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Positive experiences of visually impaired tourists

Esther Obigbesan, Anya Chapman and Duncan Light

Bournemouth University Business School, Talbot Campus, Poole, UK

ABSTRACT

There is an emerging body of research that focuses on the experiences of tourists with visual impairment. This has established that such tourists face many barriers, difficulties and challenges, predominantly relating to the design of the physical environments of tourism or the attitudes of employees. However, the issue of positive and high-quality experiences among visually-impaired tourists has been neglected. To advance the debate, this paper examines such positive experiences. It adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach and makes use of semi-structured interviews with (predominantly young) British people with a visual impairment. Five factors were identified that contribute to positive holiday experiences: excellent customer service; the kindness of strangers (both local people and other tourists); provision of audio and tactile interpretation at visitor attractions that allowed a sense of inclusion; the transformative potential of new navigational technologies; and the support provided by specialist companies which understand the particular requirements of tourists with a visual impairment. Therefore holidays for people with a visual impairment are not solely defined by challenges and barriers, and such tourists can have rich, rewarding and inclusive experiences.

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Introduction

Although people with disabilities (PwD) have been neglected within tourism research (Richards et al., 2010), there is growing interest in their travel experiences (Qiao et al., 2022a). There is broad recognition that PwD face many barriers to participation in tourism and consequently are frequently excluded from the pleasures and benefits of holidays. The accessible tourism movement seeks to enable people with a range of access requirements to participate more fully in tourism through the adoption of universal design for tourism environments and products (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011a). The UNWTO also actively promotes accessible tourism arguing that 'tourism for all' represents an important business opportunity (since PwD constitute a significant segment of demand), but also that accessibility is a key element of a sustainable and responsible tourism policy (UNWTO/ Fundación ACS, 2015).

In this context, this paper focuses on tourists with a visual impairment (TwVI). Globally some 2.2 billion people have some form of vision impairment (World Health Organisation, 2022). An emerging body of research over the past decade has focused on the experiences of such tourists and has established that they face numerous challenges when on holiday. These include unsympathetic design of the physical environment; poorly-trained service staff with limited understanding of the specific

CONTACT Anya Chapman  achapman@bournemouth.ac.uk

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needs of TwVI; and a need for resilience and persistence among TwVI themselves. In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that people with visual impairment (PwVI) are less likely to travel, particularly internationally (Small, 2015). Therefore, reducing barriers for PwVI and allowing them to participate fully in holidays is a key part of the agenda for accessible tourism.

However, PwVI are not a homogeneous group and neither are their travel experiences (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Richards et al., 2011; Small et al., 2012). While many PwVI undoubtedly have a difficult time on holiday, it is misleading to assume that their holiday experiences are solely characterized by challenges and barriers. The tourism and hospitality industries are increasingly embracing the accessibility agenda (especially in those countries that have introduced legislation enshrining the rights of PwD) and are increasingly providing experiences that are fully inclusive for PwD. Furthermore, recent developments in mobile (especially smartphone) technology are transforming the everyday experiences of PwVI and similarly have the potential to transform their experiences when on holiday. This means that TwVI can have positive experiences when on holiday, and indeed can enjoy their holidays in the same way as sighted tourists (Small et al., 2012).

In this context, we take a different approach to much previous research in that we do not focus on barriers and challenges experienced by PwVI when on holiday (which are by now well-understood). Instead, we focus in detail on positive holiday experiences of PwVI. In particular, through interviews with PwVI we explore what can make a holiday a positive and high-quality experience, and identify 5 factors which can contribute to such experiences. In this way we contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which barriers to participation can be overcome, so that tourism for PwVI can be more accessible, inclusive and fulfilling.

Literature review

In the context of growing attention to accessible tourism (Qiao et al., 2022a) there is an emerging body of research which focuses on the travel experiences of TwVI. This has been undertaken in a range of geographical contexts, although the main focus has been Europe, China/Hong Kong and Australia. Such research is usually underpinned by a model of disability as a social construct (rather than a physical or medical 'problem') in which societal attitudes to people with disabilities contribute to marginalization and exclusion (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011b; Small et al., 2012). Following Devile and Kastenholz (2018), this review of literature focuses on both the barriers and constraints encountered by TwVI but also on the factors which facilitate and enable their travel.

The issue of barriers, challenges and constraints encountered by TwVI has been a dominant theme in recent research. These are usually considered in terms of structural/environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers (Kong & Loi, 2017; Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Lam et al., 2020; see also McKercher and Darcy (2018) for an alternative conceptualization). Structural/environmental barriers relate to the difficulties encountered by TwVI in negotiating the spaces of tourism. Hotels are a common focus (Poria et al., 2011; Richards et al., 2010; Small et al., 2012; Tutuncu & Lieberman, 2016; Yeh & Fan, 2023) with key issues being the design of hotel rooms; difficulties with electronic keys; the absence of braille in elevators; the absence of large print menus in restaurants; difficulties in navigating a hotel if unaccompanied; and poor lighting. Other research has focused on visitor attractions (particularly museums) based on predominantly visual experiences so that TwVI may experience exclusion (Candlin, 2003; Poria et al., 2009, 2011; vom Lehn, 2010). A broader issue is orientation in unfamiliar destinations, along with negotiating uneven surfaces (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Small et al., 2012). However not all structural barriers relate to the physical environment. Holidays for PwVI can be expensive, particularly if using a specialist company (Richards et al., 2011). Furthermore, time may be a constraint since PwVI often have difficulties using websites that are not accessible (Mills et al., 2008; Small et al., 2012) meaning that a holiday requires additional preparation and planning (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Small et al., 2012).

The study of interpersonal barriers focuses on the interactions between TwVI and people they encounter in their destination. Numerous studies have argued that tourism employees have a

poor understanding of the nature of visual impairment and of the specific needs of their visually-impaired guests (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Kong & Loi, 2017; Poria et al., 2011; Richards et al., 2010, 2011; Small et al., 2012; Tutuncu & Lieberman, 2016; Wan, 2013; Yeh & Fan, 2023). Even where employees are well-intentioned, their efforts to help guests with visual impairment can be inappropriate or counter-productive. Consequently, such tourists may feel disregarded or excluded, or may be regarded as entirely dependent on others and incapable of their own agency. In some contexts, PwVI may be actively discouraged from entering attractions because they are associated with bad luck or misfortune (Wan, 2013). TwVI may also encounter scepticism if they do not look conventionally blind (Richards et al., 2010) or may have to deal with over-protective staff, leading to a feeling of constant surveillance (Poria et al., 2011). Problems with service staff not understanding the needs of guide dogs are also commonplace (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Packer et al., 2008; Small et al., 2012). The broader issue is limited awareness of the needs of PwVI among wider society and in this sense the situation among tourism/hospitality employees mirrors a much bigger picture.

The study of intrapersonal barriers focuses on the ways in which holiday-taking among PwVI is shaped by individual perceptions of risk and personal safety, and feelings of stress and insecurity (Kong & Loi, 2017; Qiao et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2010; Yeh & Fan, 2023). A related issue is the need to be assertive when on holiday which includes asking for help from strangers (Packer et al., 2008; Small et al., 2012). As Packer et al. (2008, p. 18) observe, for PwVI 'it is hard work to be a tourist'. In some cases, PwVI had decided that travelling was too difficult and had disengaged from the opportunities of tourism (Small et al., 2012).

Rather less research has focussed on the factors which can enable or facilitate travel among PwVI. Again, the analysis of such factors is predominantly structured around structural/environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal issues (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018). In terms of structural issues, various adaptations to the physical environment can enable participation in tourism among PwVI. These include use of contrasting colours to mark doors, entrances and stairs; adoption of tactile ground surfaces; the user of larger fonts and enhanced provision of (particularly audio) information; and provision of brighter lighting (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Lam et al., 2020; Packer et al., 2008; Poria et al., 2011; Small, 2015; Small et al., 2012). Similarly, museums and galleries can be made more accessible to PwVI through, for example, the adoption of audio descriptions or tactile exhibits (Candlin, 2003; Mesquita & Carneiro, 2016; Poria et al., 2011). A broader issue is that of design, either for creating inclusive experiences for TwVI (Tomej & Xiang, 2020), or the broader importance of inclusive/universal design within tourism environments (Lam et al., 2020).

A recent development is the importance of assistive technology in enhancing the travel experiences of TwVI. Various authors have advocated such technology for its role in promoting accessible tourism (e.g. Eusébio et al., 2021; Pühretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). However, there has been limited detailed examination of how TwVI can benefit from such technology. One form of technology with considerable potential is smartphones (Huang & Lau, 2020). For example, GPS-based apps can assist with navigation, while apps which make use of a smartphone's camera can identify objects in the surrounding environment. The authors also advocate gamification within app design to facilitate strong emotional connections with a place. However, Lam et al. (2020) are more cautious, arguing that much assistive technology is not yet accurate enough to be fully trusted by many PwVI.

In terms of interpersonal enabling factors, the most important issue concerns the role and significance of travelling companions. Most visually-impaired tourists are accompanied by friends or family who assist with navigation or provide audio assistance in restaurants and museums. Travel companions play an important role in overcoming travel barriers, acting as facilitators and providing psychological support for TwVI (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Lam et al., 2020; Poria et al., 2011; Qiao et al., 2021; Qiao et al., 2022b; Yeh & Fan, 2023). At the same time, TwVI may experience a sense of dependency on others and reduced autonomy (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Small et al., 2012). Furthermore, Lam et al. (2020) argue that travelling companions are more important than technology in overcoming travel barriers than assistive technology.

A related interpersonal factor concerns initiatives where sighted people can volunteer to assist PwVI (either within an attraction or for the duration of a holiday). For example, vom Lehn (2010) reported that PwVI visiting a museum had a richer experience when accompanied by a sighted guide but that, through touching exhibits, the guides themselves could better understand the experiences of the person they were accompanying. In cases where sighted volunteers accompany PwVI for the duration of their holiday, the guide could reduce the latter's sense of helplessness and enable greater enjoyment of the holiday (Qiao et al., 2022c). However, other research has reported that while sighted volunteers could facilitate mobility, they could also constrain it, and the experience could be intense for both parties (Small, 2015).

A further facilitating factor is individual strategies for dealing with the challenges encountered during a holiday. Such intrapersonal strategies include preparation and organization prior to the holiday; a reliance on memory and mind mapping to negotiate an unfamiliar physical environment; determination, patience and acceptance; and the experience gained during previous holidays (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Qiao et al., 2022b; Richards et al., 2010; Small et al., 2012). Such strategies can enable TwVI to negotiate or overcome some of the barriers that they encounter during their holiday-taking.

A related intrapersonal factor is the ability of visually-impaired tourists to make use of their other senses, enabling them to experience a destination in a different way from sighted tourists (Huang & Lau, 2020). The experiences of all tourists will involve auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory sensations and TwVI are no exception. However, through 'sensory compensation' (Qiao et al., 2023, p. 1) TwVI are able to use other senses to have rich experiences of their destinations. Indeed, some researchers have suggested that visually-impaired tourists may be more sensitive to the 'atmosphere' of a place than sighted tourists (Huang & Lau, 2020; Small et al., 2012; Wan, 2013). There is also growing recognition of the embodied nature of the experience of visually-impaired tourists (Qiao et al., 2023; Small et al., 2012) and in this context Small et al. (2012) have advocated an approach based on 'embodied ontology' which foregrounds corporeal and sensory issues for understanding the experiences of tourists with disabilities.

A conceptual model derived from this review of literature is presented in Figure 1. This identifies factors which can both constrain and enable holiday-taking among TwVI. Particular configurations of barriers and enablers have the potential to create both negative and positive holiday experiences. Therefore, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of travel experiences for PwVI (Small et al., 2012). In particular, despite what is often claimed, holidays for PwVI are not always characterized by difficulties, anxieties and uncertainty. Instead, they are able to enjoy the pleasures and benefits of tourism (Huang & Lau, 2020; Qiao et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2011) and can, in some cases, find their holidays empowering (Small et al., 2012). However, there has been limited research into positive tourism experiences of PwVI, and that which has been undertaken has mostly focused on what facilitates a good holiday (see for example Devile & Kastenholz, 2018; Qiao et al., 2021; Small et al., 2012), rather than the nature of positive experiences themselves. Therefore, to contribute to this debate, this paper focuses directly on the nature of positive and high-quality holiday experiences among TwVI.

Research methodology

Many previous studies of PwVI have adopted a qualitative approach to explore travel experiences in detail (e.g. Kong & Loi, 2017; Qiao et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2010; Small et al., 2012). This study similarly adopted a qualitative approach, underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology which seeks an empathetic understanding of human behaviour and experience (Bryman, 2016; Hollinshead, 2006). In a tourism context, an interpretivist approach requires paying attention to, and understanding the voices of, participants (Tribe, 2008), in this case visually-impaired tourists. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to understand the lived experiences of such tourists (a method which has been widely employed in the study of the travel experiences of PwVI). This method has various

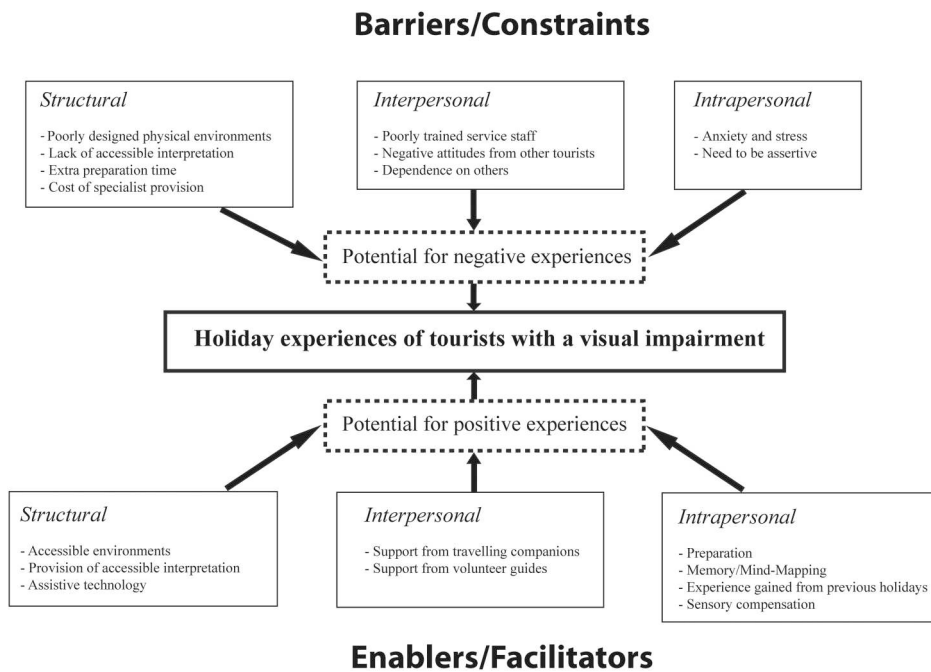


Figure 1. Factors shaping the holiday experience of TwVI.

advantages, particularly its flexibility and the ability of the interviewer to focus the interview on issues that are deemed important, and to follow-up these issues in more detail (Brinkmann, 2013).

A purposive snowball sampling strategy was adopted (Bryman, 2016). The first author (who is visually-impaired) contacted other PwVI within her network. These contacts, in turn, introduced her to others who were contacted and invited to take part in an interview. Since data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were undertaken using Zoom. The project received ethical approval from the researchers' university. All participants were sent an information sheet prior to the interview, and all signed a consent form. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 min and were recorded with the full consent of participants. Details of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Sample size is a key consideration when undertaking interviews. The sample must be large enough to understand key experiences and ensure that the important issues are uncovered (Brinkmann, 2013), but not so large that the data become repetitive or unwieldy to analyse (Mason, 2010). In this study, a sample of 10 was achieved, after which interviewing ceased. This was partly due to difficulties in recruiting additional participants but it was also apparent that the later interviews were generating limited new information. As such, this sample was approaching data saturation and,

Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Nature of visual impairment
Tamara	27	Female	Completely blind since birth
Colin	50	Male	Limited vision since late teens
Malik	31	Male	Completely blind since childhood
Jamie	21	Male	Limited close-up vision
Grace	24	Female	Limited vision
Marina	27	Female	Completely blind since birth
Cecelia	27	Female	Limited vision
Paulo	31	Male	Completely blind
Harry	30	Male	Completely blind since birth
Matthew	28	Male	Limited vision since childhood

although complete saturation may not have been achieved, O'Reilly and Parker (2013) argue that the adequacy of a sample depends as much on the appropriateness of the data set as on the number of participants. In this case, it was clear that the interviews obtained were more than sufficient to encompass and illustrate the positive holiday experiences of visually-impaired tourists. A similar sample size has been used by other researchers who have focussed on the experiences of TwVI (e.g. vom Lehn (2010); Wan (2013), Small (2015), Devile and Kastenholz (2018); Huang and Lau (2020); Yeh & Fan, 2023).

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in two stages. The first stage employed framework analysis (Goldsmith, 2021). This is a five-stage process which involves data familiarization; constructing an initial thematic framework; indexing and sorting the data against the framework; reviewing and refining the data extracts; and the summary and display of the resulting themes. This process identified 4 top-level themes, one of which was positive holiday experiences. At this stage, the data relating only to positive experiences were analysed a second time using thematic analysis. This is a flexible but rigorous technique for identifying 'patterns of meaning' within qualitative data and it can be employed with any size of sample (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). An inductive (that is, data-driven) form of thematic analysis was adopted which involved a series of sequential stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first was repeated reading of the interview transcripts to facilitate data familiarization. This was followed by coding of the full data set with codes being features of the data that were of interest or significance to the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next stage involved the grouping of codes together to create 'candidate' themes. These themes were generated from the data and not the pre-conceptions of the researchers (Terry et al., 2017). These candidate themes were then critically reviewed with reference to both the theme content (the codes which they comprised) and their 'fit' against the full data set. At this point, the previous stage was repeated to produce a different set of themes which were similarly tested against the data. Once a final set of themes had been generated these were each given a name. This analysis generated six themes but one (the role of travel companions) has been extensively considered by previous researchers and for reasons of space is not considered here.

Research findings

All participants spoke with enthusiasm about their enjoyment of holidays (see Huang & Lau, 2020) in ways that were indistinguishable from those of sighted people. Most enjoyed international travel (although not all could afford to do so regularly). Their preferences varied: some chose beach holidays, some preferred city breaks, others sought adventure and activity, and some sought a combination of elements. Most travelled with friends, family or a partner. Some took package holidays, others arranged their own travels independently. Some stayed in hotels, others booked AirBnB, and several enjoyed cruising. In many ways, PwVI are no different from 'ordinary' tourists (Packer et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2011).

All participants spoke about challenges and barriers when on holiday which mirrored what has been extensively documented by past research. At the same time, all could identify positive experiences that had contributed to a memorable holiday. We examine five types of such experience below.

Excellent customer service

As the review of literature identified, there is something of a stereotype of poorly trained frontline staff who have a limited understanding of the needs of TwVI. However, such experiences are not universal. Most of our participants had little difficulty in recounting instances of outstanding service and support from frontline staff, in a range of contexts (although mostly in European destinations). For example, Tamara and Matthew talked about their experiences in hotels:

we stayed in a hotel for two nights and again, they deserve a huge shout out, because they were also extremely helpful. And we were two blind girls staying in the hotel and yeah, they showed us where our rooms were, they even said 'if you'd like to go over routes again', and they helped us with breakfast and stuff and yeah, really, really top-notch service. Very helpful, very aware of our accessibility needs, but also, like just saying, like, 'how would you like us to help you?'

the staff at the hotel, they went above and beyond every request we asked of them, they did to the best of their abilities ... in that hotel it was really good. They couldn't do enough for you. They literally could not do enough for you and it was brilliant. So I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Others, such as Jamie, had received excellent experiences at airports: 'The staff at the airport, both UK and Barcelona ... they were really helpful. We'd get through security and helping us from the plane to where we need to go'. On some occasions outstanding service was offered from unexpected sources. Cecelia told of a coach driver who had gone out of his way to provide visual descriptions of what everybody else was seeing:

We had a really enthusiastic coach driver ... And it was actually like being on a tour bus. He would slow down and be like, 'Oh, and here you can see this and that'. And he was really detailed about explaining everything and describing things. And it was kind of like a special tour anyway, something from his descriptions, even if they were things that were too far away for me to see. From that, I felt like I got a good idea of what everybody else was seeing. It was such a nice experience.

Such experiences throw doubt on generalizing claims that frontline tourism staff have a poor understanding of the needs of TwVI. Instead, there are evidently tourism and hospitality employees who understand how to cater for the needs of PwVI. In some cases, this may reflect formal training provided by employers. But it is also important to keep in mind a broader goodwill and willingness to assist that characterizes many frontline employees within tourism/hospitality. Such employees operate within the framework of a transactional commercial exchange whereby hosts provide services which guests pay for (Lashley, 2000). But hospitality can mean much more than this: there are some (perhaps many) employees who have an attitude of 'hospitableness' (Telfer, 1996, p. 88): a genuine and altruistic concern for the pleasure and wellbeing of guests that Shani (2010, p. 316) terms the 'spirit of hospitality'.

In this context, many employees who encounter a visually-impaired guest will call upon the spirit of hospitality to do their best to help. If they have received formal training about dealing with PwVI, the attitude of hospitableness can reinforce what they have learnt. If they have not received such training, hospitableness (and the desire to go the extra mile) can come to the fore instead. The spirit of hospitality means that many employees will recognize that visually-impaired visitors have particular needs and will do their best to accommodate these (even if their approach may, at first, be cautious or improvisatory). Consequently, employees are an interpersonal facilitator who can significantly enhance the experience of TwVI (see Devile & Kastenholz, 2018). Poor service and attitudes from staff can ruin a holiday but sympathetic and understanding employees can make a holiday unforgettable.

The kindness of strangers

Just as many participants recalled positive encounters with staff, many also recounted memorable encounters with local people in their destination. Most spoke of unexpected and spontaneous acts of kindness from complete strangers and such encounters are additional interpersonal factors which can facilitate positive experiences. Marina gave one example: 'people were just so helpful. Without even us asking, like, if people saw that we were lost, people would just like, come up to us and ask if they could help'. Jamie told a similar story:

There was one time when we were a bit lost and we needed to get back to the hotel. And this really lovely guy actually walked us back. I think it was about a 10-minute walk maybe and he was just happy to walk us back and he was lovely, we were chatting to him. And it's great because you meet new people as well as them helping you

so it's kind of two good things in one really. And I think all of that together was why it was the best holiday I've been on so far.

Others recounted the help they had received from other tourists:

This guy was really lovely. And he was just 'Oh, do you need any help? Just come with me? I've just got off the same flight, we'll just go together'. And he was really lovely, and really helpful. And just yeah, it really made all the difference. And that was just someone from the general public. (Cecelia)

Then just some British guy was like 'come this way'. And ... I'm like, literally eating at his table. He got up from his table, and basically just took us to the bar without us asking him. (Marina)

Trust is a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday routines (Mollering, 2006). However, placing trust in others is an integral part of the everyday experiences of PwVI, who appear to develop higher levels of interpersonal trust than sighted people (Oleszkiewicz, 2021). This is particularly the case when on holiday where TwVI face unfamiliar geography, culture, and language. Of course, all tourists face these challenges (Williams & Baláž, 2021) and deal with them with varying degrees of competence. However, the need to trust strangers (particularly based on predominantly non-visual information) is a distinctive (and probably defining) feature of holidays among TwVI (Small et al., 2012). Needing to trust strangers in this way implies vulnerability, uncertainty and risk, but can also lead to spontaneous and rewarding encounters. Fortunately, none of our participants had an experience where their need to trust in strangers had been abused. Instead, their experiences highlighted the interdependent nature of interactions between visually-impaired tourists and others in the destination (although such experiences may not be universal).

Feeling included at visitor attractions

TwVI often have impoverished experiences at visitor attractions (Kong & Loi, 2017; Lam et al., 2020; Poria et al., 2011). Many attractions are designed around visual experiences, and interpretation has long been predominantly visual. Consequently, attractions often become sites of passive exclusion for TwVI (Hayhoe, 2017; Small et al., 2012). Indeed, some may decide not to visit attractions when on holiday. When they do, they may be less engaged due to a lack of accessible interpretation (Lam et al., 2020). However, the situation is changing rapidly, at least in some parts of the world. The combination of greater awareness of the needs of PwVI, equality legislation, and advances in assistive technology means that there is more provision of alternative experiences and interpretations for PwVI at visitor attractions. Our participants spoke with enthusiasm of how audio presentations had enhanced their visits to heritage and cultural attractions. For example:

It was like an old Roman amphitheatre ... And they had done this incredible audio guide in English and French and Spanish ... and it was a kind of dramatized audio guide where you'd sit there and they would tell the story of the gladiators fighting. And then they had the sound effects of the gladiator fight. And you're literally sitting on these stone steps overlooking the amphitheatre and it felt really weird, looking out on, and you could really imagine yourself being there. And I thought that was amazing. (Paulo)

This audio tour was available to all visitors, and it illustrates how such technology, if well designed, can be transformative for TwVI, reducing structural barriers and enabling them to experience an attraction in a similar way to a sighted tourist.

Other participants told of how attractions had made special provision for PwVI through tactile experiences. These sort of interpersonal encounters were able to create very positive experiences for visually-impaired tourists. Cecelia told this story:

Certain trips that I've been on where ... you can get assisted guided tours, where they'll bring things to you that maybe normal members of the public just walking around aren't allowed to, I don't know, breach barriers or touch certain props or something like that. Whereas, they'll make exceptions and bring things so that you can have more of a tactile experience ... I think it built a better understanding, it built a really good atmosphere. Whereas before, we could have been breezed through a certain attraction in half an hour, it actually took all day because they took the time to show us a little bit of something from everywhere ... it was the Harry Potter

studios where they bought props out to touch and feel and things like that, ones that were actually used on set, and you'd be like 'Oh my gosh, the actors that actually worked in this film touched this' ... and it just made that experience so much deeper, and more memorable.

Given the opportunity, TwVI can make full use of senses other than sight to appreciate a visitor attraction (see Huang & Lau, 2020; Qiao et al., 2023; Yeh & Fan, 2023) and are often interested in using touch (as well as sound) to experience an attraction (see Hayhoe, 2017; vom Lehn, 2010).

Innovations in assistive technology are often identified as having transformative potential for enabling PwVI to participate fully in attractions, particularly museums (Lam et al., 2020; Mesquita & Carneiro, 2021). Innovative interpretation (often based on smartphones/apps) relies less on purely visual communication and is therefore easily accessible to PwVI. However, technology, of itself, is not always essential for making an attraction accessible: indeed there may be a danger to reifying technology as the solution to the exclusion of PwVI. Equally important is the approach and attitude of employees in attractions. Whether or not they have received formal training, they can call upon their own version of the 'spirit of hospitality' to provide an inclusive experience for PwVI. This allows such visitors to experience an attraction in a rich way which, while different from that of sighted tourists, can be equally rewarding. Again, the actions of other people can be the most effective way of removing barriers to participation for PwVI (see Lam et al., 2020).

Help from assistive navigational technology

Navigating an unfamiliar destination is a significant challenge for TwVI (Kong & Loi, 2017; Richards et al., 2010; Small et al., 2012). However, in recent years, GPS-based assistive technology has transformed navigation for PwVI, reducing structural barriers both within everyday life and when on holiday. Examples include generic smartphone apps such as Google Maps which can provide audio directions to a pre-designated destination. Other features are specifically designed for PwVI: GPS-based navigation apps include Blind Square and Soundscape which provide an audio commentary on the user's surrounding environment. More innovative apps (such as Aira, Be My Eyes and Tap-TapSee) use a smartphone camera (or smartglasses) to connect to a sighted agent who provides an audio description or commentary enabling a visually-impaired person to navigate. Such apps obviously require access to mobile data or Wi-Fi (and may not be available in all locations).

Most of our participants were Millennials, a group very comfortable with smartphone technology. Consequently, they were well aware of how assistive technology was transforming navigation. Matthew remarked:

Technology has come forward in leaps and bounds especially in the last five years, especially accessibility technology ... because one of the big things is independence. So to this end, it enables people to leave their house and travel from A to B with limited human assistance if they have certain apps on their phones.

Many spoke with enthusiasm about how such technology had helped their wayfinding on holiday. In some cases, generic apps provided invaluable assistance:

I managed to get everyone around because I downloaded the Google Maps route. And I figured out that you can download it offline on my phone. So I downloaded the map that made sure it was offline because I didn't have access to Wi-Fi. (Paulo)

Others spoke of how assistive technology specifically designed for PwVI had helped them:

We ended up using Aira. And with Aira we found - like if we're walking from one place to another, Aira would tell us 'now we're passing this shop. Now that shop'. And that was really great. Because as a blind person, you just never can do that. Like, you could just look out the car window, or just walk down the street and be like, 'I'm passing this shop, and I'm passing that shop'. So that was amazing, we went into so many shops because of that. (Marina)

There's this really pretty lake, and we wanted to find some benches where we could sit and chill and we bought some Belgian waffles. And when we went with Aira - so my friend had done a route and ... she basically lost her

way, so she was like, 'okay, let's use Aira' to find the way to the spot where she knew and ... she [the Aira agent] basically led us in a different direction to get to the place, get to the benches where we could sit and have our waffles ... it definitely makes you feel a lot more independent, because you're still having to explore, but then you have someone who's also guiding you ... in terms of navigation, it's really helpful. (Tamara)

Dependence on the sighted is a core part of the experience of PwVI (Small, 2015) but holidays are an opportunity to escape this dependence (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011). Nevertheless, wayfinding in an unfamiliar destination remains challenging for PwVI, when they are most dependent on others (Small et al., 2012). Independence, on the other hand, is associated with autonomy, dignity and self-determination, something recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2022). Similarly, independence (along with dignity and equity) is an underpinning principle of accessible tourism (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011a). In this context, the explosion of navigational assistive technology is transformative for TwVI, reducing reliance on sighted companions and offering new opportunities for independence during a holiday (Lam et al., 2020). Not all TwVI will want this degree of independence and some (particularly older) people may be more cautious in how they engage with their destinations. But younger travellers appear to relish the opportunity to explore their destination. For example, Jamie stated: 'I do love the independent side of it. And, you know, getting lost, trying to find your way in another country. There's just something invigorating about that'. For more confident visually-impaired tourists, navigational technology allows them to do what many sighted tourists enjoy: step outside their comfort zone and develop skills of intrapersonal independence and autonomy in an unfamiliar destination (Huang & Lau, 2020). The confidence they develop will, in turn, feed into their future holiday experiences and destination choices. Furthermore, apps and social media increasingly allow TwVI to share experiences and advice (Huang & Lau, 2020) allowing others to benefit.

Support offered by specialist holiday companies

Various specialist holiday companies arrange holidays for PwVI. The best known are Traveleyes (which pairs TwVI with sighted guides) and Seable (which arranges bespoke holidays for PwVI). Six participants had been on holidays organized by such companies. Their experiences were positive. For example:

I went with Seable for my honeymoon ... I thought they were really good, because they provided a very bespoke service. We managed to book in our trips. And also, there was somebody to take us around from A to B ... crucially he had the local knowledge. So because he was a local himself, and then us being a couple as well, it was really tastefully done in the sense that sometimes if we were taken to a nice restaurant, he sometimes would stay and eat with us if it was in the middle of the day and we were on the way somewhere. But if it was a kind of evening meal, he would quietly go 'I'll leave you guys to it'. (Paulo)

Grace spoke in similar terms about a Traveleyes holiday:

I love it ... for me to be able to go abroad where I want to go, without thinking 'what do my friends and family want to do?' You know, it's just my trip. I can decide to do anything. So for me, I value that, it's a hugely kind of special thing, that it's on my terms ... It's nice to go with people I haven't really got to know and then get to know them over the time. I think the independence is huge.

Meeting new people was an important part of the Traveleyes experience and some participants made lasting friendships with their sighted guides. Grace recounted:

I actually made a really good friend, who was also in their 20s, so around my age. We shared a room together, because you either pay for your room separately, or you can just pay a part of the price to just share a room and she basically became a really good friend of mine ... me and her are still friends now.

Although not affordable by all, holidays organized by specialist operators give PwVI the assurance that everything will be arranged by people who understand their particular needs. Such holidays can significantly reduce structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers within the holiday experiences of PwVI and facilitate positive and memorable experiences. Holidays which pair sighted guides

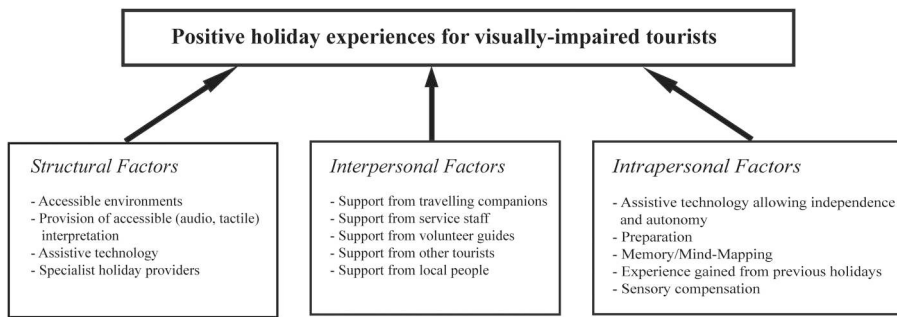


Figure 2. Factors that can create positive holiday experiences for TwVI.

with PwVI are not without their difficulties (Small, 2015) but nevertheless this can significantly enhance the holiday experiences of TwVI. Such holidays are another way of facilitating independence and self-determination, and reducing a sense of helplessness (Qiao et al., 2022c). Specialist holidays also create opportunities for meeting and interacting with new people, once again emphasizing the importance of human contact and interaction within a holiday.

Conclusions

We do not claim that PwVI always have an easy time on holiday. Tourism destinations have more to do in providing accessible environments and reducing barriers to TwVI. However, it is misleading to assume that the experiences of TwVI are predominantly negative. This paper has focused on the somewhat neglected issue of how PwVI can have positive holiday experiences, and has identified a range of structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that can contribute to such experiences. A model of these factors is presented in Figure 2. It is apparent that two things in particular are most important in creating these positive experiences: the role of other people, and the contribution of assistive technology.

People play a vitally important role within the holiday experiences of PwVI. Despite stereotypes that tourism and hospitality employees lack the training or understanding to cater for TwVI, our participants reported many examples of excellent customer service. This may reflect a growing awareness of the importance of accessible tourism and the provision of training by tourism businesses. But equally important is the often-overlooked 'spirit of hospitality' which animates many employees and leads them to go the extra mile in helping their visually-impaired guests, whether or not they have been trained to do so. As training for understanding the needs of TwVI becomes more commonplace, the experiences of such tourists will continue to improve. But it is not just about employees. Complete strangers in a destination (whether local people or other tourists) can also play an important role in looking out for TwVI and offering assistance where needed. Specialist travel companies that understand the specific needs of PwVI also play a vital role for some travellers. It is a cliché to state that tourism and hospitality are 'people industries' but clearly people are important structural and interpersonal facilitators who can play a huge role in creating a sense of belonging and inclusivity. This, in turn, can significantly enhance participation and emotional fulfilment among TwVI.

The second factor is technology. Assistive technologies are not a universal solution to the barriers faced by TwVI but can clearly enhance their experiences, particularly among younger people who embrace the potential of new technologies. Accessible audio interpretation is a structural facilitator that allows a rich experience of a visitor attraction and, more importantly, allows TwVI to feel a sense of inclusion and equality. Ease of wayfinding is another aspect of providing quality tourism experiences for PwVI (Small et al., 2012) and navigational technology has advanced at an extraordinary pace since much previous research into the holiday experiences of PwVI. The combination of smartphones and apps has transformed wayfinding in destinations, allowing TwVI greater intrapersonal

independence and autonomy. Assistive technology reduces interpersonal dependence on sighted people when on holiday, whilst also reducing the stress that can arise from being lost in an unfamiliar destination. It also gives PwVI more scope to travel as independent tourists.

This paper has established that the holiday experiences of PwVI are not always defined by difficulties or barriers. Instead, a range of structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal facilitators can ensure positive experiences when on holiday. However, the limitations of this research should be acknowledged. First, the sample size employed in this study was relatively small and although we are confident that it was sufficient to illustrate the positive experiences of TwVI, it is possible that a larger sample would have allowed such experiences to be examined with greater nuance (and may have pointed to additional positive experiences). Second, the findings are based on a relatively small number of British participants who were predominantly Millennials. As such, they may have been more confident as travellers and more open to new experiences than some older tourists. That said, apart from the embrace of navigational technologies, the positive experiences that they identified were not contingent upon their age. Third, the holiday experiences examined in this paper were predominantly based in Europe and the experiences of TwVI in other parts of the world (where legislation ensuring the rights of PwD is less developed) might be quite different.

Future research can explore positive experiences of TwVI in more detail with reference to the structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors which facilitate such experiences. First, there is a need for more research into what makes a high-quality holiday experience for PwVI. This will illuminate both the multisensory nature of holidays of PwVI, but also the ways in which this group can have rich experiences based on senses other than sight. Second, future research can focus on older PwVI to establish if their positive experiences mirror those of younger PwVI. This would also highlight changes that are necessary to ensure such experiences. Finally, future research can focus on tourism employees and their approaches to the needs of PwVI. In addition to establishing both the effectiveness (or limitations) of formal training, this will illuminate how a 'spirit of hospitality' animates such employees when they encounter TwVI.

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