

An investigation into the spa experiences of wheelchair users

Presentation abstract

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The modern spa and wellness industry has its origins in ancient medicine and social bathing culture, promoting health and wellbeing for thousands of years. (Smith and Puczko, 2008). Today, the industry is growing worldwide, with the popularity of spas increasing, and new facilities opening every year (Global Wellness Institute, 2017). Spa visits have been described as ideal for people living with lifelong disabilities and these institutions market themselves on the rejuvenating benefits to be gained from their facilities and treatments, (Smith and Puczko, 2008). Studies have shown that numerous spa experiences such as Balneotherapy (Gass and Gass, 2001; Varga et al, 2008; Ucok et al, 2008; Zhang et al, 2014) are beneficial to those with joint, spinal and mobility conditions. Watsu hydrotherapy has been found to be effective in improving symptoms of fibromyalgia and acute muscle pain (Resende Silveira Leite et al, 2013), and Pelotherapy (the application of therapeutic muds and minerals in treatments such as rasuls) has been proven to have anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties (Suarez et al, 2013; Gomez et al, 2013; Ortega et al, 2017). These treatments would be of particular benefit to those in wheelchairs, for rehabilitation for their primary disability. Those with a long-term spinal cord injury can suffer secondary health conditions - such as upper body pain acquired from self-propulsion in the wheelchair (Adriaansen et al, 2013; Flemmer and Flemmer, 2015). These can be treated by massage (Sritoomma et al, 2012; Keeratitanont, et al 2015; Peamruetai, et al 2016).

Roughly 1% of the population of developed countries use a wheelchair (Flemmer and Flemmer, 2015), with 1.2 million wheelchair users in the UK, of these, two thirds are regular users (NHS England, no date). Darcy and Dickson (2009) estimate that around 30% of a population will have access requirements in their lifetime, such as temporarily needing a wheelchair due to injury for example. This figure is expected to increase as the population ages, along with the rise of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cancer, and cardio vascular disease (World Health Organisation, 2011). There is therefore an assumption that wheelchair users will become a larger customer segment, and hence access will become an issue of greater importance for businesses in general. The spa industry will need to create accessible experiences in order to meet customer requirements, which will have the incentive of new financial opportunities. Flemmer and Flemmer (2015) estimate that 90% of wheelchairs used are pushrim-propelled, with no gears or power assistance, with even physically strong users facing environmental problems such as inclinations of sloping surfaces, and ground textures which increase rolling resistance – grass, gravel, carpet. This could have implications for spa, especially in outdoor areas such as zen gardens or relaxation areas.

There is very little existing literature on the experiences of wheelchair users in spas, so other industries have been considered. In tourism and aviation, Davies and Christie (2017), Chang and Chen (2011), and Michopoulou et al 2015, found key issues that people with disabilities face whilst travelling. One of the biggest was the lack of accessible toilets, with some participants saying they put off flying altogether because of this, or they take drastic methods such as catheterisation to avoid having to use the toilet. This could also be an issue for spas, especially in much older buildings that have been converted from previous use and not purpose built with accessible toilet facilities. Other issues mentioned included painful manual handling experiences when taking their airline seats, suffering injury due to unsuitable lifting/transportation equipment, or poor training of staff. Emotional distress in the form of humiliation and embarrassment was also mentioned, occurring due to poor communication or organisation by the airline company. This could also become an issue within spas if a guests in a wheelchair arrived and

reception were not prepared to receive them. Finally, staff communication and training was identified. Participants felt that staff are polite but often have little knowledge about wheelchair users needs and often end up having to phone someone senior for help.

In the hotel sector, interactions with both the physical environment and human services have also had issues raised. In a study by Poria and Reichel (2010) staff training and conduct in particular were mentioned. Lack of knowledge of how to help lift a wheelchair, or transfer a person from a wheelchair to a dining room chair for example also triggered feelings of embarrassment, with a participant stating they felt like a piece of luggage. This may also apply to spa for example if a client needs to be transferred onto a massage couch and the therapist is unsure of how to do this. Additionally, the inaccuracy of the description of how accessible the hotel was, sometimes an entire hotel has been classed as accessible when only some areas were suitable such as the restaurant. Finding accessible accommodation is a big problem itself, and when a wheelchair user arrives, the descriptions frequently do not match the reality.

From the literature it can be concluded that there limited (if any) information on the experiences of wheelchair users in spa settings. Evidence from other service sector industries suggest that there are a number of barriers that may be also evident in spas. Hence, this research will investigate the experiences of wheelchair users in a spa setting. It concentrates on the spa experiences of UK wheelchair users by (1) examining their journey through the spa, from booking to payment, and (2) identifying their physical, emotional, and informational barriers

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Biography : Dr. Elina (Eleni) Michopoulou is a Senior Lecturer in Business Management at University of Derby, Buxton. She teaches on subjects relating to the management and marketing of Tourism, Hospitality, Events and Spa industries. She holds a PhD in Accessible Tourism Information Systems from University of Surrey, UK. Her research interests include technological applications and information systems in tourism, online consumer behaviour and technology acceptance. She is particularly interested in the field of accessible and wellness tourism, which she has actively been researching for over ten years. She is the European Editor of the International Journal of Spa and Wellness. Elina has also acted as a Guest Editor for a Special Issue on Accessible Tourism for the Journal of Tourism Futures. Previously she was involved in the European Commission funded Project OSSATE (One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe).

2nd speaker : Sarah Hilton

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