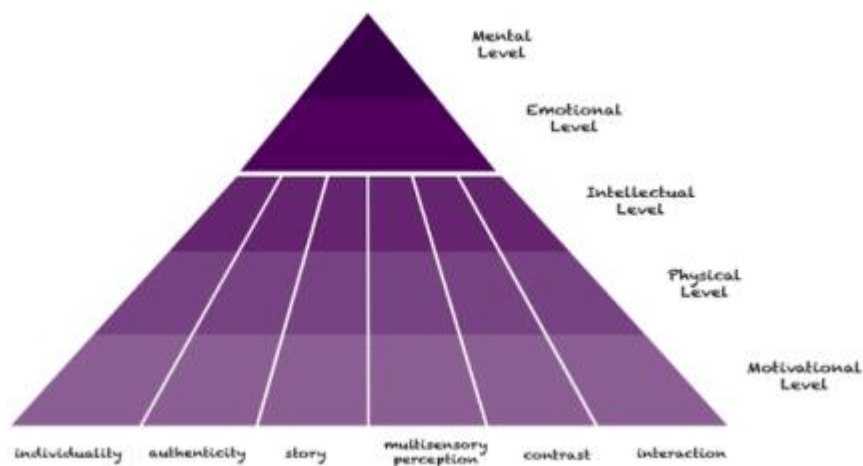


Figure 4. The experience pyramid (Tarssanen 2009)

Individuality is about the uniqueness of the experience, in that it's not available elsewhere. It also means that the product is almost endlessly customisable according to the customers'

preferences. A highly individual experience or product is often quite expensive to produce, but it's also something that customers are willing to pay more for (Tarssanen 2009).

A product or experience is authentic if the customer considers it credible and genuine. Story is closely related to the authenticity. The point of a story is to bind the elements of the experience into a coherent narrative. A good story gives the experience added value in social significance and content. The story justifies what is done and in which order, and it adds an intellectual and emotional level to the experience (Tarssanen 2009).

A successful experience has contrast between the customer's everyday life and the experience. It should be something out of the ordinary, which means also taking cultural background into consideration. After all, what is new and exciting for someone might be mundane and boring to another (Tarssanen 2009).

Interaction means "successful communication between the service provider and/or other customers, as well as between the product and its producers" (Tarssanen 2009). Experiencing something together with others and being able to share it afterwards creates additional value to the experience.

The experience pyramid also acknowledges how the customer experience is "constructed from interest to the actual experience and to the conscious processing of it" (Tarssanen 2009). In the experience pyramid, the first level is motivational. This is where the customer first becomes interested in the experience. Next is physical, the part where a person actually takes in the experience through the senses. On the intellectual level, the customer decides whether they are satisfied with the experience or not. The emotional level is where the meaningfulness of the experience is determined based on the emotional reaction, which is the most difficult to predict or for an outsider to affect. Finally, there is the mental level, which is the post-experience permanent change in a person. These levels are very similar as the stages of the psychological model of a tourist experience by Scott & al. (2017). However, while Scott & al. put more emphasis on the pre-experience process, Tarssanen splits the processing of the experience itself into two, the physical and intellectual.

Considering all these elements when designing an experience can lead to an amazing one-time experience, but also create customer loyalty. Hultén (2011, 269) argues that multi-sensory brand experience should be the basis for brand building and brand identity in creating image and loyalty. Stimulating the senses reinforces positive feeling and generates value to the customer as the experience reaches the hearts and minds of tourists (Agapito & Mendes 2013, 8).

If multisensory experiences are the most memorable, what happens when you don't have all five senses? According to Hultén, Broweus & van Dijk (2009), sight is often considered the most powerful sense for discovering changes and differences in the environment and is the most common sense in perceiving goods or services. Therefore, it follows that if someone doesn't have the use of their sight, whether temporarily or permanently, it greatly affects their whole experience. However, there isn't much research on the topic, perhaps because of the assumption that visually impaired people don't engage in tourist activities (Poria & al. 2010, 150).

First, it's important to define 'visual impairment'. It is an umbrella term, including both low vision and blindness. Low vision is defined as "visual acuity of less than 6/18 but equal to or better than 3/60, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 20°, in the better eye with the best possible correction" (WHO 2007, 1). Visual acuity "indicates the sharpness or clarity of vision" (American Foundation for the Blind 2015). A visual acuity measurement of 6/18 means that a person with 6/18 vision who is 6 meters from an eye chart sees what a person with unimpaired, or 6/6, vision can see from 18 meters away. The definition of blindness is "visual acuity of less than 3/60, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 10°, in the better eye with the best possible correction" (WHO 2007, 1).

Globally there are approximately 2,2 billion people with visual impairments (WHO 2019). In Finland, the number of blind or visually impaired people is approximately 60 000 (Näkövammaisten liitto ry 2019, 4). Based on the age distribution of the people who register as visually impaired, about 50 000 are senior citizens, less than 10 000 are working age, and younger than that account for a few thousand. With the aging of the population, it is expected that the number will increase in the future (WHO 2019).

Despite the issues that come with it, visually impaired people can and do travel. Not being able to enjoy visual experiences when traveling is an issue in and of itself (Devile & Kastenholz 2018, 14). However, not having sight doesn't mean one can't enjoy the atmosphere of a destination at all; instead, blind tourists rely on their other senses to savour a tourist experience (Small, Darcy & Packer 2012, 944).

Another common problem for blind tourists is feeling anxious and insecure due to a lack of sense of control when in an unfamiliar environment (Devile & Kastenholz 2018, 14). Blind people often learn to navigate spaces by memory (Richards, Pritchard & Morgan 2010, 1110), so being in a completely new environment is understandably a stressful experience. This anxiousness about the unknown builds before the trip and intensifies before departure,

staying throughout the trip as accessibility is an issue at every new location (Small & al. 2012, 944-945).

The lack of accessible cues often limits visually impaired people's independence in traveling as well as their access to urban opportunities (Marston & Golledge 23-26 May 2004, 2). One method of making it easier for visually impaired people to move from one place to another on their own is multisensory wayfinding, which "[interprets] layered information tied to a place that can't be discovered relying solely on vision" (Iacofano & Malhotra 2019). While wayfinding is always a multisensory experience, sight is the most commonly used sense as well as the most useful. For instance, one must be relatively close to the source of a sound to effectively utilise it for wayfinding, while people generally can see things both at a distance and near to them (NHS Estates 2005, 18). Also, most of the time wayfinding is set up very visually with "static, two-dimensional signs, symbols and typography on signposts, walls and buildings in the urban space" (Engholm & Harrestrup 1-7 July 2012), which are obviously inaccessible for visually impaired people. However, with the development of technology, this traditional wayfinding could be supplemented or entirely replaced by multisensory, digital means (Engholm & Harrestrup 1-7 July 2012), offering even visually impaired people the chance for independent wayfinding.

Since multisensory wayfinding is a relatively new concept and is therefore not available everywhere, easing the sense of not being oriented while travelling could be achieved by traveling with at least one companion. However, this commonly leads to blind people feeling like a burden on their friends and family because they can't travel on their own, as well lack of independence (Devile & Kastenholz 2018, 13). Some have relied on helpful strangers while traveling but on the other hand, that means having to put one's trust in someone they just met (Small & al. 2012, 946) and it doesn't provide any more independence than traveling with a friend or family member.

Another social component is sighted people thinking a blind person wouldn't enjoy traveling and it makes no difference where they are since they can't see anyway (Richards & al. 2010, 1106; Devile & Kastenholz 2018, 13). These types of comments can lead to feelings of decreased value and worth and exclusion to the point of making some visually impaired people not travel at all (Richards et al. 2010, 1107; Small & al. 2012, 945). Also, the obviousness of visual impairment affects others' behaviour and attitudes. Packer & al. (2007, 21) found that those who were visibly visually impaired, e.g. they had a guide dog or used a cane, received worse treatment than those who didn't 'appear' to be disabled, which sometimes led to them feeling humiliated and disrespected.

Besides the social barriers, the physical environments can have negative impacts on visually impaired travellers' experiences. For instance, one interviewee remarked that "hotels are set up visually, not 'auditorily'", which makes it harder to access information and move around when blind (Packer & al. 2007, 19). However, there are facilitators that could help blind people navigate in hotels, such as information in Braille on room doors and lifts, differentiated floors and sound system in the lifts announcing which floor it is as the doors open, whether the lift is going up or down etc. (Deville & Kastenholz 2018, 15).

Even tourism marketing has been neglecting the significant role of senses other than sight during consumption experiences, even though tourism products are multi-sensory by nature (Gretzel & Fesenmaier 2004, 2). Tourism marketers should capture the essence of all of the destination's sensory experiences (Ditoiu & Căruntu 2014, 301), as relying on only text and pictures can create incorrect product expectations due to its limitations in conveying a complete picture (Gretzel & Fesenmaier 2004, 2). Instead, the destination branding process should focus on developing sensory experiences for a five-dimensional end result (Ditoiu & Căruntu 2014, 301), that is, an experience that takes into account all five senses.

Just like any other customer segment, blind people are a diverse group, and do not all have the same needs or consumer behaviour, not to mention that there are many different visual impairments and eye conditions, therefore their travel patterns and preferences also vary (Cantero 2018, 124; Richards & al. 2010, 1106). Despite this, sighted people often treat people with visual impairment as a homogenous group who is entirely characterised by their impairment rather than it being just one part of their identities (Richards & al. 2010, 1106).

However, blind tourists' preferences don't necessarily even deviate from those of sighted people. People with visual impairments "stay in the same types of accommodation, use the same transport, go to similar attractions and engage in similar activities" as people who have no visual impairments (Small & al. 2012, 944).

Traveling can be scary for anyone, but especially for visually impaired people (Packer et al. 2007, 18). One interviewee who had lost their sight due to old age said that enjoyment had been taken out of travelling because they could no longer see (Small & al. 2012, 944). Experiences such as this highlight importance of tourist destinations addressing senses other than sight, offering tourist experiences that are accessible for all (Agapito & Mendes 2013, 13-14). Investing in accessible tourism would improve the traveling experiences of visually impaired people, as many of their negative feelings about travel are related to lack of accessibility (Packer et al. 2007, 22).

4 Research

The next chapter describes the empirical research process of the thesis. This includes introducing the chosen research method and the reasons behind that choice, as well as the data collecting process and results of the research.

The aim of this thesis, as stated in the introduction, is to analyse visually impaired people's current accommodation experiences and then give suggestions on how accommodation businesses could improve their services to better cater to visually impaired people. This objective is to be reached with the help of the research questions.

4.1 Methodology

For this thesis, the chosen research approach is qualitative. Qualitative research approach is used to get a personal perspective of a condition, experience or event or when investigating a specific group's behaviour in a specific setting (Grbich 2007, 4; Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey 2016, 499). Also, Creswell (2003, 22) states that in situations where more information is needed on a topic, qualitative research approach is the best choice. There is currently not much research available on blind and visually impaired people's accommodation experiences, especially in Finland, which is another reason for why qualitative approach was chosen for this thesis.

The three most common qualitative research methods are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey 2005, 2). For this thesis, it was logical to choose interviews for the method because they offer large amounts of in-depth data (Frances, Coughlan & Cronin 2009, 313): insight into people's personal feelings, opinions and experiences and how they interpret and navigate the world (Mack & al. 2005, 30). As the thesis is about visually impaired people's real-life accommodation experiences, it makes sense to choose a method that best suits the purpose.

However, there are also limitations with using interviews as a research method. Firstly, finding interviewees and setting up the interviews might take a lot of effort (Morris 2015, 7). Taking too long to find interviewees could delay the whole research process, in worst-case scenario even resulting in missing the deadline. Additionally, the interview itself might be long, and if the interview has been recorded, transcribing it afterwards is also a time-consuming process (Morris 2015, 7). Another option is to hire someone else to do the transcribing, however, that can be expensive. There is also the matter of possible bias of the interviewer and how the questions are posed (Frances et al. 2009, 312). The questions should

not be leading to avoid the interviewees only repeating what the interviewer wants them to say (Webb 2018, 2) or too complex so the interviewees don't have to struggle to remember the whole question (Maykut & Morehouse 1994, 93).

After choosing the research method, the next step was coming up with the interview questions. The questions for the visually impaired interviewees were written first; the idea to interview staff members came later. The interviews are semi-structured, that is, there is a set of topics that need to be covered but there is also room for digressing and the style of the interview is more conversational (Morris 2015, 10).

The interviewees could choose between conducting the interview face-to-face, over the phone or Skype, and email. There were eight interviews, of which one was done by email, one face-to-face, and the rest over the phone. The interview that was done by email was already in writing and the face-to-face interview was recorded and transcribed afterwards. However, for the phone interviews the author had to rely on taking notes because it wasn't possible to record the calls.

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2019 and were 20-45 minutes in length. All of the interviews were done in Finnish, although it would have been possible to use English or Swedish as well. The interview questions are included at the end (see Appendix 1).

The interview request for the visually impaired respondents was originally sent to a PR manager in Näkövammaisten liitto, who then forwarded it to a forum aimed at visually impaired users. The author was contacted by eight people who were interested in participating, ages 24-65, and the interviews were set up quite quickly. The interviewees were visually impaired people from all over Finland: three of them lived in Espoo, one in Lahti, one in Lappeenranta, one in Tampere, one in Jyväskylä and one in Mikkeli. Of the eight people interviewed, only two hadn't been visually impaired since birth. One of the interviewees was also hard of hearing. Five interviewees currently had guide dogs; one had had one earlier but not anymore at the time of the interview.

The first three questions were included to gather background information about the interviewees; they were generic in nature and not specific to visually impaired people. The next six questions, however, were specifically about the accommodation experiences of visually impaired people. These questions were chosen to get as full a picture as possible of the process a visually impaired person goes through when choosing accommodation. As the

aim of the thesis is also to give suggestions on how to improve the current situation, including questions about the negative and positive aspects was important. The penultimate question, how the interviewees felt about the concept of an accommodation solution for visually impaired people, was especially significant, as that was one of the sub questions of the thesis.

The interview questions (appendix 1) can also be divided according to the topics of the theoretical part of the thesis. Questions 4-7 are related to accessible tourism, question 9 is related to senses as part of experience and 8 is related to both.

4.2 Results

The first question was how often they on average travelled so that they spent the night somewhere other than home. The frequency of travel among the respondents varied significantly. One of the interviewees travelled three times a month on average, and two travelled at least once a month. On the other hand, there were two respondents who only travelled once a year on average. The rest placed somewhere in between: one interviewee travelled on average every other month, one about 10 times a year, and one a few times a year.

Of the two who hadn't been visually impaired since birth, one said that she travelled less now than back when she could still see specifically due to her visual impairment. She still wanted to travel, though, even though now it was more difficult, especially if she hadn't travelled in a while. The longer she went without travelling, the more difficult it became to leave home. However, she saw it as a form of challenging herself. For the other one, her visual impairment hadn't affected her frequency of travel in a significant way.

There were also other reasons for not traveling as often as before. One interviewee who had been visually impaired since birth and fully blind for about 25 years said she did travel less now than when she was younger, but that had more to do with having children and her financial situation than her visual impairment. Another respondent said that she nowadays travelled less than before due to lowered mobility of both her and her husband, since they travelled together most of the time.

The most common reason for traveling was work; of the eight interviewees six made work-related trips at least sometimes. In addition, vacation, hobbies, training and education were mentioned. One interviewee mentioned package tours as their preferred type of travel be-

cause it was easier when everything could be booked in one place and with only one payment, while another preferred booking accommodation and transportation from different places so he could get the best prices. The rest had no real preference for one or the other.

Especially for work trips it was common that someone else made the booking. One interviewee said that she always wanted someone who could see to make the booking for her as she wanted to make absolutely sure that she didn't make any mistakes, for instance accidentally paying for extra services that she didn't want or need. She also said that when the accessibility directive 2016/2102 is put into use everywhere she might be able to start using the internet on her own more than she does now, which would include making her own travel reservations. Only one of the interviewees said that he booked everything himself.

There was no clear preference for domestic or international travel, most did both. One interviewee said that she made an effort to travel abroad at least once a year because she liked to challenge herself. She also frequently wanted to visit new places instead of always going to the same ones. Another interviewee said she travelled mostly domestic but most of her trips were work-related, so she didn't get to choose the destinations.

Only one of the interviewees travelled alone more often than with someone. Even the ones that did sometimes travel alone said they preferred to travel with someone as travelling alone can be scary, and when they did travel alone, they often ended up having to ask for help from staff. Of the five who had guide dogs, four always travelled with the dog. For leisure trips, friends and family were the most common companions and during work trips colleagues. The interviewee who was hard of hearing also often had a sign language translator with her for work trips. Personal assistants were used during both leisure and work-related travel. When the travel companion wasn't a personal assistant, it was often another visually impaired person.

Checking the accessibility features of an accommodation in advance was important for most when travelling alone or only with a guide dog so they could be sure they'd have no problems moving around the hotel without human companions. Only one person said they never checked the accessibility in advance. When travelling with someone else, however, it wasn't as important for any of the interviewees to know about the accessibility beforehand, especially if the companion(s) could see. One who travelled a lot for work said that she didn't check accessibility when it was a work-related trip and she wouldn't be able to change the accommodation either way.

More than the accessibility features, for most the deciding factors were price and the offered services. For one interviewee, the decision came down to ease of logistics more than anything else. For instance, if he was travelling as part of a group, he'd choose the same transportation and accommodation with at least one other member of the group. That way he could rely on the others' help even if the accommodation itself lacked in accessibility.

One interviewee said that she didn't really check accessibility but rather chose based on previous experiences. While she preferred to stay with a familiar chain (Scandic hotels and Sokos hotels were mentioned by name), she had noticed differences in accessibility between individual hotels even within the same chain. She also said that when looking for new accommodation, she asked for recommendations from friends. To her, that was easier as she preferred interpersonal contact (speaking on the phone or in person) rather than using the internet to look up guest reviews.

One of the interviewees mentioned having had to cancel a trip due to not finding accommodation, however, it had been due to reasons unrelated to being visually impaired. Another interviewee said she had resorted to her plan B a few times, but as a whole it seemed that finding accommodation that was accessible for visually impaired people was not an issue. One interviewee said that when she travelled for work, she sometimes had to stay in hotels that she would not choose for herself, but they had been chosen for their price rather than accessibility. Not having control over her own accommodation sometimes meant having to stay somewhere that did not cater to her accessibility needs, however, the work trips were usually very short, a few nights at most, so she could manage even with less than desirable level of accessibility. One time she had stayed at a hotel that had been so bad in terms of accessibility that she would have switched if the trip had been longer than one night. That was an exception, however; she had not been sent to that hotel or another of similar level of accessibility again.

When asked about things that they'd commonly noticed lacking in accommodation from the point of view of a visually impaired person, four people mentioned the lack of accessibility in lifts. There was often no sound system that would announce which floor it was when the lift stopped or whether it was going up or down when it arrived. In addition, the buttons in the lifts were rarely raised or in Braille, and sometimes the buttons were even completely smooth or behind a glass, so it was hard to tell where they were let alone which one to push. If there was someone else in the lift at the same time, they could ask for help, but that took away from the feeling of independence, and was also completely up to chance. All of this meant that lifts were difficult to use alone as a visually impaired person, and thus most interviewees preferred taking the stairs whenever that was an option.

The problem of the numbers not being raised also applied to room doors, which was brought up by six of the eight interviewees. When navigating from the lift to the room, there was no way to know which room was the right one since they couldn't feel the numbers on the doors by hand. One interviewee who had a guide dog said that his dog would eventually learn the route from the lift to the room, but the first few times it was really difficult to find it. It was also an issue that the floors were practically identical in most hotels, so it was difficult to know whether they'd even gotten off the lift on the right floor.

One interviewee mentioned that many hotels used plastic key cards that were completely smooth and symmetrical, so it was impossible for a visually impaired person to know which way they went into the lock. Another person mentioned coming across locks that had a screen that showed whether the door was open but no sound system, which made them inaccessible for visually impaired people. Also, locks that flashed a green light when the door was unlocked were difficult for the same reason.

Two of the interviewees with guide dogs had had problems when travelling with the dogs. One said that in some places guide dogs weren't allowed at all or the hotel was suddenly 'full' when the dog was brought up. The other one said that many places had tried to charge an extra fee for the dog even though guide dogs are comparable to a cane or wheelchair, and it is a legal right to bring a service dog to hotels. She had always managed to avoid paying the pet fee by talking to the staff, but wished staff was more trained about guide dogs.

Another commonly lacking element that was mentioned by multiple interviewees was contrast. It helped with navigating the room if for instance the bathroom door frame was black, and the wall around it white. It would also help with navigating in the hallway if the room doors were clearly distinguishable from the wall. In the reception area, having a dark floor and light reception desk or vice versa made it easier to find the reception. One interviewee said that strong contrasts would also help in the hotel restaurant, for example having a light tablecloth and dark plates, glasses and utensils. Also, the first and last step of staircases were often not of a different colour than the rest of the stairs, which would be increase accessibility for visually impaired guests.

However, having strong contrasts didn't make a difference if the lighting was bad. The most common issue was that the lighting wasn't the same everywhere. One interviewee mentioned that in her experience it was very common that the reception area had much stronger lighting than the surroundings, which made this interviewee practically blind for a moment

as her eyes couldn't handle such a stark and sudden change. Another issue was the atmospheric lighting that many hotel restaurants had, as interviewees with low vision needed a strong light to be able to see anything. Good lighting was also of importance outside the hotel to help navigate to the main entrance. Also, signs weren't always well-lit or logically placed, so they didn't really help even if the guest could still see something.

Many interviewees used a cane to navigate but noted it was difficult if the floor was completely smooth everywhere. In addition, stairs often didn't have a metal moulding on the edge that could be touched with the cane to find out where the next step was. Also, it was a safety hazard for cane users if the route to the reception or other common routes were blocked by something, e.g. plants or luggage. One person mentioned she had almost fallen over things left on the way to the reception more than once.

One interviewee said that most of the time accessibility was only thought of in terms of wheelchair users. A hotel could advertise itself as accessible but when she went to stay, there was nothing to help her as a visually impaired person. As she put it, "there's nothing wrong with my legs, I just can't see". However, she had been happy with Scandic's accessibility program and said it was a good standard that all accommodation businesses should strive towards.

For one interviewee, filling in the passenger information sheet was a source of grief. Staff often offered to fill it for her, but she didn't feel comfortable sharing her information out loud at the reception, especially if there were many people around. It was an unnecessary invasion of privacy that seeing people didn't have to put up with. It wasn't such a problem when traveling with someone who could see because then the other person could fill it for her but that made her feel like she was being treated like a child. Another issue was that sometimes staff would start speaking slower or louder when encountering a visually impaired guest, even though there was nothing wrong with their hearing or cognitive skills. This also contributed to the feeling of infantilization.

One interviewee noted that extra information, such as what to do or where to eat in the area when staying at a hotel, was available only as brochures, and there was almost never a Braille or audio version. In practice this meant that she either got less information than seeing guests or she had to ask the receptionist for recommendations. However, having to rely on the receptionist meant less independence since she couldn't just check the brochures on her own time. She also said that this would be a relatively easy thing to fix if accommodation businesses ordered some brochures in Braille or invested in making audio versions.

One interviewee also noted that there was often no parking outside hotels for situations where the driver would escort a visually impaired person to the reception and the parking spot was therefore needed just for a few minutes. To her, it made no sense to either have to walk from the closest parking spot, which could be far, or leave the visually impaired person waiting at the entrance while the driver went to find somewhere to leave the car.

There were a lot of things that were either completely lacking or needed improving. However, the interviewees also had positive comments about their accommodation experiences. The most mentioned positive aspect was the staff. They were always professional and ready to help, even beyond their job description. For instance, one interviewee who always travelled with a guide dog said that staff often offered to take his dog out for walks and played with it if he wanted to rest.

Another interviewee had had a very positive encounter with a staff member at a hotel restaurant. When bringing the plate to the table, the waiter had stayed for a while to explain what was on each part of the plate. This had been the first time the waiter had encountered a visually impaired guest and they hadn't been trained for it, they just felt that was the most natural way of serving a visually impaired guest. This encounter had left an impression on the interviewee even though it was a relatively small thing because it wasn't a guarantee that hotel restaurant staff would know how to service visually impaired guests.

While the breakfast buffet was difficult to navigate, the staff was always willing to help in the breakfast hall, so that no one had had to miss it. Staff was also flexible on the breakfast; one interviewee mentioned that he was often able to arrange free room service breakfast instead of having to go to the buffet if he contacted the hotel beforehand and let them know he was visually impaired.

While some of the interviewees had had problems related to their guide dogs, there were also positive experiences with them. One person mentioned dog treats waiting in the room or available from the reception was always a positive surprise. Also, some hotels had specific pet rooms so there was no need to worry about the cleaning in case of allergic guests.

There were some that said the key cards posed them problems, however, there was one interviewee who said that in her experience staff had always been ready to mark the key cards for her, by punching a hole in one corner for example. That way she could know which way the key went into the lock even if she was alone. Even such a small gesture had made her travel easier and given a feeling of independence.

Next, the interviewees were asked how hotels could make them feel welcome. Majority of the answers were about adding the commonly lacking elements and improving accessibility while keeping the good parts and making them even better. For one interviewee, her guide dog was so important that the hotel showing that the dog was welcome was enough to make her feel welcome as well. However, it would make things easier if the staff was more educated about guide dogs, so she wouldn't need to fight about the pet fee or anything else related to the dog.

In some hotels, guests received sweets as a welcome gift. One interviewee said those shouldn't be placed on the bed because their dog might jump on it and mess up the bed covers. Also, revolving doors were challenging, both with a guide dog and a cane. If even entering the hotel posed problems, it was very hard to feel like you were welcome there at all.

Even though staff was already the best part of the interviewees' accommodation experiences, many were of the opinion that the situation could be made even better by training staff members on how to encounter visually impaired guests. Most of the times just listening to the guests' needs was enough to lead to a positive customer service experience, however, one interviewee wished for a more proactive attitude. That is, the staff shouldn't wait for the guest to ask for help but rather ask if they needed anything if they looked like they weren't sure where they were going. However, even just greeting when someone walks through the front door so the guest would know which way the reception desk was and navigate towards the voice was enough for some interviewees to feel welcome.

All in all, the presence of staff was a very important factor in making visually impaired guests feel welcome. One interviewee said that she absolutely wouldn't stay somewhere where there was no staff on site. Two of the interviewees even said there should be an employee dedicated to helping visually impaired guests free of charge. Their job description would include accompanying the guest from the reception to the room, possibly more than once, and helping to navigate the sauna department and restaurant. In addition, the assistant would describe the room when they first go in. That way they could navigate the room better but also know if there was something fragile there. For instance, one interviewee had broken a piece of art once because no one had told him it was in the room and he had accidentally made it fall.

This assistance service being offered for free would also be cheaper than always traveling with someone as there'd be no need to book an extra room for the other person. Moreover,

one person said that she mostly travelled with her husband who was also blind, and a third person traveling with them would often end up feeling like a third wheel.

Also, a few of the interviewees wished there would be logic to the placement of items. For example, towels should always be in the same place in the bathroom and the remote control easy to find, preferably close to the TV or even attached to it. With standardised placement finding everything in the room would be easier even alone.

As lighting was mentioned to often be lacking, it was also an element that would make many of the interviewees feel welcome. Having good lighting everywhere in the hotel but especially in the reception area was a priority. In the rooms, there should be only one light switch by the door, not multiple across the room. Also, the room lighting could be adjusted according to personal preference, and there should be no spotlights or other sudden changes in the levels of lighting. One person also mentioned that lights could help with navigating if they were bright enough and placed logically. However, they should never be LED lamps.

One interviewee said that the hotel itself being generally accessible for visually impaired people was important. However, accessibility of the website was also something that should be thought about more since a lot of people make the booking or at least check some information about the accommodation online before the trip. Online accessibility should improve in the EU after the accessibility directive 2016/2102 is adopted, but until that happens, many websites are practically inaccessible for visually impaired people. In addition, all written material at the physical location should also be available in Braille or audio, maybe even both.

One interviewee noted it was important that service was directed at the right person when travelling with a seeing person. He had more than once been in situations where staff had only addressed his travel companions even though he'd been standing right next to them. Being treated like others was important. Staff often seemed to not understand that being visually impaired didn't mean that he didn't understand what was happening around him, and that made him feel infantilized.

An element that the interviewees who used canes really wanted was something on the floor that could be followed with a cane (e.g. metallic moulding), also on the edge of the stairs. It would make moving around on their own safer and easier and therefore give them a feeling of independence. Related to moving around safely, one interviewee wished there were booths in the breakfast hall so the chairs or tables couldn't be moved to block the walking routes, even if it was unintentional.

There were even a few comments that were not related to visual impairment. The interviewee with a hearing impairment said that in her dream hotel, there would be an in-built induction loop at the reception desk, and induction loops available in all meeting rooms. Another person said that having a good bed in the room was more important than anything in making him feel welcome.

The question that split the interviewees the most was the about a hotel or other accommodation solution for visually impaired people. One person said she would prioritise such accommodation when available, two said they would want to stay there at least once just to see what it was like and could make the trip just for the accommodation, while the rest wanted to be just “one of the guests”. A hotel for visually impaired people would make them feel “other”, and they would prefer instead to stay in a ‘regular’ hotel that was designed to be accessible for visually impaired people as well. That would be beneficial for everyone since hotels that are accessible for visually impaired people usually employ the principles of universal design, making them easier to navigate even for seeing people.

Lastly, the interviewees were asked to share their thoughts on hotels with highly visual concepts. This question also got somewhat mixed reactions. One person said she would not stay at a highly visual hotel under any circumstances as that would make her feel excluded and unwelcome. A few said they highly visual concepts would make them feel like outsiders, however, with guided tours on the premises the hotel could be made into a different but no less amazing experience. The tours would cover all the art and other visual elements at the hotel, so visually impaired guests could experience it with their other senses, mostly by hearing but also touching and even smelling and tasting when possible.

Using other senses to compensate for the lack of sight wasn’t something unthinkable even when staying in ‘regular’ hotels, as in ones that hadn’t put a lot of effort in their visual appearance. One interviewee mentioned that when she wasn’t able to see how big a room was upon entering, she would click her tongue and listen to the echo to get an idea about the size.

Another accessible option would be having visual description available by using technology, for instance at the press of a button. However, the descriptions would need to be very detailed and accurate in order to convey the experience in a satisfactory manner. Some of the interviewees were neutral on the question, they might go if the price and other services were right. The visual aspect didn’t really matter to them either way.

The interview requests for the hotels were sent to staff members in managerial positions in five different hotels in the capital region of Finland. Of the five, three replied. Two of those forwarded the questions to another department because they were unable to answer the questions themselves, but the other departments never responded despite being prompted by the author. The third one only said they had no training for staff on how to encounter visually impaired people or special services for the guests, nor had they any statistics or other information about their visually impaired guests.

The author has worked in three different hotels, and there wasn't any kind of training on how to encounter visually impaired or indeed in any way disabled guests at any of these hotels. That, and the fact that the interview requests got no answers, leaves the impression that visually impaired people are not a high priority as a customer group.

The accommodation experiences of visually impaired guests vary, as with any customer segment. However, there were recurring themes in the interviews which suggests that visually impaired people do have similar wishes regarding their accommodation experiences. Many of the interviews also had similar comments on what was wrong with the current situation, which indicates that there is a need to plan for accessibility for visually impaired guests.

5 Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to find out what visually impaired people's current accommodation experiences are, and to give suggestions on how to better take them into consideration as a customer group in the future. In this chapter the main findings of the interviews are discussed and suggestions for future work and development are given. There is also the author's evaluation of the thesis process and its trustworthiness as well as some ethical considerations.

5.1 Consideration of results

As stated before, the main objective of the thesis was to analyse, and based on the analysis, give suggestions on how blind people could be better taken into consideration as a customer segment when designing new accommodation businesses. The research questions were as follows.

- What is the present accommodation experience of visually impaired people?
- How does the emphasis on visual effects in hotel design affect the accommodation experience of blind people?
- Is there a lack of independence in traveling when blind or visually impaired?
- Is there a need or interest for a hotel for blind people in Finland?

Based on the interviews, the current accommodation experiences of visually impaired people in Finland vary depending on where they're staying, for what purpose and with whom. There are both positive and negative aspects, as with any customer segment. However, most of the points of complaints could be fixed with little effort on the accommodation providers' part. The main concerns were about the physical accessibility, especially when traveling alone.

As for the positive, staff was praised by almost everyone, although it was noted that with proper training they could be even better. Helpful staff could even make up for lack of physical accessibility to a point, especially if there were personal assistants available at accommodation businesses for no extra cost to the customer. However, there had also been some less successful staff encounters, such as being treated like a child. As Burnett & Bender Baker (2001, 10) established, staff attitude affects the frequency of travel among disabled people, meaning that these types of encounters could have a negative impact also on the revenue of the accommodation providers.

Regarding the emphasis on visual effects in Finnish hotel design, the interviewees expressed some feelings of exclusion and being neglected as a customer segment. However, the idea of multisensory hotels was offered as a compromise more than once. This would mean including things like visual description and guided tours, allowing visually impaired guests to use other senses to compensate for their lack of sight. In addition, for many interviewees price was a more important factor than how visual the hotel was, which was somewhat expected as being careful with money is a common feature among disabled people (Burnett and Bender Baker 2001, 10).

Pine & Gilmore (1998) talked about how senses affect how engaged a person is in an experience, its consequent memorability, and how implementing all five senses can be a competitive advantage to business providers. However, based on the interviews, it's possible to fully compensate for a missing sense by using the other four, creating experiences that are different but no less engaging or memorable.

The question about independence got more split answers. Many of the interviewees didn't travel alone often if at all, and most reported feeling a bit uncertain when alone, which Devile & Kastenholz (2018, 13) found to be common among visually impaired tourists. If there was a travel companion, it was most often another visually impaired person or a personal assistant. The hotel-provided personal assistant idea that was presented shows that having another person around would be reassuring and make staying in hotels easier, and it would also be more cost-effective than always having to travel with someone.

Furthermore, many of the interviewees had experiences of being treated like a child or staff inadvertently behaving like there was something wrong with their cognitive skills, sometimes even aiming service at the wrong person when they were with someone. Physical accessibility was in most places only thought of in terms of mobility-related disabilities, which made accommodation less accessible for visually impaired people traveling alone or only with a dog. There was also the issue of written information not being accessible. All these factors had a negative impact on the interviewees' independence.

Based on the interviews, there is no real interest for a hotel for visually impaired people in Finland. Such accommodation might be a curiosity for some, but most would rather invest in universal design and general accessibility rather than making accommodation specifically for visually impaired people. In short, there is no need for an accommodation solution for visually impaired people if a 'regular' hotel is accessible enough. Most of the interviewees just wanted to feel like others, and accommodation aimed for visually impaired people would

make them feel othered. Also, as mentioned earlier, having more accommodation possibilities with universal design would benefit everyone, not just visually impaired people.

It is notable that the results of the interviews largely correspond to the three main barriers to accessible tourism established by Eichhorn & Buhalis (2011, 51). These barriers are physical accessibility, lack of information and attitudinal barrier. All eight interviewees mentioned at least one feature related to these barriers as a negative element of their accommodation experiences, and they were the most recurring ones. Clearly these three are elements that would need to be focused on most when thinking about accessibility not just in accommodation but in fact all tourism.

This thesis is important in that it is on a topic that is not talked about widely in Finland. As such, it could potentially encourage someone else to continue the research and lead to changes in the future. Usually, a bachelor's thesis is not the most relevant source for business owners who are thinking about making changes to their services or products. Of course, the small number of respondents also affects the significance of the thesis. With a bigger sample size, the results would be more relevant to accommodation providers and disability organisations alike.

5.2 Trustworthiness and ethicalness of research

Validity refers to “how well an instrument as measures what it is intended to measure” (Dudovskiy 2019). In this case, validity is measured by whether the research questions were answered. As established in the previous section, all of the research questions were covered by the interviews, meaning that the thesis is valid.

There were elements that affect the trustworthiness of the thesis. First, the limited number of interviewees and the subsequent lack of diversity. There should be more variation in age, as only one interviewee was under 40, as well as more people who hadn't been visually impaired since birth to compare how their accommodation experiences had changed since they'd become visually impaired. Also, there is no data on how other disabilities affect the experiences; only one interviewee was hard of hearing and one had mobility difficulties, so no conclusions could be drawn about the effects of multiple disabilities. Due to the limited number of interviewees it's not possible to analyse the frequency of travel among visually impaired people or compare it to the general population either.

Secondly, in interviews there is always the possibility of bias in the questions and subsequently interviews. Furthermore, only one interview was done in writing and one recorded

and transcribed, so it's possible that the author unintentionally changed or later misinterpreted the answers slightly since they were not relayed word for word and therefore possibly lost nuance. Additionally, because the interviews were done in Finnish (the author's first language) and the thesis in English, some things might have been lost in translation.

As for the ethicalness, the interviewees are completely anonymous to protect their identities and all features that could be used to identify them have been removed. No one was forced or pressured to participate; in fact, the interviewees were the ones who contacted the author to express their interest in being part of the thesis process. They were also free to quit the project at any time, however, no one did. There was no intention to mislead or harm anyone with the thesis at any point of the process.

5.3 Suggestions for development or further work

There is currently a lack of research on accommodation experiences of visually impaired people in Finland. In fact, the author was unable to find any Finnish studies on the topic. This was also reflected in the interviewees' reactions to the interview request. Most of them were very happy that someone was finally taking interest in it, and they had a lot to say about the topic. Based on their answers, it's clear that there is a need to design accommodation and related services to be more accessible for visually impaired people. This process should be started by researching what visually impaired people want and expect from their accommodation with more respondents and diversity than in this thesis. The results should also be spread wider than this thesis to ensure actual changes.

Other than research, it is also important to consider the people working in the industry. For the sake of developing accessible accommodation businesses in Finland, hospitality professionals should work with disability activists and organisations (e.g. Näkövammaisten liitto). There need to be people who want to be part of creating accessible accommodation and tourism in general in Finland, possibly taking their talent and ideas abroad at some point if they become successful in Finland.

5.4 Evaluation of the thesis process and learning

Writing a thesis is always a learning experience. During their studies the author had already done written assignments, of course, but the thesis is much longer and goes into more depth in its topic than any previous work. As a result, the author learned a lot about academic writing. The thesis process requires so much reading for the theoretical part that the academic language starts coming naturally at some point.

Also, while writing a thesis, one learns how to search for reliable information and choose the parts that are most relevant instead of including everything even if it relates to the topic. It also teaches time management and self-control, since a thesis can't be written in one night. This thesis took the author about three months' worth of full-time work, even though as a whole the process was spread over a period of nine months, including presenting the original idea and getting it approved as well as writing the first thesis plan. Given that the process took so long, the author also learned how to stay motivated during a long project, even if at times there was nothing to do but wait, for instance when setting up the interviews. The process got delayed by a few months due to other responsibilities taking more time than anticipated, but in the end, it was better to take the time to do the thesis properly rather than rush it just to stick to the original schedule.

Of course, the author also learned a lot about the topics covered in the thesis. The term accessible tourism was already familiar at the beginning, but the author had no real idea what it meant in practice. The author also became familiar with the definition of visual impairment and the practicalities of traveling with one as well as considering things from the point of view of a disabled person.

The whole thesis process took a lot of work, but it was fun because the topic was interesting and there was a lot to cover with it. The writing process was difficult to get started, but reading other people's theses helped with getting an idea of how to construct the thesis, how to start each chapter, and what order to proceed in. It also helped with the academic language. However, especially towards the end writing came very naturally and it was easy to produce at least a page per a day of writing.

The theoretical framework was by far the most arduous part, and it also took the most time. The author went back to the theoretical framework multiple times to add new things and to edit what was already there. The interviews were interesting, as they gave the author the chance to talk to people they probably would never have had any kind of contact with otherwise and to hear perspectives and opinions they had never considered before.

The original intent was to get 5-6 visually impaired respondents for the interviews, but there were eight, which was a positive surprise. It was disappointing that the hotels didn't respond; on the other hand, it is telling of how little consideration there currently is for visually impaired people as a customer segment that none of this data is readily available. Also, the idea to interview hotel staff wasn't included in the original thesis plan, so it wasn't that high of a priority anyway. However, for next time, it might be a better idea to start looking for interviewees at earlier point in the process so there's more time to wait for responses.

All in all, this thesis took a lot of work, taught the author a lot but was also an enjoyable experience. There are some things that could have been done differently and the schedule changes were unplanned, however, that always happens with long-term projects. Despite all the setbacks, all of which were thankfully relatively small, the thesis process concluded the author's studies on a positive note.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions for customers

Haastattelukysymyksiä

1. Kuinka usein matkustat keskimäärin?
2. Minkä tyyppisiä matkoja teet?
3. Kenen kanssa matkustat?
4. Tarkistatko matkaa suunnitellessasi etukäteen, miten majapaikassasi otetaan huomioon näkövammaiset?
5. Mainitse jotain tavallisia puutteita majoituksessa, jos olet huomannut. Tai hyviä asioita.
6. Oletko ikinä perunut matkaa, koska et ole onnistunut löytämään majapaikkaa, joka palvelisi sinua näkövammaisena riittävän hyvin?
7. Kuvaile omin sanoin, mitä toivoisit majapaikaltasi, jotta tuntisit olosi tervetulleeksi.
8. Jos jossain olisi hotelli/muu majoitus, joka olisi suunnattu ensisijaisesti näkövammaisille, lisäisikö se kiinnostustasi kohteeseen? Voisitko kuvitella lähteväsi jonnekin ihan vain tällaisen majoitusmahdollisuuden takia?
9. Mitä mieltä olet hotelleista, joiden konsepti perustuu enimmäkseen/kokonaan visuaalisiin elementteihin? Tunnetko olosi ulkopuoliseksi? Toivoisitko, että olisi enemmän hotelleita, jotka erottuisivat muilla keinoilla (esim. äänimaailma, huoneen koko, palvelut)?