The Reality of Hospitality Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

Accessible tourism is a fast-growing sector. However, despite the decades of implementing initiatives and legislation, there is still much improvement needed to serve persons with disabilities (PwDs). This study in Singapore was designed with the aim of mapping their customer journey for a hotel stay.

Two research methods were used. There were interviews with PwDs and hotel staff. PwDs shared about their experience from the booking stage till the post-stay phase; the staff disclosed their knowledge about the accessibility features at their hotels, and their own experiences of serving PwD-guests.

Then, there were on-site observations of the top 10 hotels in Singapore, based on TripAdvisor listing at the time of the fieldwork. The purpose was to appraise the accessibility inside an accessible room, and at public areas such as car parks, lobbies and restaurants. The key findings from these data collections were then compiled to illustrate the customer journey of PwDs.

The research outcome reflects more touchpoints of frustration and inconvenience, as compared to positive moments. It also highlights that accessible hospitality is beyond the design of physical fixtures alone. It requires multi-pronged coordination that involves staff training and even a review of governmental guidelines. Only concerted efforts might concretely enhance PwDs' hotel experience.

Though this study was conducted in Singapore, the findings are applicable to hospitality industry in any country. The research methodology can also be replicated by different organisations to evaluate their own actual level of accessibility.

1. Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis on accessible tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) even devoted 2016 to this theme (UN Tourism, 2016). At the same time, there is expanded awareness about the huge commercial impacts of PwDs on the industry. Globally, PwDs have an estimated value of US$60 million, with a 12% annual growth rate (Catalano, 2024).

Countries all over the world have begun executing measures to meet this rising demand for accessibility. For example, many restaurants in the Netherlands have braille menus (Sesame Access, 2023). Even Japan that had a reputation of being inaccessible, now has over 90% of its rail stations being accessible (Japan National Tourism Organisation, 2024).

In the US, hotels must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. For instance, door and corridor widths as well as furniture heights must be suitable for PwDs. Furthermore, hotel management and staff have to address PwDs' needs effectively while respecting appropriate boundaries (ADA National Network, 2024).

Over in Singapore, there is the Code on Barrier Free Accessibility that was drawn up by the Building and Construction Authority (BCA). Established in 1990 and updated six times since then, the code serves to inform developers and architects on how to make buildings more user-friendly for PwDs (Building and Construction Authority, 2025). However, older hotels may not be compliant with the latest version of the code. This is because only post-1990 buildings undergoing renovation or refurbishment that require plan submission, are legally mandated to provide basic accessibility for PwDs (Chew, 2022). Additionally, the code covers building works and not hotel room appliances, fixtures and furnishings.

2. Challenges Faced by PWDs During Hotel Stay

Despite the initiatives and legislation, PwDs continue to face challenges during their hotel stay. The difficulty begins even at the booking stage when they search for accommodation.

A study of 1,000 hotels worldwide revealed that more than half did not offer rooms for PwDs (Mobility Mojo, 2020). For properties that have accessible features, 18% of them do not adequately or openly communicate the information (De Pascale et al. 2023; Fennel & Garrod, 2022). Then during the stay, PwDs' experience continues to be adversely affected at the various touchpoints.

2.1 Rooms

Many hotels use access cards with magnetic strips that are generally plain and do not have braille signs, making it hard for individuals with visual impairments to locate their rooms. Wheelchair users face another type of hurdle when they try to open the heavy doors while manoeuvring their devices at the same time (Tutuncu & Lieberman, 2016).

Upon entering the rooms, the space can be restricted, and the bed height is often too high for wheelchair users to carry out independent transfers (Hoireabhaird, 2024). Moving on to the bathroom, the built-in shower seat is usually located on the opposite side of the shower control, causing a separation problem (Stasell & Bathje, 2021).

The obstacles extend to the amenities. For wheelchair users, the positions of towels, room temperature controllers and closet hangers might be non-reachable. As for the visually impaired guests, there are no tactile instructions on how to use the water taps. There is also no way to distinguish between shampoo and conditioner bottles (Tutuncu & Lieberman, 2016).

2.2 Public areas

In public areas, PwDs are unable to access certain spots due to absence of ramps, automatic doors, suitable door-width, handrails and braille signs on elevators (Mandhani et al., 2023; Mangwiro et al., 2019).

Additionally, most lobby toilets do not have emergency push buttons to activate for help, and the restaurants lack space for easy navigation (Alkawai & Alowayyed, 2017; Uchihashi, 2022). All these hurdles have persistently caused dissatisfaction and inconvenience to PwDs and their caregivers (Dupuy, 2023; Senghor et al., 2017).

2.3 Staff's ability to assist

PwDs' unhappiness and stress are compounded when insufficiently trained staff display negative attitudes or lack of knowledge (Jamin et al., 2024; Kong & Loi, 2017). It was found in past research that a high proportion of staff do not know enough about their property's accessibility offerings. They are not trained to assist PWD-guests too (Kalargyrou et al., 2018; Poria et al., 2011).

Among the staff themselves, effectual internal communication is also crucial to meeting the needs of PwDs. For example, if the front desk person fails to inform the housekeeping team that the room is occupied by PwDs, it might result in the re-arrangement of personal belongings that impedes PwDs' easy reach of the items (Stasell & Bathje, 2021).

2.4 Marketing and publicity

Despite the pervasive reliance on online information and PwDs' willingness to pay for accessible accommodation, many hotels do not leverage this touchpoint to promote their accessibility features, adequately and accurately (Singh & Ismail, 2020; Tavares, 2022; Zhang & Yang, 2019). There is a major gap between hotels' actual provision of accessible features versus what they communicate online. This has led to PwDs having to contact the hotel directly to confirm details (Cole et al., 2019).

3. Experience Design and The Customer Journey Map

The hospitality industry places great importance on the guest experience and perceives it to be the essence of their business. As competition intensifies, service offerings alone are insufficient as a tool of differentiation. It has become necessary to provide pleasant and memorable experience (Chang & Chiu, 2023; Khan et al., 2015).

Many accessibility-related recommendations pivot on the concept of experience design. It is a systematic approach that involves designers in empathetic exposures and familiarity with users' senses, cognition and emotions; it focuses on the experience instead of the product (Dalsgård & Halskov, 2006; Lallemand et al., 2014). When used in the hotel setting, this methodology puts designers in the shoes of the guests, identifying with their thoughts, feelings, priorities, and preferences (Khan et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2017).

As part of the experience design process, one critical tool is the customer journey map that is used to plan products and processes from the users' perspective (Dey, 2019). The map is essentially a visual representation cum storytelling that shows how consumers engage with a service through a series of touchpoints: from decision-making to consumption and post-purchase (Alawad et al., 2018; Bernard & Andritsos, 2017; Utami & Darma, 2024). It is a norm for customer journey map to reflect the user's emotions at each touchpoint (Bascur et al., 2019; Rojas et al., 2021).

Understanding the customer journey map can help organisations identify potential problems that may negatively impact consumers' satisfaction. This is especially relevant for the hotel industry, given the complexity of interactions between guests and the myriad of service touchpoints (Dey, 2019).

4. Research Objective and Design

Majority of previous research has concentrated on PwDs' satisfaction levels about hotel facilities and staff interactions. There is limited use of a customer journey map to

systematically document the user experience during PwDs' hotel stay. Thus, this study was designed to fill the knowledge gaps by compiling PwDs' encounters from booking stage till post-check-out phase.

4.1 Interviews

There are two sample units: PwDs and hotel staff. The PwDs comprised four individuals with visual impairments and two wheelchair-users. These two types of disabilities were selected because they constitute the main segments in the PwD community. More than two billion people have near or distant vision impairment, and over 65 million are wheelchair users (Torrey, 2023; World Health Organisation, 2023).

All the PwDs in this study travel at least once a year, mostly with their family or caregivers. However, a couple of them do travel independently. Besides the use of an interview guide, a 360-degree video featuring hotel facilities and amenities was used to help PwDs recall their stay experience. For PwDs who have visual impairment, the video content was orally described to them.

As for the hotel staff, the seven of them were from the operational departments of front office, housekeeping, and restaurant. Each of them has had at least one year of service in the industry. They were surveyed on their awareness about their hotels' accessibility features and their self-appraised ability to assist PwDs.

4.2 On-site observations

Regarding the observations, one accessible room (with permission from the property) and public areas of 10 hotels were investigated. Checklists were utilised alongside a measuring tape to record the various dimensions. To have a more objective assessment about the level of accessibility, the empirical data were matched against the guidelines of Singapore's Building and Construction Authority (BCA).

5. Findings

The findings are organised in this order: interviews with PwDs and staff, followed by on-site observations.

5.1 Interviews with PWDs

The six PwD interviewees are de-identified and coded as PwD1 to PwD6.

Pre-arrival stage

The PwDs agreed that it is difficult to find online information about hotels' accessibility features. PwD3 shared that before making a reservation, they must call every hotel to ask

if the property could accede to special requests such as increasing the brightness of corridor lights.

Even if there is information, it lacks comprehensiveness or accuracy. PwD5 recounted this: “it's indicated on the website that there is braille on the (elevator) buttons … but when we arrived at the hotel, there is no braille”.

Check-in / arrival stage

As all the PwDs do not drive, they have not encountered any difficulty with accessibility upon arrival at the car parks. Entering the hotels via automatic or manual doors does not pose any issue as there is always the caregiver or hotel staff to help.

None of the PWDs has faced challenge with the height of the check-in counters too. This is because they would pre-inform hotels so that in-room check-in can be arranged to bypass the counter service.

There is general agreement that hotel staff can anticipate and attend to their needs. For example, prior to arrival, the hotels might contact them about the reservation of designated breakfast spot, or a special service of the staff reading the menu aloud to visually impaired guests.

Stay stage

Collectively, the PwDs highlighted the lack of navigational ease along the corridors. Moreover, the allocated rooms are often far from the elevators. The problem was aggravated by the absence of braille and the dimness of lighting which made it tough to see the room numbers.

The PwDs generally indicated that the bed height is appropriate, and the space inside the room is sufficient. PwD1 and PwD5 (both with visual impairment) even expressed preference for narrower rooms which will be easier for them to navigate. Only PwD2 had suffered bruises from accidental knocks into the furniture due to dim lighting. All the visually impaired PwDs indicated that they face difficulty distinguishing between shampoo and conditioner.

In the restaurants, while the dining table height is suitable, four out of six PwDs have encountered trouble in navigating within the tight spaces. They recalled their difficulties in moving along the pathways and between tables: the spaces are simply too narrow for their mobility aids (i.e., walking canes and wheelchairs).

In addition, PwDs with visual impairment shared that they cannot read menus that have small font sizes. They are unable to see clearly, and no braille menus are available. Thus, the restaurant staff would have to sometimes help by reading the menu aloud.

Check-out / post-stay stage

The PwDs commented that only some hotels would respond to negative feedback by apologising and offering discounts for future stays. There are other properties that do not bother to even provide an acknowledgement. It is indeed a lost opportunity for relationship-building because hotels can leverage online responses to create the impression of higher trustworthiness and care (Sparks et al., 2016).

5.2 Interviews with staff

The hotel staff are coded as HS1 to HS7. All the staff indicated that when guests are PwDs or travelling with PwDs, there will be advanced notice for them to make the necessary preparations. For instance, front office staff will allocate rooms closer to elevators, housekeepers will place non-slip mats in bathrooms, and restaurant staff will reserve tables with ample space. HS2 added that if PwDs travel alone, then the staff will make calls to check on guests' well-being and inquire if further assistance is required.

While most of their properties have ramp access and braille on the elevator button panels, the staff disclosed that PwDs do often request extension cables for power sockets that are hard to reach.

Collectively, the staff admitted that they did not receive specific training on how to assist PwDs. While some of them opined that positive attitude and sincerity would suffice, others expressed misgivings. For instance, HS6 conceded that if PwDs were to encounter difficulties, she would not know how to manage the situation.

5.3 On-site observations

As mentioned earlier, observations were carried out at the public areas of 10 hotels. For in-room observations, only one property granted permission for measurements inside its accessible room.

Measurements in accessible bedroom and bathroom

As shown in Table 1, the observations established that the entrance door width, keycard height, door lock height, light switch and bed distance to wall all meet the standards that are listed in the guide by Building and Construction Authority (BCA). However, the air-control height and the in-room walkway width do not meet BCA's standards.

Additionally, there are several features that are currently excluded from BCA's requirements. These include the heights for fire safety and evacuation route maps, wardrobe amenities, kettle and cups, bedside table, bed, as well as the distance of light switch and charging port to bed. As mentioned earlier in section 1, BCA'S code covers building works, not hotel room appliances, fixtures and furnishings.

Table 1. Measurements – main accessible bedroom

Features	**Measurements (in mm)**	**Compliant with BCA's code requirements**
Entrance door (width)	900	Yes
Keycard slot / scanner (height)	1,100	Yes
Entrance door lock (height)	1,000	Yes
Fire safety and evacuation route map (height)	1,700	Not a requirement
Light switch (height)	780	Yes
Air-con control (height)	1,250	No (difference of 50mm)
In-room walkway (width)	950	No (difference of 250mm)
Wardrobe amenities including hangers, slippers, and extra pillows (height)	60 - 480	Not a requirement
Kettle, cups and spoons (height)	890	Not a requirement
Coffee / bedside table (height)	500	Not a requirement
Bed (height)	550	Not a requirement
Bed distance to the wall	1,500	Yes
Light switch distance to the bed	40	Not a requirement
Charging port distance to the bed	230	Not a requirement

Comparatively, the measurements inside the PwD bathroom all meet BCA's requirements (Table 2). The measured features consist of door width as well as the heights of door handle, standing shower lever, soap amenities, sink, towel hooks, and bathroom mirror.

Table 2. Measurements – accessible bathroom

Features	Measurements (in mm)	Compliance with BCA's code requirements
Entrance door (width)	1,000	Yes
Door handle (from floor level) (height)	800	Yes
Standing shower lever (height)	960	Yes
Soap amenities (height)	1,150	Yes
Sink (height)	810	Yes
Towel hooks (height)	1,200	Yes
Bathroom mirror (mid-point to floor) (height)	1,370	Yes

Public areas

For the car park, majority of the 10 observed hotels have PwD lots and ramps (Table 3). The PwD parking lots are generally located near the elevator lobby and easily spotted. Most car parks are sufficiently bright too (Image 1). The assessment of brightness was done subjectively by the research team; it was not based on the technical measurements of lumens or lux.

However, only two hotel car parks have braille signs to direct individuals with visual impairments towards the exits and lift lobby. What is also missing in most car parks are designated pathways for pedestrians. This poses a risk to PwDs as drivers reportedly pay less attention to their surroundings when parking (Crawford and Brown Law Firm LLP, 2024). So, if PwDs are unable to respond and move away in time, accidents could occur.

Table 3. Observations – carparks

Carpark features	Number of hotels with PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels without PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels not observable (due to restricted access, etc.)
PwD lots	7		3
Brightness	8	2	
Braille signs	2	8	
Ramps	8	1	1

Image 1. A sufficiently bright car park with PwD lot (photo by research team)



Upon entering the lobby, it was noted that five hotels do not have automatic doors at their entrances. This might lead to inconvenience and dissatisfaction to PwDs and their caregivers in the arrival stage, even before the actual stay experience begins (Mandhani et al., 2023; Senghor et al., 2017).

While all the lobby elevators appear to be spacious enough for wheelchairs, only four of the 10 properties have different buttons located at a lower height for wheelchair users' easier reach. Only one reception counter is of a height that is appropriate for wheelchair users (Table 4).

Table 4. Observations – lobbies

Lobby features	Number of hotels with PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels without PwD-suitable features
Automatic door	5	5
Brightness	9	1
Separate elevator button for wheelchair users	4	6
Space in elevator for wheelchair users	10	
Counter height	1	9

As for lobby toilets, nine out of the 10 properties have accessible units (Table 5). However, a few toilet doors require more effort to open as they are rather heavy. Only one toilet has automatic door. Moreover, for cubicle doors are installed with rounded knobs or push / pull bars, that might be difficult for wheelchair users if they are alone (Image 2).

Table 5. Observations – lobby toilets

Lobby toilet features	Number of hotels with PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels without PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels not observable (restricted access)
Accessible units	9	1	
Automatic door	1	7	2
Weight of toilet door	3	5	2
Width of toilet door	4	4	2
Emergency button in cubicle	3	5	2
Position of toilet rolls	7	1	2
Position of sink, mirror and soap dispenser	4	4	2

Image 2. Push / pull bar on toilet door (photo by research team)



When the positions of amenities were observed, it was found that only four out of the 10 lobby toilets have sinks, soap dispensers and mirrors at an appropriate height for wheelchair users. There is a particular toilet roll that is mounted more than 300mm from the toilet seat, making it hard to reach (Image 3).

Image 3. Toilet roll is beyond an arm's reach (photo by research team)



It was noticed that only three accessible cubicles have emergency buttons installed. This finding corresponds with past research that most public toilets do not have push buttons for PWDs to activate for help, which is a point of concern (Alkawai & Alowayyed, 2017; Uchihashi, 2022).

Nearly all the breakfast restaurants do not have any steps leading to the entrances However, upon entry, just half of them are free of obstacles such as furniture or decorations (Table 6). While the aisles to the tables are wide enough (Image 4), only four out of the 10 restaurants have tables that are of suitable height for wheelchair users. This was determined after comparing against BCA's recommended height of 800mm.

Table 6. Observations – restaurants

Restaurant features	Number of hotels with PwD-suitable features	Number of hotels without PwD-suitable features
Step-free entrance	9	1
Furniture / decoration-free at entrance	5	5
Manoeuvrability in restaurant	5	5
Height of tables	4	6

Image 4. Aisles are wide enough for wheelchairs (photo by research team)



5.4 Customer journey map

Using all the findings, the PwDs' key touchpoints in a customer journey map are compiled. As seen in Figures 1 to 3, there are several instances of frustration and inconvenience for PwD-guests.

Figure 1. Customer journey map: pre-arrival and arrival / check-in stages

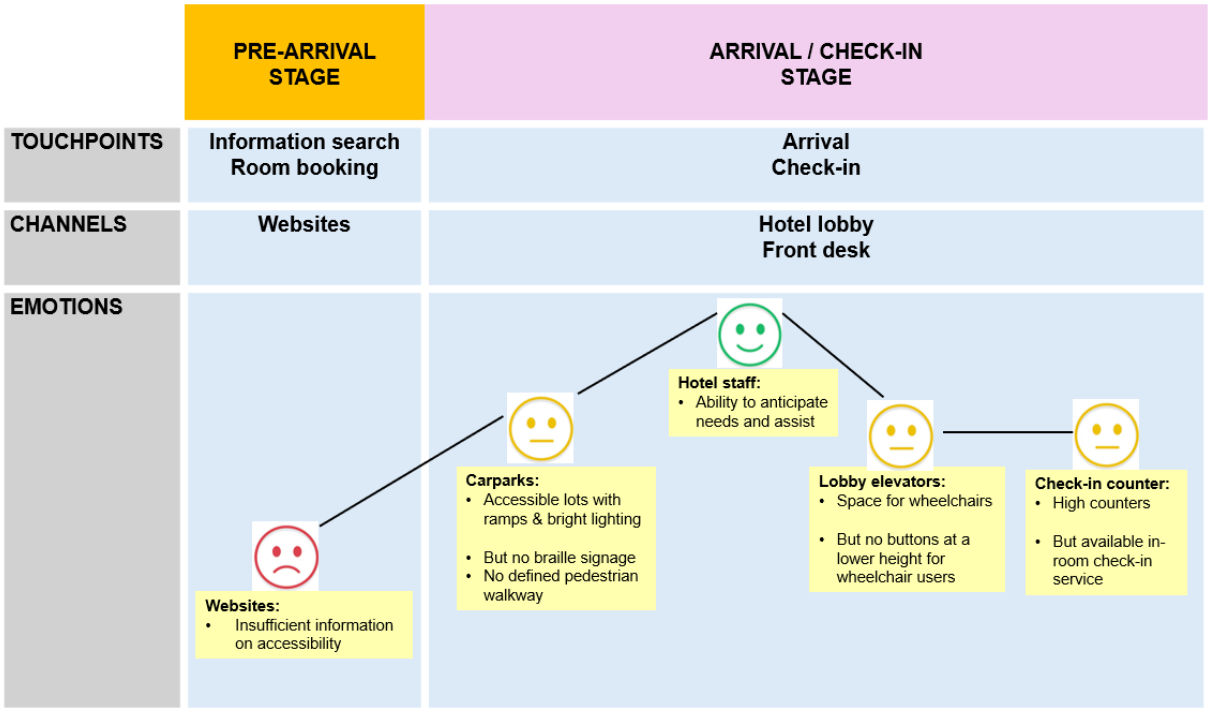


Figure 2. Customer journey map: stay stage

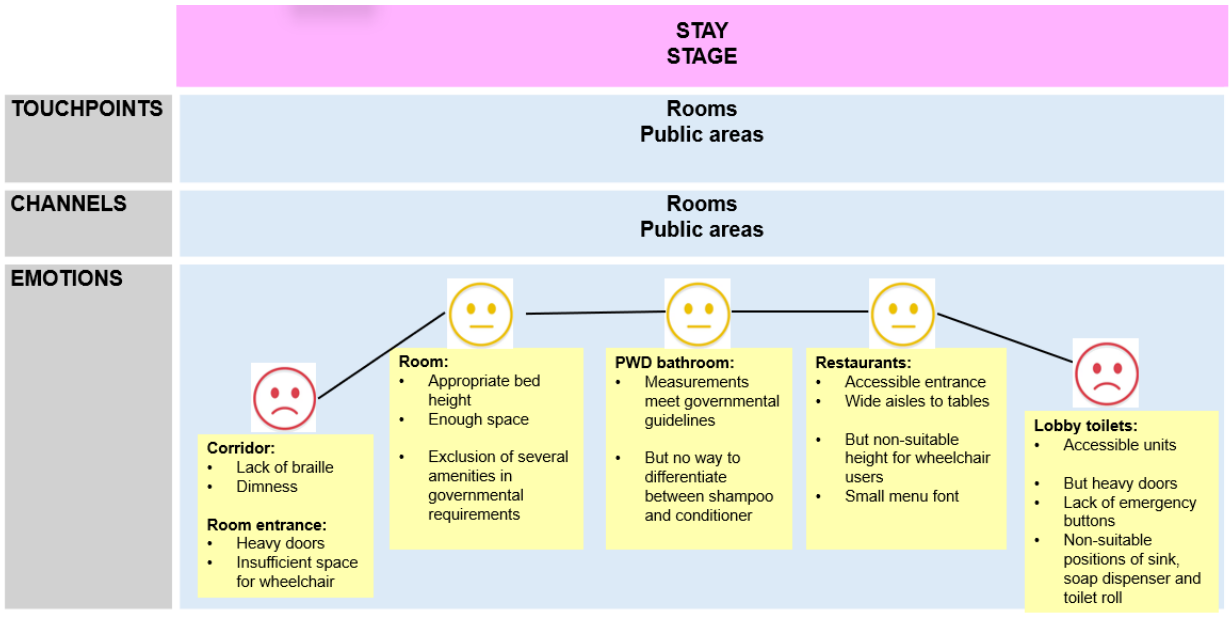
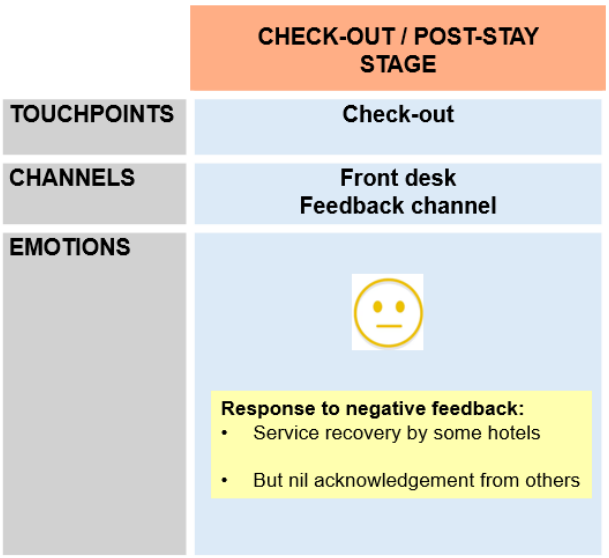


Figure 3. Customer journey map: check-out / post-stay stage



This study's findings are like the outcome of another research project in Taiwan (Chang & Chiu, 2023) that revealed this: out of 32 touch points, nine yielded unhappiness for guests, 10 produced positive emotions and the remaining 13 led to neutral responses. All these suggest that more could be done to enhance PwDs' experience during a hotel stay.

6. Recommendations

There are four recommendations that hotels and governmental agencies can consider. Firstly, hotels can avail a dedicated page on their websites, complete with accurate accessibility-related information. Nowadays, about 80 per cent of travellers look for information on hotel websites before making a booking (Salem & Cavlek, 2016). Among them are PwDs who depend on online information in their decision-making process (Singh & Ismail, 2020; Zhang & Yang, 2019).

Secondly, hotels can upgrade existing facilities and amenities to be more accessible. To better serve visually impaired guests, there can be audio announcements inside elevators, in addition to braille on lift buttons, menus and in-room amenities such as soap bottles. To enhance the experience of wheelchair users, lobby toilets can feature lower sink and soap dispenser; automatic doors can be installed to facilitate easier entry and exit. In Singapore, there is an Accessibility Fund that can help owners of pre-1990 buildings improve the level of accessibility (BCA, 2025).

Thirdly, hotels may consider providing more structured training to help their staff be more knowledgeable and confident in assisting PwDs. Such training could include practical tips that are shared regularly for both existing and new staff (Swanepoel et al., 2020). When staff receive training to develop their competencies, they will proceed to provide better service and increase guest satisfaction – which all eventually benefit the hotel (Waqanimaravu & Arasanmi, 2020).

Finally, governmental agencies such as Singapore's BCA can review its Accessibility Code to include more hospitality features in its list of standards. For example, BCA has an entire section on bathrooms and toilets, but there is a lack of guidelines on specifically hotel amenities such as the height of hangers and towels, or the distance of charging port to bed. It will be beneficial to have a clear sub-section that focuses on accessible rooms in hotels.

7. Conclusion

The limitations of this study are largely related to data collection. To begin with, there was difficulty in garnering the participation of PwD-linked associations. Thus, the PwD-participants were all recruited through the research team's personal contacts. If the associations had participated, the sample size of PwDs would have been bigger, and the types of disabilities could be more varied. Then, hotels can know the wider range of challenges faced by different groups of PwDs.

There were also challenges in recruiting staff who were willing to participate in the study. Besides the time constraints posed by shift schedules, some of them were concerned about any repercussions of sharing negative experiences, though they were assured of confidentiality. Eventually, the staff-participants belong to only three frontline functions in hotels. Thus, the staff's comments might not have captured the spectrum of perspectives about serving PwDs.

In addition, the endeavours to conduct on-site room observations saw only one hotel granting access to its accessible room. Even when observing public areas, some lobby toilets are restricted to guests. This has affected the ability to compare easily across all 10 properties.

Nonetheless, this study has served as a reality check: despite the strides that have been taken to improve accessibility, PwDs still encounter considerable obstacles during their hotel stay. Hopefully, with more determined effort, hotels can progressively better meet the goals of accessible tourism and deliver elevated experience to this segment of guests.

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