



Assessment of accessibility in Hotelli Verso

Perspective of a wheelchair user

Susanna Niittylä

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Niittylä Susanna

**Assessment of accessibility in Hotelli Verso:
Perspective of a wheelchair user**

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Abstract

The benefits of accessible tourism are still not well recognized in the hotel industry. The demand for quality accessible services however exists and there is a lot of room for improvement in accessible services. Realizing that accessibility is a matter of both human rights and a possibility for increased profits would help improving the industry. The topic was decided based on this knowledge gap in the industry and together with the commissioner, Hotelli Verso, which recently renovated their accessible rooms.

The goal was to research how customers using wheelchair experience the accessibility of Hotelli Verso and if there are issues to develop. The research was carried out by using interviewing and observing as research methods. Four people using manual or electric wheelchair stayed for one night in Hotelli Verso observing its accessibility. After their stay, they were interviewed, and the most crucial observations were gone through and visualized by the researcher. The results were analyzed by using content analysis.

The results gave diverse insight of the accessibility of Hotelli Verso from wheelchair users' point of view. Hotelli Verso can benefit from the results by realizing their already existing potential and improving issues mentioned by the participants. Consequently, they will gain a new, loyal customer group and a big competitive advantage.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Accessible tourism, wheelchair, accessible hotel, qualitative research, interview, Hotelli Verso, Yöpuu Yhtiö

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

Appendices 5. Results, 6. Suggestions for improvement and 7. Discussion are confidential and removed from the public thesis. The basis for secrecy is section 24(17 & 20) of the Act on the Openness of Government Activities (621/1999), a company's business or trade secret. The period of secrecy is ten (10) years, the secrecy will end on 3.4.2034.

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1 Introduction

Everyone should have an equal access to services regardless of their physical state. However, there is still a lot to do to make this happen in reality. Tourism is no exception: everyone should be able to use tourism services. Reduced inequalities based on for example, disability, is also one of the 17 sustainable development goals of The United Nations (United Nations, n.d.) and tourism as a continuously growing business should be part in helping the goal to be achieved by 2030. Researching accessible tourism and improving it is important both because of enhancing the possibilities of the disabled but also because improving accessibility is a competitive advantage for the business itself (UNWTO, n.d.). Today tourism industry still lacks the understanding of the segment as consumers and the knowledge of their needs (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Researching accessible tourism more would help the industry realize that there is a need for quality accessible services and that the segment is worth investing in.

This thesis is a development project for a hotel in Jyväskylä. The aim is to help the company identify their already existing strengths in accessible tourism and find the possible pain points of the disabled guests using wheelchair by making research of real experiences in the hotel. The wheelchair users was chosen as a target group because wheelchair requires the most space and thus is the best tool to set the standards for accessibility (Papamichail, 2012).

1.1 The commissioner

The commissioner of this thesis is a family-owned company Yöpuu Yhtiö Oy and more precisely one of their hotels, Hotelli Verso. The company is located in Jyväskylä, and altogether they have two hotels and three restaurants. Hotelli Verso was opened in 2016 as a continuum for renowned Hotelli Yöpuu and restaurant Pöllöwaari (Hotelli Verso, n.d.).

Hotelli Verso is located in the heart of Jyväskylä city center, and it has 128 rooms of which two are accessible. One of the accessible rooms is a standard room and the other is a superior room with its own accessible sauna, and both accessible rooms were totally renovated in February 2023 (Hotelli Verso, n.d.). Restaurant of the hotel, Verso Baari & Keittiö was opened in May 2019 (Yöpuu Yhtiö, n.d.). Hotelli Verso has also meeting rooms / ball rooms but those are not included in this thesis because they are not open to public if there are no events.

There are four values that the company presents in their websites: quality service, responsibility, aesthetics and locality (Hotelli Verso, n.d.). They highlight that every touchpoint during the customer journey affects the success and that their mission is to provide meaningful experiences and make the customer leave happier than they were when coming (Hotelli Verso, n.d.; Yöpuu Yhtiö, n.d.). They highlight that quality must be preserved by learning new and solving the pain points. They want to be trusted by both the employees and the customers.

1.2 The goal of the project

The purpose of the project was to investigate the accessibility of Hotelli Verso and the main research question was: *How do people using wheelchair experience the accessibility of Hotelli Verso?*

Research questions that supported the main questions were:

- *What is the prevailing situation of the accessibility of hotel rooms in Hotelli Verso?*
- *What is the prevailing situation of the accessibility of other premises in Hotelli Verso?*
- *What is the prevailing situation of the availability of the websites of Hotelli Verso?*
- *Which areas should be developed and how?*

The topic of this thesis was decided based on the willingness of the company to develop its accessibility and the motivation of the researcher to understand accessibility better and through that, help the commissioner to improve. This thesis provides the commissioner with valuable information of the current situation of accessibility in Hotelli Verso from a wheelchair user's point of view and issues to develop in the future. The aim of this thesis is to research how well the renovation of the accessible rooms has succeeded to fulfill the needs and wants of the wheelchair users, if there should be some corrections to be made in the rooms and furthermore, if the other premises of the hotel are accessible for this customer group and if some development in accessibility should be done for them.

The longer-term goal is to raise the occupancy rate of the accessible rooms through developing the accessibility of the hotel. Customers that are happy with the service and accessibility will likely act as promoters and through positive word of mouth, it is expected that more customers in need of accessible services will find the services of Hotelli Verso.

Larger goal of the project is to be part in raising accessibility knowledge of the whole industry. By developing accessibility of one company, it is possible to affect others if they realize that considering accessibility will benefit all: the customers, the company itself and the whole society.

2 Accessible services

2.1 Key terms

Hotel industry

Hotels provide short stay accommodation for guests. Accommodation company is a company that sells furnished rooms for guests in order to make profit (Finlex, 1991). An accommodation company can be called for example as a hotel, hostel, guest house or resort depending on the type of the accommodation. Hotel industry is also part of hospitality industry which includes also “restaurants and other types of businesses that provide food and/or temporary accommodation for the purposes of business or pleasure” (Wood, 2015). Hospitality industry in turn is part of tourism industry which includes all those companies producing products for tourists (UN Tourism, n.d.). Thus, tourism industry includes hotels and restaurants but also for example transportation, travel agencies, attractions and events. Figure 1. shows how hotel industry is situated in tourism industry.

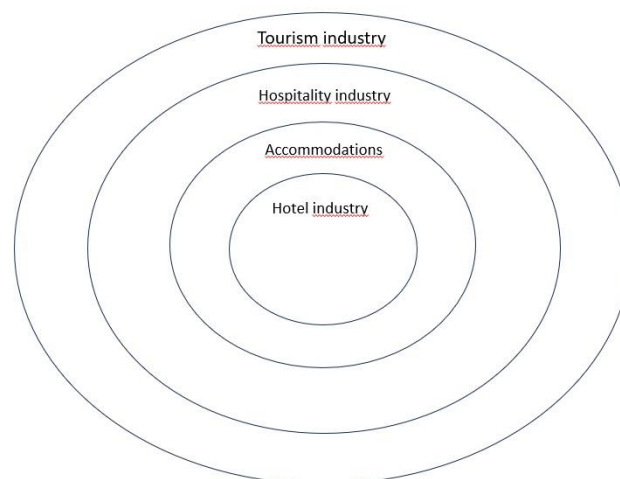


Figure 1. Hotel industry is a sub category of tourism industry

Most of the hospitality companies are small and medium sized (Wood, 2015). In 2022 there were 683 hotels in Finland (Tilastokeskus, 2023). In 2022 the number of overnight stays in hotels in Finland was around 17,5 million of which around 76% were domestic tourists and 24% tourists from abroad (Tilastokeskus, n.d.).

Disability

The first key term to understand when researching accessibility is what disability means. It has been estimated that over 1.3 billion people in the world has some kind of disability which means 16% of the whole world's population (WHO, 2022). The number of the disabled has increased during past 10 years because the world's population has increased, and people live longer. CDC (n.d.) defines that people with disabilities are a heterogenous group with a common attribute in activity restriction due to physical or cognitive/mental state. All disabilities are not visible and the needs and restrictions of the same kind of disability may vary. Also, a disability can be temporary or last for a lifetime, be present from the day of birth or occur later in life, be static, episodic or degenerating (WHO, 2011). The need for assistance varies also greatly due to type of disability and the surrounding environment (accessibility). Wheelchair is one great mobility aid which gives a disabled person unable to walk possibility to more independent life.

There is no exact number of people who use wheelchair but there is an estimation of WHO that proposes there are more than 80 million people who may need a wheelchair in the future (WHO, 2023). The need for wheelchair may derive from old age, health condition or disability. Some wheelchair users need wheelchair all the time while others need it only in certain circumstances such as when moving outdoors. Also, some may need the wheelchair through their life while others may need it only temporarily. Roughly, wheelchairs that are used daily can be divided into manual and power wheelchairs. Manual wheelchairs can be propelled by the user themselves by using hands or someone can help by pushing. Power wheelchairs function with electricity and the user can move without using effort on rolling the wheels. Power wheelchair is ideal for example for a person who has muscle weakness (FreedomCare, n.d.).

WHO (2023) states that wheelchair "enables full and effective participation and inclusion in society". In an ideal world this would be true but there is still a lot to do to make the environments

wheelchair accessible. The attitudes of governments and individual companies towards accessibility define how fully the wheelchair users are able to act in the society in comparison with the non-disabled.

Accessible tourism

When defining accessible tourism, one must first understand what accessibility means. WHO (2023) has divided accessibility to four divisions which are non-discrimination, physical accessibility, economic accessibility and access to information. The disabled should be treated the same way as others, they should have physical access to the same environments as others, they should have the same economic possibilities as others, and they should be able to reach information regardless of their disability. According to THL (n.d.), accessibility enables the disabled to participate the society the same way as the non-disabled. It is an attitude of a whole society or a single service provider who want to provide the same possibilities of for instance working life, free time and all other scopes of life for all. Accessibility is good planning of buildings and services, and it makes the life of all people, not just the life of the disabled, easier (Invalidiliitto, n.d.).

When attempting to give a definition for any phenomenon, it is usually not that simple to have a one fully comprehensive and straightforward definition. This applies also to the definition of accessible tourism which does not have a one commonly agreed definition (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). According to World Tourism Organization (2016), one reason for the lack of a common definition is that the phenomenon itself has evolved and broadened in the course of last ten years. Also, different terms such as inclusive tourism, adapted tourism, Barrier Free Tourism (BFT), Universal Tourism and Tourism for All, are used interchangeably. The word accessible tourism is used in this thesis because it describes the needs of a wheelchair user the best. However, the fact that making the services accessible for wheelchair users is a benefit for all, disabled or not, is kept in mind through the whole process. At the same time, the fact that every disability and every individual is different is true, and the aim of this thesis is not to discover whether the services of Hotelli Verso are accessible for every type of disability, but it concentrates in issues that are important especially for the most wheelchair users.

Darcy and Dickson (2009) see the term accessible tourism from a very holistic point of view. They suggest that accessible tourism considers all possible conditions including physical and cognitive

disabilities and temporary disabilities, families with children, ageing people and even the employees of tourism field. Accessible tourism gives all these groups a possibility to enjoy tourism services independently, equally and safely. This is enabled by adopting universal design in tourism products, services and environments. As tourism is a phenomenon that is under an ongoing change and easily affected by the changes in macro level, it is probable that the definition of accessible tourism will live and change together with the industry itself (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

Other term that is commonly used today is inclusive tourism which takes a wider perspective. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2017) define inclusive tourism as: “Transformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits”. Thus, inclusive tourism considers other marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, poor people etc. as well and includes them both as consumers of tourism services as well as owners, managers and employees of tourism field. Accessible tourism can be defined to be one part of inclusive tourism.

Availability

An important term alongside accessibility is availability. While accessibility is usually related to the physical environment, availability is a wider term that takes into account for example the web environment: if the information on web is understandable and clear, the website is easy to use and there is enough information of accessibility of the physical place (Salo, 2012). Availability is part of customer-oriented approach (Saavutettavuusvaatimukset, n.d.).

Because people with disabilities tend to have more special requirements than the non-disabled, it is more crucial for them to have enough and detailed information of the destination beforehand (Pühretmair, 2004, as cited in Pühretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). Yau et al. (2004) report that people with disabilities must use more time and effort to plan their trip than the non-disabled. They have to search for information of the physical accessibility of the premises, the route to the destination and if assistance is provided. When the information seeking process is finally done, they many times feel that they must verify if the information is correct. Reasons for the distrust may be for instance differences in accessibility standards, lack of control concerning the law and the commer-

cial nature of tourism industry which may offer misleading marketing (World Tourism Organization, 2016). This means that a disabled person needs to do at least double the work compared to a person with no disabilities. If a person without disabilities finds out the information on websites was incorrect on site, they usually can cope with the situation anyway. In comparison, if a person using a wheelchair finds out there is no elevator in the hotel for example, it is probably not possible to cope with that.

World Tourism Organization (2016) presents the most crucial problems concerning the internet availability. The first problem is that the information on the internet is inaccurate or outdated. In both cases, the customer might be negatively surprised when arriving to the destination and in the worst case, they are not able to stay there as planned which affects both the customer satisfaction and the company image. Another issue might be that the information is not detailed enough which may lead to customer having to ask for more details via phone or email or even the customer not choosing to see the effort and hotel losing the customer to competitor.

The findings of Yau et al. (2004) show that planning a trip as a disabled person is not easy. The complexity of the process may even suppress the willingness to travel at all. Thus, companies should set more focus on providing all the information the disabled could need on their websites in order to attract customers of this specific group. Also, they have to be able to convince the customer that the information provided is accurate. A company that provides the best information of accessibility has a competitive advantage and is likely to make a customer choose it over another similar competitor (Pühretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). What companies should also realize is that providing enough, and reliable information is the easiest and at the same time the most important way to make tourism more available for the disabled (Darcy & Daruwalla, 1999; Cavinato & Cuckovich, 1992, as cited in Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2011). It lowers the threshold to book a trip and decreases the time used for the planning.

Universal Design

A term that is closely linked to physical accessibility is universal design. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (n.d.) concludes that it means designing the surroundings in a way that it can be used by all people including different aged people, people of different sizes, disabled and non-disabled. The idea is not to have custom-made solutions for the minority, but the starting point

again is to have functioning environment for everyone, not just for the disabled. In a wider scope, adapting the principles of universal design will make disabilities and accessibility more visible and normal in the society (Darcy et al., 2011). World Tourism Organization (2016) describes the evolving of the attitudes towards accessibility as follows:

We can therefore conclude that the concept of Accessible Tourism has evolved from the idea of accommodation or adaptation so that people with disabilities can participate in tourism towards a concept of quality tourism for all, understanding that accessibility is an important part of that quality.

Thus, accessibility and universal design are seen as quality factors in tourism products as well. Making the environment accessible does not mean doing the minimum adjustments for a special group just to make it possible for them to use the services but making sure that everyone can enjoy tourism experiences with the same quality in the same premises. Understanding accessibility and universal design principles should therefore be built in every modern tourism company's DNA.

According to The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (n.d.) there are seven principles that should be taken into account when designing environments:

The 1st principle: The use of the environment should be equal, meaning that everyone can use it and the design is attractive for everyone.

The 2nd principle: There should be flexibility in the usage of the environment offering solutions for individual abilities.

The 3rd principle: The design of the environment should be easily understandable and intuitive.

The 4th principle: The environment gives enough important information in a way that everyone can notice and understand it.

The 5th principle: The environment should be safe for all and minimizes any risks for accidents.

The 6th principle: It should be possible for all to operate in the environment without great physical efforts.

The 7th principle: There should be enough space for all to operate in the environment and everyone should be able to reach every important object.

All these principles are linked to the wheelchair users in a hotel environment as well and they can be used to help evaluate the accessibility of a hotel for this customer group. As mentioned before, this thesis concentrates to this customer group, but it must be remembered that universal design serves all and the design is universal only if the principles are fulfilled from every customer group's point of view.

Papamichail (2012) states that principles of universal design should be taken into account both when building new buildings and when doing renovations for the existing ones. An important issue to take into account when renovating or building new accessible environments is that it is cheaper to plan it well beforehand than to do corrections later. Hotelli Verso had a professional interior designer with experience in accessibility as well designing the renovated accessible hotel rooms.

The wheelchair users are not a homogenous group either and universal design principles help to serve the needs of different wheelchair users as well. A person with a manual wheelchair will probably have some common needs as a person with an electric wheelchair but they will likely have different needs as well. Also, the needs may be different if a person has a personal assistant or not. Universal design serves the needs of all these persons using different wheelchairs and on top of that, also the needs of every other people with or without disability as well.

2.2 The value of accessible services

Accessibility as a human right

Accessibility is a matter of human rights. The United Nations composed a Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 which aims at protecting the human rights of the disabled in those countries that have signed it (United Nations, n.d.). The convention has 50 articles of which one covers solely accessibility. According to United Nations CRPD (2006), the undersigned countries should:

enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.

Thus, accessibility should be considered in for example buildings and communications of companies. Also, it should be monitored that accessibility standards are actually being followed. People working in companies should also be educated in how to encounter a person with a disability. In Finland the convention became into action in 2016 (Invalidiliitto, n.d.). For a non-disabled person, all these aspects of accessibility are usually taken for granted. It is usually obvious that they can enter any building or vehicle and that they easily reach all the information related to a place of visit that is crucial for them. However, for a disabled it is not always something considered self-evident and places them in an unequal position compared to the non-disabled.

Accessibility of tourism services is also a matter of the quality of life of a disabled person. The study of Pagán (2013) shows that people with disabilities tend to have fewer leisure trips than those without a disability. However, according to Kastenholz et al. (2015), the disabled would like to travel more. The study of Pagán (2013) also found out that the more a person (with or without) disability travels, the more satisfied they are with their life. The difference of satisfaction between the disabled and non-disabled narrows the more they travel.

This lower difference of a regular tourist with or without disability might be caused by the experience and confidence that the disabled person has gained from the previous trips (Yau et al., 2004). Thus, those disabled who do not travel much should be encouraged to travel by offering easy, accessible services. If the disabled travellers are uncertain, using tourism services will likely not increase their satisfaction of life. In an ideal world, life satisfaction should increase at the same pace for the disabled and non-disabled despite the amount of experience of a traveller. This is where the tourism businesses can make a change by easing the travelling of the disabled. This will only benefit both the business and the disabled people: the company acquires a new customer group and at the same time, increases the quality of life of the disabled.

Right for accessible services in hotels is also in the Finnish law. The council of state's act on accessibility of a building (Finlex, 2017) commands that at least 5% of the hotel rooms and at least one of the rooms must be accessible with an accessible bathroom. In a hotel with 100 rooms there should be at least 5 accessible rooms.

Accessibility as a business value

As discussed in the previous chapter, companies should see the disabled as a potential customer group bringing profits. The customer group has always been there but now as accessibility issues are being discussed more and more in the society, tourism companies should also finally recognize this customer group and its willingness to have quality services. Even though it has been seen that there is a growing number of people with accessibility needs in developed countries, the statistics show that those needs are not fulfilled (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Thus, it can be said there is an imbalance between supply and demand.

This customer sector tends to be loyal to a company as they find a service provider that fulfills their needs and wants (Bender Baker & Burnett, 2001; Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2010). When they finally find a service provider that caters their needs, they will likely use their service again because they already know their offerings. Loyal customers are cheaper for the company than attracting new ones (Hudson & Hudson, 2022), so making the disabled feel good in the hotel is a way to decrease marketing costs. Also, satisfied customers will likely promote the hotel to their friends and family who may also have accessibility needs, and so word of mouth (both positive and negative) spreads among the customer group.

The disabled usually have longer stays than the non-disabled and they tend to travel with a companion (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2010). That is explained with the need for personal assistance, even though not all disabled need it. The longer a customer stays and the more people they bring with them, the more money they spend. The occupancy rate will also rise and the company will improve its position in benchmarking comparison between other hotels. Offering accessible services could also help in spreading tourism more evenly through the year in destinations where there is strong seasonality in tourism because still, a significant number of people with disabilities do not get a job which would affect their holiday schedules (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

Even though many people with disabilities still do not know their possibilities for traveling, there is also increasing number of experienced travellers who know their rights for quality services (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Boxall et al. (2018) point out that the disabled tourists should be seen as any other guests with the desire to have luxury and aesthetic experiences. However, in many hotels the accessible rooms may have a clinical feeling especially in the bathroom and the interior design may not be as aesthetic as in other rooms (Darcy & Pegg, 2011). Even though renovating the accessible rooms to be more attractive might be expensive, it would likely attract more disabled customers if marketed properly and increase the occupancy rate in the long run. Also, if the hotel is fully booked with no guests with disabilities, those non-disabled guests staying in accessible rooms would be more satisfied as well since the standard of luxury would be the same even though the room would be accessible. As Darcy and Pegg (2011) report, many times accessible rooms are the last ones sold because they usually are not that attracting to the non-disabled. When interviewing hotel managers, they also found out that if non-disabled is accommodated in an accessible room, they would many times complain about it. This would not be a problem if accessible rooms would be designed with a good taste and for all.

Hotel managers should remember that many disabled have the required purchasing power: 70 % of European citizens with need for accessible services have financial and physical ability to take part in tourism activities (Buhalis et al., 2005). In Europe, the disabled people spend on average 80 billion euros on tourism products but in reality, the expenditure is even higher because this considers only the European citizens (World Tourism Organization, 2016). However, the disabled do not know the possibilities of accessible tourism products if they are not marketed by companies (Partanen & Riekkinen, 2022). Thus, it is important to raise the knowledge of quality accessible tourism products by marketing to the right people using the right channels.

At the moment, Finnish tourism companies that actually have accessible services do not offer enough information on their websites (Partanen & Riekkinen, 2022). It means that many companies have unused potential only because of the lack of spreading knowledge about the services and they could benefit financially so much more if this customer sector would know about them. Marketing accessibility does not even require a big financial input in huge campaigns. Clear, accurate information and pictures on the websites and social media marketing would likely already bring more customers. Marketing accessibility can work as an attracting feature also for the non-

disabled who are responsibility conscious and want to support a socially responsible company. Companies should also realize that even if they are not perfectly accessible, being honest and informing which places are accessible and which not is already better than deciding not to mention anything about accessibility. This way, the disabled searching for accessible accommodation can decide by themselves if the hotel is accessible for them or not easily without making extra phone calls due to total lack of information.

The motivation to travel derives from push and pull factors. Push factors are related to a person's intrinsic needs and wants whereas pull factors are related to the destination itself (World Tourism Organization, 2016). A push factor to travel could be for instance wanting to relax, learn something new or see friends and family and have a good time with them. Pull factors could be for instance certain food culture, picturesque nature or indeed, quality accessible services.

Understanding push and pull factors of the disabled can motivate the managers offer and market accessible services. As mentioned before, the disabled use a lot of time and effort to get knowledge of accessibility of the destination. They know their intrinsic motivation (push factor) to travel and search for a destination where they can fulfil that need. There might be other pull factors than accessibility as well and they have found a perfect destination that meets their push factor and pulls them to visit. A hotel that markets its accessibility in that specific destination will likely be chosen because it enables the tourist to actually stay there and fulfil the other needs. If no hotel is found or the hotel does not succeed in providing the promised service, a customer will probably choose another hotel/destination the next time and spread negative word of mouth among the customer group.

In conclusion, there clearly is a need from the customer side to have accessible tourism services. However, there is still a lack in provision of accessible quality services and many companies still do not realize the potential of accessible tourism. As the world's population is ageing and the number of disabled (related to ageing or not) is growing, the segment should not be seen as a niche anymore. Companies that realize the market size and customer behaviour of this customer group will likely gain themselves a huge business advantage, improved business image and a new unique selling proposition which differ them from the competitors.

3 Customer journey in a hotel

3.1 Customer decision journey

Before the customer arrives to the hotel, they complete a process of consumer decision journey which contains four stages: consider, evaluate, buy and enjoy, advocate and bond (Hudson & Hudson, 2022). Consideration stage contains many different brands that the customer has been exposed to by different marketing channels. After that the customer evaluates different brands and other people's opinions play a significant role in the decision making. For example, in the case of accessible tourism, working with disabled influencers could be an effective way of increasing both awareness of the tourism service (consideration stage) and creating trust in others in need of accessible services (evaluation stage). During these two stages happens Zero Moment of Truth.

At the third stage, the customer has already chosen the company and they will purchase the service, most likely via internet in the case of tourism services (Hudson & Hudson, 2022). However, when trying to search for accessible rooms online, it was clear that many times it is not possible to check the availability and do the reservation for an accessible hotel room directly from the websites. This is unfortunate, because as Chang et al. (2009) point out, for customers making online purchases it is important that the products and information of them are easy to find and that making the purchase is effective. This confirms the previously noted issue of how important it is that there is enough reliable information of accessible services on the internet. Additionally, if a hotel wants to make booking accessible hotel rooms more effective and thus treat all customers more equally, it should be possible to reserve one directly from the internet.

The purchase stage is then followed by the stage of enjoy, advocate and bond during which the customer continues connecting with the company (Hudson & Hudson, 2022). They may rise the excitement for example by following the company on social media and reading more about the company from their own websites and from other people. Thus, it is important that accessibility issues are shown also in the social media channels. Also, the company can boost the excitement by sending offers and more detailed information of the upcoming stay. In the case of accessible tourism, hotels could send a more personalized welcome letter to those staying in accessible rooms. The letter could include the same basic information as others but additionally, there could be information of for example accessible attractions in town.

3.2 When in hotel

Customer experience (CX) is something that hotel managers want to manage in order to retain the customers and attract new ones. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) connect the terms “customer experience” and “customer journey”. They define customer journey as the customer’s whole experience with the company, including several touch points from prepurchase until post purchase. From accessible tourism point of view, the most crucial points of the customer journey are “access to information, booking procedures and methods, trip to the destination, and the stay within the destination” (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Hudson and Hudson (2022) present that customer experience is composed of physical environment, personal characteristics, human interaction and trip-related factors. In accessible tourism, physical environment is emphasized but other factors such as experience of the customer and their personal needs, preparedness of the staff to encounter disabled guests and purpose of the trip, must also be paid attention to. Customer experience affects the customer’s willingness to return especially when accessibility is considered (Quiñones & Rojas, 2022). That is why a hotel should highlight the importance of a premium accessible customer experience in every touchpoint during the customer journey.

It is not possible to draw a customer journey which would describe the journey of every customer in every hotel but there are certain touchpoints that are usually experienced by all: arrival, check-in, going to the room, eating, staying in the room and check-out (Hudson & Hudson, 2022). A service blueprint or customer journey map are useful tools to evaluate each touchpoint and see if customer experience is as desired or if something has to be improved in a certain touchpoint. Thus, it can be used as a tool to assess accessibility of every touchpoint as well. Figure 2. shows a typical customer journey in a hotel as a service blueprint. It shows the journey of a hotel customer but also what happens in the front stage and backstage, which support processes are needed and what kind of physical evidence of the service the customer encounters.

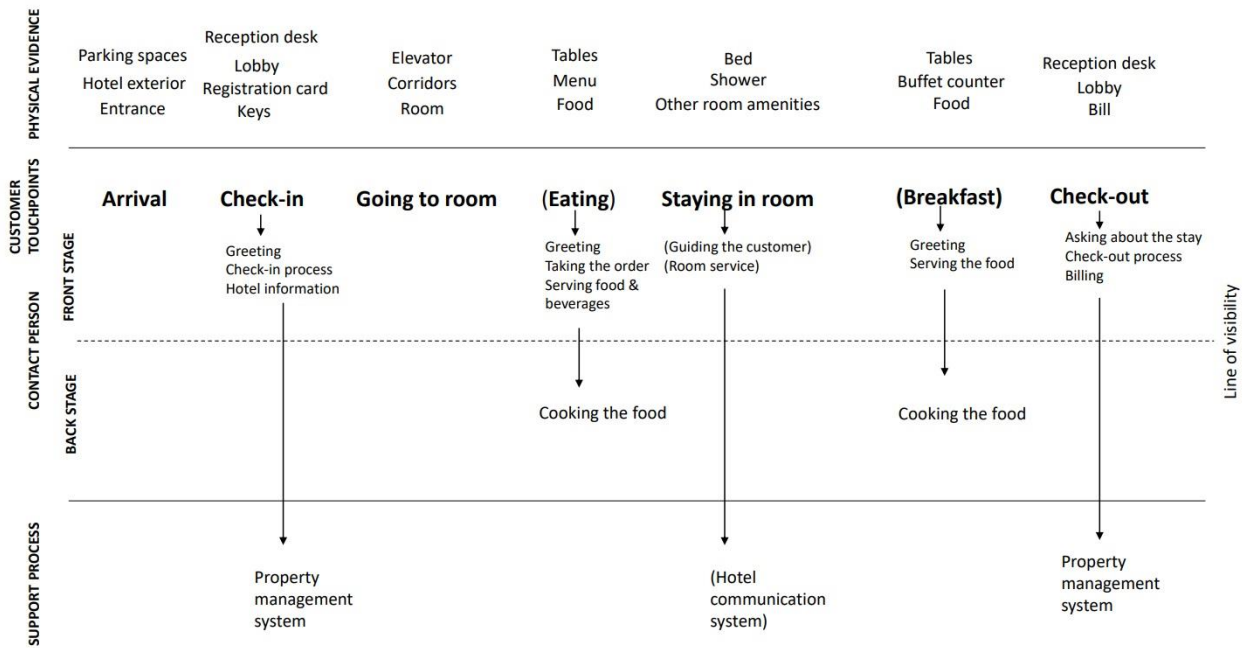


Figure 2. Hotel service blueprint (Adapted from Hudson & Hudson, 2022, p.53)

After the customer has checked out and left the hotel, follows a post-stay phase. It is an important phase which should not be forgotten because at that phase, a hotel can still continue attracting the customer to visit again and become a loyal customer (Revinat, 2022). What a hotel can do is, for example, to send a feedback survey, respond to the reviews on the internet and offer a newsletter. Answering and acting according to the feedback is important in order to create trust and make the customer come back. A CRM (customer relationship management) program is recommended to use because with it, a hotel can create a customer profile of the loyal guests and mark their preferences according to the feedback.

4 Hotel services and accessibility

4.1 Physically accessible hotel

Papamichail (2012) lists important features of the hotel for the wheelchair users based on experience since usually the physical accessible environment is designed according to wheelchair users because of their need for the wide spaces without obstacles. However, it must be remembered that the official standards of accessibility vary depending on the country.

Papamichail (2012) points out that there are eight functions that must be taken into account when designing or evaluating hotel accessibility: how to enter the hotel, checking in, how to move inside and outside the hotel building, sleeping, how to take care of personal hygiene, eating and drinking, using other hotel facilities and how to evacuate in case of emergency. These functions will be examined closer next.

Entering the hotel and checking in

If the guest arrives by car, there should be minimum one accessible parking lot per accessible room and there must be a signpost addressing accessibility. The accessible parking lot should be as near as possible to the hotel building, and it must be wide enough so that it is possible to assemble the wheelchair next to the car.

The main entrance should not have a threshold or if it does, it should not be more than 2cm high. The door should be wide enough meaning that the minimum width is 100cm but recommendation is wider. Revolving doors are not recommended.

In the reception it is recommended that there is a counter which offers possibility to reach it from a wheelchair as well. This means that there should be part of the counter that is max 80 cm high.

Moving inside and outside the hotel

The minimum continuous width of the corridors should be at least 120 cm. It is however recommended that a wheelchair user and a pedestrian and two wheelchair users can pass each other. The former requires 150 cm width and the latter 180 cm width. The floor surface should be smooth to roll, and it is recommended not to have too thick carpets.

Where there are ramps, they should be gently sloping and there should be handrails on both sides. On the sides of the ramp there should be 5–10 cm borders. If there is a door after the ramp, there should be a flat area of 1,50 x 1,50 cm for being able to open the door from a wheelchair.

If a hotel has many floors, there must be accessible elevator. The door of the elevator should be at least 90 cm wide and the elevator itself should be at least 110 cm wide and 140 cm deep. The buttons should not be too high so that they can be pressed from a wheelchair: 90 cm to 120 cm from the floor.

Hotel room

In the hotel room there should be enough space next to the bed. For a wheelchair user's needs it is recommended that there is a turning circle of 150 cm. The bed should not be too high: recommendation is 45–50 cm. As wheelchair users may have personal assistants traveling with them, it is recommended to have two separate beds instead of a double bed. Other furniture should be easy to move if extra space is needed. Light switches and electrical sockets should be reached from the wheelchair: they should be placed 90–120 cm from the floor. Also, clothes-hangers should be at the same height.

In a wheelchair accessible bathroom, a roll-in shower is a better choice than a bathtub. Beside the shower there should be handrails and a shower chair. The shower head should be adjustable. In front of the toilet there should be 120 cm free space and next to the toilet there should be at least 90 cm free space. If a toilet is not next to a wall, there must be two handrails that can be raised up. Under the washbasin there should be room for the feet in a wheelchair and the maximum height for the upper edge is 80 cm. The lower edge of a mirror should be 100 cm from the floor. Again, a turning circle of 150 cm is recommended, and towel racks should be reached from a wheelchair (90–120 cm). Also, emergency call system is recommended.

Dining

If there is a restaurant in the hotel, it should be on the same level or accessed by ramp or elevator. Between tables there should be at least 100 cm free space, but 120 cm is recommended. Recommended tables have one leg in the middle of the table so that it is easy to reach from a wheelchair. The height of tables should be 70–75 cm so that they are not too high, but the legs can fit under.

4.2 Elements of servicescape

Tourism is a service business selling intangible experiences in a tangible environment. In the case of accessible tourism, the tangible environment plays an extremely important role because it determines whether a guest with mobility impairments is able to use the service in the first place. Thus, the term of servicescape must be explained in the context of accessible tourism.

Hudson and Hudson (2022) divide servicescape into facility exterior, facility interior and other tangibles. Facility exterior includes the elements outside the building such as parking, walkway to the building and other elements of the yard. Facility interior covers the elements inside the building such as the layout, design, equipment, lightning etc. of the common areas and in the case of this paper, the hotel rooms. Other tangibles include all the other tangibles that the customer sees and uses before, during and after their stay. These are for instance web pages, brochures, stationary etc. In an accessible hotel, all these elements throughout the customer journey should be considered and the principles of Universal Design should be applied.

There are four strategic roles of servicescape: packaging, facilitator, socializer and differentiator (Hudson & Hudson, 2022). The role of packaging means that through servicescape, a customer gains insight of the service provider's essence and what kind of feeling they want to provide. In the case of accessible tourism, the role of packaging could be shown by offering aesthetic and luxurious accessible rooms as well which is not self-evident (Darcy & Pegg, 2011). However, only having those rooms may not be enough but they should also show their offering by pictures on their websites which will provide the desired image.

The role of servicescape as facilitator is maybe most strongly linked to accessibility. It means that in an ideal case, servicescape helps customers act in the physical environment. In an accessible hotel, facilitating elements of servicescape could be for example ramps, adjustable tables, wide enough spaces, support rails etc. Grady and Ohlin (2009), as cited in Hudson and Hudson (2022), highlight that hotels should investigate the physical accessibility with the help of the customers using their accessible services by performing surveys of whether the environment serves their needs well or if some changes should be made.

Servicescape can also work as a socializer which helps people encounter each other. This includes both customer-customer encounters and customer-employee encounters. In the case of accessible tourism, servicescape should be designed in a way that makes it possible for the disabled to participate in social interactions in the same way as others. For instance, if there is a lobby bar or a restaurant in the hotel, it should be designed in a way that allows for example people using wheelchair to sit either in their own wheelchair or get up to a chair easily and so that they can reach the table. Also, the height of the reception desk could be considered to allow more natural and equal feeling contact between the receptionist and the customer.

The last role of servicescape is differentiator which means that the physical environment can differ the company from their competitors. Today, as accessibility is not yet that well considered in many tourism companies, a company that differentiates itself from others by offering quality and well-designed accessible services may have a remarkable advantage by being one of the first ones offering them and thus gaining the trust of the customers.

5 Implementation of the project

5.1 Research methods

In this research, two different methods were used: interviewing and observation. The research is qualitative, meaning that it is interested in understanding the experiences of the people researched (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The goal is to “make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this research, the phenomenon is accessibility of Hotelli Verso, and context is people using a wheelchair. Thus, it is interested in understanding *how* people using wheelchair *experience* the accessibility of Hotelli Verso.

Interviewing

In-depth interviewing was chosen as a main research method for this project. The reason for the choice is that the goal of an in-depth interview is to find out how the interviewee experiences,

feels and thinks of the subject in a deeper level than just answering yes or no (Rapley, 2007). Also, as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018) state, interview is a flexible method which allows the researcher to repeat and specify the questions if needed.

The structure of the interview was decided to be semi-structured with open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview gives a possibility for the interviewer to lead the discussion towards issues that the interviewee considers important while still staying inside the frames of the research project (Brinkmann, 2013). In this research project, the same interview structure with the same questions was used in every interview, but every interviewee was let to focus more on those issues that were the most crucial for them and different extra questions outside from the structure were asked of those topics in order to understand them in a deeper level. As Walle (2015) suggests, the questions were asked in a coherent order following the customer journey.

According to Brinkmann (2013), there are four characteristics of a semi-structured interview. The interview always has a purpose and there is always a goal that the researcher wants to achieve with the help of an interview. In this development project, the purpose of the interviews is to find out the experiences of accessibility of Hotelli Verso from the interviewees' point of view. The second characteristic is that the researcher is searching for descriptions and answers to "how" instead of finding out "why". In this project, the researcher was interested in knowing *how* the interviewees found the accessibility of Hotelli Verso and wanted them to *describe* their experience. A typical question that was asked was "how did you experience the accessibility of... (for example, the reception). The third characteristic is life world which means that in interviewing, the researcher aims at understanding the world as an individual experiences it before drawing scientific conclusions. In this project, the goal of the researcher was to understand the experiences of the interviewees and with the help of their life world experiences, draw a conclusion of what is commonly important for them. The fourth characteristic according to Brinkmann is that the interviewer always has to interpret the interviewee. The interviewer can and must listen to the interviewee but in the end, the conclusion is always the researcher's interpretation. Because of this, the interviews of this project were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Recording the interviews gave a possibility to go through the discussions as a whole afterwards when analys-

ing them. If the answers had been written on a paper, there would have been more room for interpretation when analysing the interviews because it is not possible to write every word or remember every word that has not been written.

Observing

Observing was used to support interviewing. After the interviews, those issues mentioned by the interviewees were went through by the researcher. Also, the main issues were photographed for visualizing the observations. Some measurements were also done by the researcher to see if the size of the premises correspond with the recommendations. Whyte (1953), as cited in Grönfors (2011) opines that it is recommendable to verify the interviews by observation. In this project, however, observing afterwards was not done because of any mistrust towards the interviewees but to understand their experiences better. The researcher was not observing during the stay of the participants because they wanted to be given an authentic experience in their own peace. The observing method where the researcher does not participate in the activities of the participants is called non-participant observation (Grönfors, 2011).

5.2 Research process

The interviews were implemented during November 2023 until January 2024. Four people using wheelchair were asked to stay one night in Hotelli Verso for free in return for observing accessibility of Hotelli Verso from their point of view. Before their stay, they received an observation check list (see appendix 2.) which they used as a guideline when observing the accessibility throughout their customer journey. The purpose of the check list was that by using it, every participant remembered to observe all the same touchpoints of the customer journey. Also, as Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) point out, the researcher receives as much knowledge from the interviewee as possible if the interviewees have had a chance to familiarize themselves with the interview topics beforehand.

After their stay, the participants were interviewed based on the observation check list. Both the check list and the interview were in Finnish because both the researcher and all the interviewees were Finnish. Three of the interviews were held face to face and one was held remotely via Zoom.

Two of the participants used a manual wheelchair and two used an electric wheelchair. The interview questions can be found in appendix 1.

5.3 Analysis methods

Content analysis was used as an analysis method for this project. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), it is a method which aims at summarizing the research material and creating a verbal description of the research topic. The research material is disassembled and conceptualized after which it can be reassembled creating trustworthy conclusions. Even though the method handles verbal material, and the goal is to create verbal conclusions, one may continue the analysis by quantifying the produced material (Silverman, 2006, as cited in Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). This means that the researcher may for example count how many times certain issue is mentioned by the interviewees. If an issue is raised by many interviewees, researcher may conclude it is important for the group being researched.

The analysis process was started by transcribing the recordings into word documents after which they were read carefully. After this, the analysis began properly by using coding. When coding, a symbol or a number is usually given to every theme (Taylor et al., 2016). The function of coding is to structure the material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In this research project, each theme was given a color which was used to highlight how each interviewee had described it. For example, ability to reach items was one of the themes which was coded with green. Thus, when ability to reach items was mentioned in the transcription, it was highlighted with green color. Because there were such many touchpoints that were observed during the customer journey, every touchpoint was gone through individually. Otherwise, the number of usable colors would have ended.

After transcribing and coding, the material was gone through using thematic analysis. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), it means grouping the data according to specific themes and sometimes counting how many times the same issue is mentioned (quantitative analysis). Even if quantitative analysis is used, descriptions of the themes are highlighted. Thus, it was counted how many of the participants had mentioned the same issue of the theme and how they had described it. The goal was to find similarities in the answers. The most crucial observations were summarized

under each theme, and they were coded again by using green and red color. Green implicated positive issues (those that worked well) and red implicated negative issues (those that did not work well).

5.4 Research ethics

Agreements and permits

Before the thesis project, an agreement on thesis cooperation was written between the commissioner (Yöpuu Yhtiö Oy), the writer and Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences. Also, as Yöpuu Yhtiö Oy has the right for business secret, a confidentiality agreement was also signed by the parties. Thus, the results of the thesis will not be published publicly. Research permit was not required by the commissioner.

Good scientific practice

Because this project researched real people and their experiences, research ethics were taken into account very carefully. Ryan (2007) raises three main ethical issues that usually must be addressed in Western research, and they are codes and consent, confidentiality and trust. Codes and consent in practice means that the researcher must inform the research participants that they will be researched, the purpose of the research and their right to discontinue if wanted. In this research project, all the participants were informed via email when they were asked to participate in it. They were informed that they would participate in a bachelor's thesis project by observing the accessibility of Hotelli Verso, after which they would be interviewed. They were also informed that in return for their valuable insights, their one-night stay in Hotelli Verso would be for free.

Confidentiality refers to the researched person's right to preserve anonymity. All the participants were informed already in the invitation email that the results would be treated anonymously, and no one could be recognized from the ready thesis. Also, before the interview they were informed of the nature of the research and anonymity, and they were asked for a permission for recording the interview orally. When the recordings were transcribed, the persons speaking were referred to by using letters A, B and C. Thus, there were no names on written documents.

The third issue, trust, means that the participants should trust the researcher and vice versa. In this project, trust was built by careful informing and transparency of the progression of the project. Also, the participants were informed that all the material recorded and transcribed would be stored behind a password in secured cloud of Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and that they would be destroyed after the project.

5.5 Reliability

The number of the participants for the project was decided to be four people of which two used a manual wheelchair and two used an electric wheelchair. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) state that money and time are two resources that affect the number of the interviewees. In this project, those were the resources guiding the number of participants as well. The participants were given a free stay in Hotelli Verso, so money wise the number was limited to four together with the commissioner. Also, as the researcher has limited amount of time due to their other work and limited study right, it was reasonable not to choose too many participants. Also, as the aim of qualitative research is not to produce statistic generalization but to understand a phenomenon, it is more important to have participants who know much about the subject than to have as many participants as possible (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

One measure for the needed number of participants is saturation which means that the number of participants is big enough when no new information arises from the interviews (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). If the reliability of this research is measured by using saturation, it could be said that more participants would have been needed to reach full reliability. A full reliability in this case would mean that no new accessibility observations would arise in the interviews. However, as accessibility is such an individual experience affected by individual ability, full saturation might be hard to reach. Even without a full saturation, those issues mentioned frequently by most of the interviewees can be interpreted as reliable.

One issue that arose from the questions was that they could have been more precise. The interview was guided by customer journey touchpoints which was a good choice otherwise but instead of asking of accessibility of the bathroom, for example, it could have been asked about accessibility of the sink, toilet, shower etc. from all the interviewees. This way, every interviewee would have said something about the same issues. For example, not everyone commented on the

amount of free space which is now interpreted as if for some it is not enough even though in reality, it was just not commented.

6 Results (confidential)

This section is confidential (Appendix 5.)

7 Suggestions for improvement (confidential)

This section is confidential (Appendix 6.)

8 Discussion (confidential)

This section is confidential (Appendix 7.)

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview frame in Finnish

Opinnäytetyö haastattelu

Accessibility of Hotel Verso from a wheelchair user's point of view:

Current situation and issues to develop

1. Millä saavuit hotelliin? Miten koit saapumisen esteettömyyden?
2. Mitä havaintoja teit vastaanoton fyysisestä esteettömyydestä?
3. Miten kuvailisit vastaanoton henkilökunnan palvelua? (Tarkenna kysymystä tarvittaessa koskemaan esteettömyyttä/pyörätuolinäkökulmaa)
4. Mikä esteettömissä huoneissa on mielestäsi erityisen onnistunutta? Entä mikä voisi olla paremmin?
5. Kävitkö ruokailemassa tai muuten tutustumassa Verso Baari & Keittiöön? Jos ei, siirrytään kysymyksen 7. Jos kyllä, mitä esteettömyyshavaintoja teit sieltä?
6. Miten kuvailisit Verso Baari & Keittiön henkilökunnan palvelua? (Tarkenna kysymystä tarvittaessa koskemaan esteettömyyttä/pyörätuolinäkökulmaa)
7. Mitä esteettömyyshavaintoja teit aamiaissalista?
8. Miten kuvailisit aamiaissalin henkilökunnan palvelua? (Tarkenna kysymystä tarvittaessa koskemaan esteettömyyttä/pyörätuolinäkökulmaa)
9. Mitä esteettömyyshavaintoja teit hotellin muista yleisistä tiloista?
10. Jos varaisit esteettömän huoneen itse, löytäisitkö tarvitsemasi tiedot Hotelli Verson nettisivuilta? Mitä nämä tiedot ovat tai mitä puuttuu? Kokisitko varaamisen helpoksi? Miksi/miksi et?
11. Onko vielä jotain muuta, mitä haluaisit mainita Hotelli Verson esteettömyyteen liittyen?

Appendix 2. Interview frame in English

Thesis interview

Accessibility of Hotel Verso from a wheelchair user's point of view:

Current situation and issues to develop

1. How did you arrive to the hotel? How did you feel the accessibility of arrival?
2. What observations you did of the physical accessibility of the reception?
3. Miten kuvailisit vastaanoton henkilökunnan palvelua? (Remind to think from accessibility point of view if needed)
4. What do you think is especially good in the accessible room? What could be better?
5. Did you visit Verso Bar & Kitchen? If not, let's move to the question 7. If yes, what observations did you have from there?
6. How would you describe the service of the staff in Verso Bar & Kitchen? (Remind to think from accessibility point of view if needed)
7. What accessibility observations you did from the breakfast restaurant?
8. How would you describe the service of the staff in the breakfast restaurant? (Remind to think from accessibility point of view if needed)
9. What accessibility observations you did from the common spaces of the hotel?
10. If you would book an accessible room by yourself, would you find the information you need from the websites of Hotelli Verso? What are these information or what is missing? Would you feel the booking is easy? Why/why not?
11. Is there something else you would like to mention about accessibility in Hotelli Verso?

7. Verso Baari & Keittiö (mikäli kävit: fyysiset tilat, henkilökunnan palvelu)

8. Verso Baari & Keittiö esteetön wc (mikäli käytit)

9. Aamiaisravintola Silmu (fyysiset tilat, henkilökunnan palvelu)

10. Hotellin muut yleiset tilat

Appendix 4. Accessibility checklist for the participants in English

Check-list

Accessible accommodation in Hotelli Verso

– Perspective of a wheelchair user

A warm thank you for attending my thesis project of *Accessibility of Hotelli Verso from a wheelchair user's point of view!*

Here is a check-list which I kindly ask to use as a help when observing the accessibility of Hotelli Verso. I recommend writing short notes of every part so that you remember your observations in our relaxed discussion after your stay. I hope you to write honestly both things that work well and things you wish would be improved.

Also, I request you to familiarize yourself with the websites and accessibility information of Hotelli Verso before our discussion.

I wish you a pleasant stay and fruitful observing in Hotelli Verso!

Kind regards,

Susanna Niittylä

1. Parking (if you arrived by car)

2. Elevator from the garage to the hotel (if you arrived by car)

8. Accessible toilet of Verso Baari & Keittiö (if you used)

9. Breakfast restaurant ~~Sijmi~~ (physical premises, service of the staff)

10. Other common spaces of the hotel

11. Websites of the hotel (accessibility information, booking)

12. Other observations (voluntary)