

## PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: AN ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES AS A FUNCTION OF DIRECT CONTACT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** Accessibility is a contemporary issue in tourism that requires knowing the perspectives of the majority of the population. People with disabilities encounter not only environmental and communication difficulties in tourism activities but also attitudinal barriers. According to contact theory, direct contact with people with disabilities (PwDs) is an effective way of promoting positive attitudes towards them. Based on this, this paper explores whether contact with PwDs influences the perception of accessible tourism among the Romanian population. This study used a quantitative approach, comprising an online, self-administered questionnaire survey of the adult population in Romania (N=1046). The respondents were selected using quota sampling and stratified by gender, age, region, and type of municipality. To increase the sample's representativeness, the results were weighted according to the primary socio-demographic variables (gender, age, type of municipality, and educational level) based on the latest available census data (as of 1 December 2021). The data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS version 22 for Windows. The results suggest that, although individuals with disabilities face considerable challenges in their leisure activities in Romania, the general population is often unaware of this unless they have someone with a disability among their family, friends, or close acquaintances. Those who do not interact with people with disabilities are less informed about the difficulties they encounter, whether in accessing tourism or dealing with other daily barriers. Furthermore, they are less likely to recognise the inadequate communication and treatment of people with disabilities. They are also less inclined to view the promotion of accessible tourism, including accessible routes and online collections, as essential compared to those who have contact with them. Direct contact is therefore essential, not only for gaining a better understanding of the situations and challenges faced by people with disabilities but also for diminishing attitudinal barriers. Following contact theory, the study emphasises the importance of direct contact in fostering social acceptance. This is particularly important in Romania, where the population is not fully aware of the need for accessibility, and negative social attitudes create an unavoidable barrier to accessible tourism.

**Keywords:** accessible tourism, attitudinal barriers, contact theory, disability, direct contact, PwDs, public opinion, Romanian population, social acceptance

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism rights apply equally to everyone; however, persons with disabilities face various barriers to participating in tourism activities. Attitudinal barriers are one of the three major obstacles to participation in tourism, indicating that the attitudes and behaviours of the majority of society represent a serious hurdle, in addition to environmental or communication barriers (Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2011). PwDs face hostile social attitudes that limit their participation in tourism (McKercher & Darcy, 2018). Tourists' reluctance to share common areas or complaints about PwDs also affects accommodation owners. Consequently, prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards PwDs also affect the supply side, creating obstacles to the development of accessible tourism (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2025). Therefore, the attitudinal barrier can represent a powerful social factor that hinders PwDs from participating in and enjoying social interactions (Guamán et al., 2023).

This is particularly important in Romania, where the primary barrier to tourism activities for families with children with disabilities is attitudinal, followed by physical barriers and a lack of information (Tecău et al., 2019). Simultaneously, research highlights the benefits of tourism for PwDs, including therapeutic, personal development, socialisation, and educational benefits, in addition to relaxation, recreation, and entertainment (Moura et al., 2023). PwDs regard tourism activities as the most important for self-development, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Kastenholz et al., 2015; Yau et al., 2004). This highlights the importance of ensuring access to tourism for PwDs. Therefore, tourism must be inclusive, and researchers must endeavour to find ways to achieve this (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018).

Direct contact with PwDs serves as an excellent means to promote positive attitudes and reduce social prejudice. Contact theory can be persuasive, as getting to know PwDs better and discovering their positive characteristics can contribute to developing affirmative attitudes towards the entire group (Álvarez-Delgado et al., 2022). Consequently, contact enhances attitudes towards the external group member encountered and positively influences perceptions of the

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group's perceptions of other groups (Boin et al., 2021). Engaging with people with disabilities also seriously shapes public opinion about individuals with disabilities (Wang et al., 2021). The research explored whether direct contact with PwDs affects the perception of accessible tourism among the Romanian population.

In addition to presenting a national sample of the Romanian population's views on accessible tourism, this study contributes to the growing literature on the topic by highlighting the importance of contacts in promoting the widespread acceptance of PwDs and accessible tourism, particularly in Romania, where the social and economic inclusion of PwDs is still not fully ensured (Grigoraş et al., 2021), negative social attitudes are the most considerable barriers to PwDs (Paşcalău-Vrabete & Băban, 2018), and low awareness of the need for accessibility is one of the main barriers to accessible tourism (Văduva et al., 2021). The article begins by defining disability and then describes the characteristics of accessible tourism. It further presents the barriers to tourism and the contact theory, before discussing methodological issues and the analysis results. The article concludes with final remarks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of disability

Disability is an evolving concept, making it challenging to define. The changing nature of disability is emphasised in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It states, „Disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UN, 2007, Preamble, paragraph (e)). Disability is defined variably across different societies and cultures. Another feature of the definition is that it draws attention to the fact that, besides impairments, several other factors can prevent equal participation in society.

Similarly, the World Health Organisation's (2001) definition in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) recognises that the definition of disability may vary across cultures and disciplines. However, it stresses the importance of personal and environmental influences on this perception (Halmos, 2017). It defines disability as an umbrella term that includes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Therefore, the importance of barriers is already reflected in the internationally accepted definitions of disability and is thus inevitable when examining the topic.

### Accessible tourism

The first definition of accessible tourism was about overcoming disabling barriers and creating an enabling environment (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). The current state of accessibility has been influenced by changing perceptions of disability, i.e., the spread of the social model of disability (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021), a theoretical framework that approaches disability not only as a problem inherent in individuals but also in their interaction with non-disabled people and the built environment. As the WHO (2001) definition of disability highlights, disability is only one of many factors that influence participation in everyday activities and life situations. Removing physical barriers to access only solves part of the problem, and accessible tourism is more than just an accessibility issue (Yau et al., 2004; Farkas et al., 2022). The concept is then united with the whole-life approach and universal design, which means designing products and environments as usable as possible for all people, without requiring adaptation or unique design (Darcy, 2006). The significance of universal design lies in the fact that accessibility is already at the heart of design and is not added for compliance purposes (Darcy & Dickinson, 2009). On this basis, „Accessible tourism enables people with access requirement (...) to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services, and environment” (Darcy & Dickinson, 2009:7).

### Barriers to tourism

The literature on PwDs' tourism activities highlights the numerous barriers to their participation in tourism, resulting in limited access to tourism opportunities. Several approaches to grouping these barriers have been proposed. Smith (1987), for example, distinguished three groups of barriers: intrinsic (lack of knowledge, health-related problems, social ineffectiveness, and physical and psychological dependency), environmental (attitudinal barriers, architectural barriers, ecological barriers, transportation barriers, and rules and regulation barriers), and interactive barriers (skill-challenge incongruities and communication barriers). As mentioned in the introduction, Eichhorn & Buhalis (2011) also distinguished three categories: physical access barriers, attitudinal barriers, and lack of information.

However, it is essential to note that PwDs do not form a homogeneous group, and not all obstacles affect them equally. At the same time, other barriers are specific to the group. Based on this, McKercher & Darcy (2018) propose decomposing constraints and grouping them into a four-tier framework. In their conceptual framework, the first tier encompasses the problems experienced by all tourists, while the second tier identifies the barriers shared by all PwDs, regardless of their specific disability. The last two levels focus on the specific types of disability and the associated impairments.

For this study, the common limitations, independent of disability, are the primary focus and are important because they build upon each other. Barriers found at lower levels must be removed before obstacles at higher levels can be addressed (McKercher & Darcy, 2018). Based on the literature, the authors distinguished five major groups: ignorance, attitudes, reliability of information, issues related to the tourism industry, and the person involved. The presented models all aim to draw attention to the limiting effect of negative attitudes. However, many studies have identified negative attitudes as a substantial problem (e.g., Guamán et al., 2023; Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2025). The contact theory's assumption that those interacting with PwDs have more positive attitudes toward the group may help reduce their biases.

### The contact theory

Among the various theoretical approaches to interpreting and explaining discriminatory attitudes towards PwDs, the contact theory is one of the most prominent (Álvarez-Delgado et al., 2022). According to Allport's (1954) theory, contacts that foster knowledge and familiarity are likely to lead to stronger beliefs about minority groups, thereby reducing prejudice. Several meta-analyses supported the conclusion. For example, the work of Pettigrew & Tropp (2006), based on an analysis of 515 studies, demonstrates that intergroup contact can considerably reduce prejudice and that contact theory can be extended to other groups, such as PwDs. This theory is also excellent for research on sexism and gender inequality (Mikołajczak et al., 2025). The importance of contact in attitudes towards PwDs is also supported by Yucker's (1994) cumulative evaluation. His results indicate that beliefs, information, and relationships are key factors influencing attitudes. Thus, relationships are particularly effective in reducing prejudice towards people with intellectual or physical disabilities (Paluck et al., 2019). This has been demonstrated in research on attitudes towards employees with disabilities (Daruwalla & Darcy, 2005) and meta-analyses (e.g. Hernandez et al., 2002).

At the same time, several studies have been conducted among students, revealing considerable differences in perceptions of PwDs depending on the contact (e.g., Horner-Johnson et al., 2000; Polo Sánchez et al., 2021). Most research has, therefore, supported the theory; however, other studies have produced mixed results (e.g., Slininger et al., 2020). Slininger and his colleagues (2020) tested the theory among 9- to 10-year-olds and found evidence for it among boys, but not among girls. Although the contact theory was not proven, the authors acknowledge its validity.

Conversely, a meta-analysis by Armstrong and colleagues (2017) supports the effectiveness of contact interventions in improving children's attitudes towards disability. On the other hand, direct and indirect contact can trigger the bias-reducing effect of contact (Dole et al., 2025). Several studies have shown that prejudice was decreased not only by direct contact but also by a variety of indirect contact, such as imagined (Cocco et al., 2023; Ginevra et al., 2021; Plackowski, 2023), parasocial (Plackowski, 2023; Zhang & Haller, 2021), vicarious (Cocco et al., 2021) or online (Cocco et al., 2024) contact. In conclusion, over 70 years of research have demonstrated that intergroup contact plays a crucial role in fostering harmonious intergroup relations (Dole et al., 2025).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

The research participants were selected using a quota sampling procedure with Facebook ads targeted to strata based on gender, age, region and type of municipality. Participation in the research was voluntary. Since not enough people joined the research, participants were recruited from public Facebook groups associated with PwDs. As a result, PwDs and their relatives were overrepresented in the sample. To increase sample representativeness, the results were weighted according to the main socio-demographic variables based on the latest Romanian census data (as of 1 December 2021). After weighting, the distribution of the sample by gender, age groups, type of municipality, and educational attainment is similar to that of the Romanian population aged 15 and over (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (Source: Author's calculations)

		<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>	male	497	48.0
	female	540	52.0
<b>Settlement type</b>	urban	544	52.5
	rural	493	47.5
<b>Age groups</b>	34 and younger	273	26.3
	35–64-year-olds	523	50.4
	65 and older	242	23.3
<b>Education</b>	low (less than primary, primary and lower secondary education)	298	28.7
	medium (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education)	540	52.1
	high (tertiary education, including postgraduate education)	199	19.2

### Procedure

The data collection method was an online, self-administered questionnaire survey of the adult population in Romania. The data were collected by a market research and public opinion polling company between January 20 and February 21, 2024. One thousand forty-six respondents completed the questionnaire, with 834 answering it in full and 212 partially, but to a large extent. The underlying questionnaire was developed in the framework of an international collaboration involving researchers from four countries (Hungary, Croatia, Poland, and Romania). The answer to the question “Are there PwDs in your family, friends or close acquaintances?” approximated whether or not the respondent has direct contact with PwDs. If someone has PwDs in their family, friends, or close acquaintances, they are considered to have direct contact with PwDs; if not, they are considered to have no direct contact with PwDs. Although the answer to this question does not fully capture the concept of direct contact, it is considered a good approximation for this study.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using several methods. First, Kolmogorov-Smirnov with Lilliefors significance correction and Levene tests were carried out to determine the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. The result

justified using the independent samples t-test to examine differences between respondents as a function of contact with PwDs. The effect size between the variables was tested using Cohen's d. Reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha) was used to examine the coherence of statements in a category of questions. The associated items were aggregated by principal component analysis (PCA). The test of independence between categorical variables was performed with the Chi-square test. The effect size was tested using Cramer's V value in this case. The identification of latent variables was carried out using factor analysis (Maximum Likelihood). The rotation method was Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. In interpreting the results, Cronbach's alpha was also examined to determine whether the variables associated with a given factor interacted. The data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS version 22 for Windows.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we examined the differences in perceptions of the various difficulties faced by PwDs as a function of contact. Respondents were asked to rate the different challenges on a scale of 1 to 7 (where one means "No difficulties at all," and seven indicates "Severe difficulties faced by PwDs"). Significant differences (independent samples t-test) were found in all cases: respondents with no contact with PwDs are less aware of the difficulties that PwDs face in their tourism activities than those with PwDs in their family, friends, or close acquaintances (see Table 2). This suggests that contact influences PwDs' perceptions of the difficulties associated with tourism.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and the result of the independent sample t-test of perceptions about various difficulties faced by PwDs, as a function of contact with PwDs (Source: Author's calculations)

	Contact	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Use of rail transport	Yes	705	5.61	1.92	4.349	305.97	.000
	No	214	4.85	2.33			
Use of long-distance bus and coach transport	Yes	653	5.52	1.81	4.701	259.49	.000
	No	185	4.70	2.19			
Use of local public transport	Yes	633	5.26	1.87	4.627	266.07	.000
	No	188	4.41	2.30			
Use of accommodations	Yes	627	4.67	1.94	4.453	276.12	.000
	No	184	3.88	2.15			
Use of catering facilities (restaurants)	Yes	620	4.24	2.06	2.303	265.21	.022
	No	174	3.81	2.19			
Use of sports activities as a sports person	Yes	606	5.33	1.91	3.921	239.17	.000
	No	168	4.58	2.23			
Use of sports activities as a spectator	Yes	591	4.56	2.08	4.471	757	.000
	No	168	3.74	2.13			
Attending outdoor concerts and festivals	Yes	581	4.45	2.00	4.150	747	.000
	No	168	3.71	2.12			
Visiting tourist attractions	Yes	571	4.90	1.98	5.223	736	.000
	No	167	3.96	2.27			
Access to reliable information on effective accessibility	Yes	563	4.43	2.09	5.663	728	.000
	No	167	3.38	2.17			

The most considerable difference between the mean scores was found for *Access to reliable information on effective accessibility* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 1.05$ ), and *Visiting tourist attractions* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 0.94$ ). The Cohen's d effect size indicator was also the highest here ( $d = 0.50$  and  $d = 0.46$ ). Followed by *Use of local public transport* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 0.85$ ), *Use of long-distance bus and coach transport* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 0.83$ ), and *Use of sports activities as a spectator* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 0.82$ ).

Cohen's d also indicated a medium-sized effect ( $d = 0.39 - 0.44$ ) for these items. Nevertheless, for all the other factors listed, except *Use of catering facilities* ( $M_1 - M_2 = 0.43$ ), where the effect between the two variables is low ( $d = 0.20$ ), we found differences of more than 0.7 between the mean values as a function of contact, with medium impact ( $d = 0.36 - 0.39$ ). This suggests that society does not fully recognise the barriers that PwDs face daily, despite the ongoing need for improvement in this area. For example, the participation of PwDs in sports activities is minimal, primarily due to individual efforts or private initiatives (Grigoraş et al., 2021).

The responses to the above ten items were combined using principal component analysis (PCA) to obtain the respondents' overall score. Internal consistency was checked using Cronbach's Alpha before aggregating the items for the difficulties. The resulting value (Cronbach's alpha .94) indicated excellent reliability, meaning the questionnaire items measured a consistent construct. Since omitting individual items does not increase the alpha, all items were included in the analysis. The resulting principal component reflects, to a large extent, the variability in responses to the original ten statements (total variance explained: 65.37%). The Principal Component expresses the aggregated perceptions of the various challenges faced by PwDs during their tourism activities (Table 3). Differences between the Principal Component values for difficulties along contact were also tested using an independent samples t-test, after checking for normality and homoscedasticity conditions (Kolmogorov-Smirnov with Lilliefors significance correction and Levene tests). The results further support the conclusion drawn above that direct contact determines the perception of the difficulties faced by PwDs. Those not in direct contact with PwDs do not perceive their challenges as severely as those who are in direct contact with them. For example, although access to tourist services is an essential, legally required fairness

requirement, PwDs have limited access to many hotels and tourist attractions (Grigoraş et al., 2021). The results are significant ( $t(212.577) = 5.633, p = .000$ ), with a Cohen's d value indicating a medium effect size ( $d = 0.58$ ).

Table 3. Results of the Principal Component Analysis

	Communalities	Factor loadings
Use of rail transport	.666	.816
Use of long-distance bus and coach transport	.743	.862
Use of local public transport	.730	.854
Use of accommodations	.739	.860
Use of catering facilities (restaurants)	.546	.739
Use of sports activities as a sports person	.594	.771
Use of sports activities as a spectator	.694	.833
Attending outdoor concerts and festivals	.600	.775
Visiting tourist attractions	.688	.830
Access to reliable information on effective accessibility	.536	.732

Note. The KMO index value (0.916) indicated that the variables were suitable for factor analysis. The variables included in the study were not pairwise uncorrelated, and the Bartlett's test was significant ( $\chi^2(45) = 6006.050, p < .001$ ). The variables met the minimum criteria for factor analysis. The number of factors was determined using the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1).

In the following section, we looked at opinions on tourism participation opportunities. The opportunities for PwDs to participate in tourism are bad or unacceptably bad, according to a slight majority of respondents (51.8%). However, a substantial proportion of the population thinks they are neither bad nor good, and fewer than one-tenth think PwDs have good or excellent tourism participation opportunities (see Figure 1). Depending on the contact, we can see that those who have no contact with PwDs do not perceive the severity of the problem as much as those who have contact with them, even though research findings in Romania show that most PwDs (83%) not going on holiday (Grigoraş et al., 2021). The effect size measurement (Cramer's  $V = 0.2$ ) shows a weak association between the two variables, but the results are statistically significant according to the Chi-Square test:  $\chi^2(2, N=978) = 33.211, p < .001$ . Thus, direct contact influences perceptions of opportunities for participation in tourism. Those who are closer to PwDs are more critical in this regard and recognise that access to tourism is not suitable for them.

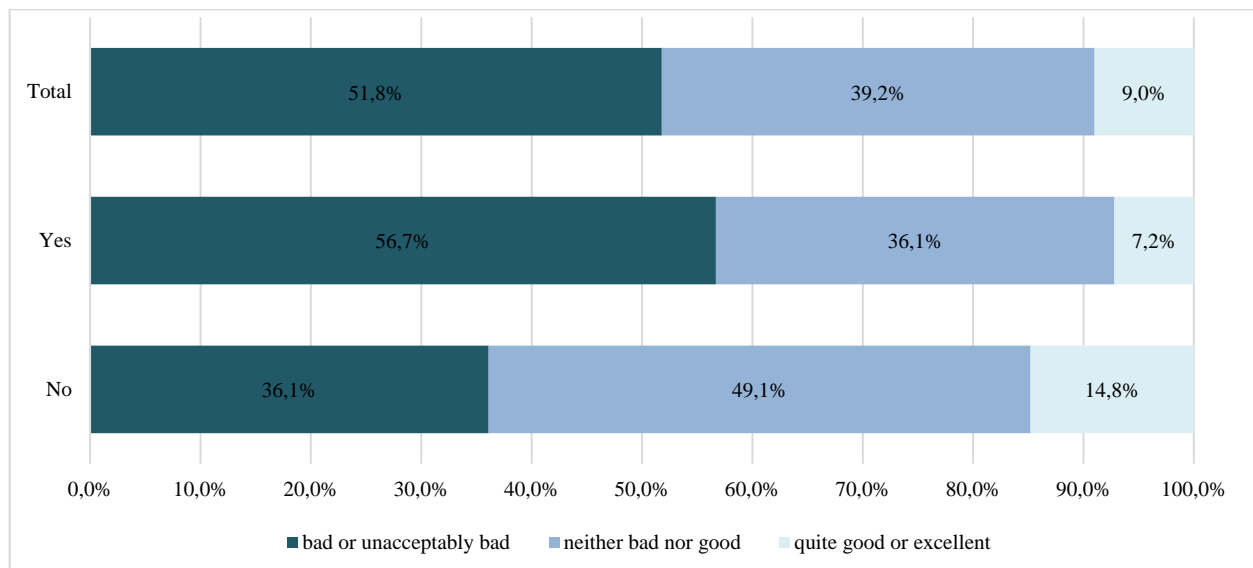


Figure 1. Opportunities for participation of PwDs in tourism as a function of contact with PwDs

Several statements were formulated to explore opinions on accessible tourism. Factor analysis was conducted using the Maximum Likelihood method to analyse common patterns. Based on the Kaiser criterion, we identified three factors explaining 72.61 percent of the total variance. The model fit is significant ( $\chi^2(12) = 319.499, p < .001$ ). The first factor was *Accessibility improvement* because, based on the factor loadings, it included statements that set expectations for the accessibility of tourism services. The second factor is called *Approach and communication*, as it encompasses not only the accessibility of communication but also the appropriate treatment of PwDs by both tourism workers and society. The third *Tourism promotion* factor includes aspects that would improve opportunities for PwDs to participate in tourism (Table 4).

Examining the results as a function of contact, based on the independent samples t-test we found significant differences for the second ( $t(172.471) = 2.128, p = .035$ ) and third factors ( $t(681) = 1.955, p = .051$ ).

Respondents who are in contact with PwDs rated appropriate communication and treatment of PwD, as well as promotion of tourism through accessibility and the creation of accessible tourist routes and online collections of it, as being more critical than those who were not in contact with them.

Table 4. Results of the Factor Analysis

	Factor loadings		
	1	2	3
<b>Factor 1: Accessibility improvement</b>			
Commercial accommodations should provide accessible places for people with disabilities.	.121	.150	<b>.854</b>
Catering establishments should also be more accessible for people with disabilities.	.202	.186	<b>.743</b>
<b>Factor 2: Approach and communication</b>			
Accessibility information should be more reliable for people with disabilities.	<b>.836</b>	.189	.075
In general, goodwill towards people with disabilities should improve.	<b>.952</b>	.134	.133
In general, respectful behaviour towards people with disabilities should be improved.	<b>.840</b>	.162	.206
In general, the attitude of tourism workers towards people with disabilities should be improved.	<b>.732</b>	.206	.151
<b>Factor 3: Tourism promotion</b>			
If trains and buses in my country were more wheelchair accessible, more people with disabilities would travel.	.225	<b>.665</b>	.176
If my country had hiking trails in park forests at least near cities, more people with disabilities would go hiking.	.172	<b>.931</b>	.165
If there were a reliable online collection of wheelchair accessible hiking trails, more people would choose to hike in nature.	.134	<b>.781</b>	.100

Note. The extraction method was Maximum Likelihood with an oblique (Varimax with Kaiser Normalization) rotation. The KMO index value (0.774) indicated that the variables were suitable for factor analysis. The variables included in the study were not pairwise uncorrelated, and Bartlett's test was significant ( $\chi^2(36) = 4496.074, p < .001$ ). The variables meet the minimum criteria for factor analysis. The number of factors was determined using the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1). Factor loadings above .30 are in bold.

The contact also influences how respondents perceive programs as more suitable for PwDs. Indeed, programs that are not explicitly designed for PwDs but provide barrier-free access help to reduce discrimination against PwDs as opposed to programs that are designed expressly for them. They aim for social inclusion and do not treat disability-related characteristics as "special" but instead as one of the many types of disability in society (Zajadacz, 2015). At the same time, it is also the preferred choice for PwDs (Gonda, 2023). Respondents in contact with PwDs are aware of this, as they agree with this statement to a greater extent ( $M = 5.45$ ) than those not in contact with them ( $M = 4.79$ ). The difference between the two variables is significant according to the independent samples t-test:  $t(779) = 3.824, p = .000$ . (Again, opinions were recorded on a scale of 1 to 7, with one being "Strongly disagree" and seven being "Strongly agree".)

Finally, the results also show that contact with PwDs determines the perception of the relevance of developing accessible tourism, as it is considered more valuable ( $M = 3.79$ ) by those who have contact with PwDs than by those who have no contact with them ( $M = 3.42$ ), acknowledging ( $M = 3.36$ ) that accessibility is not only beneficial for PwDs but also for themselves. Accessible tourism is no longer only for the benefit of PwDs but also for those who suffer from some form of disability, such as accident, surgery, pregnancy, overweight, or ageing (UNWTO, 2016; Gonda, 2021). Conversely, those who do not know PwDs are less likely ( $M = 2.80$ ) to recognise that accessibility can benefit them. The differences are significant according to the independent samples t-test. Cohen's d value indicates a medium effect size ( $d = 0.56\text{--}0.58$ ). The respondents are aware that Romanian society does not support social integration and inclusion (Figure 2). The opinion of those who are not in contact with PwDs is slightly more positive ( $M = 2.47$ ) than that of those who have PwDs in their family, friends, or acquaintances ( $M = 2.30$ ). According to Cohen's d effect size measure, the relationship is weak but statistically significant, as indicated by the t-test. So, contact also influences the perception of these issues.

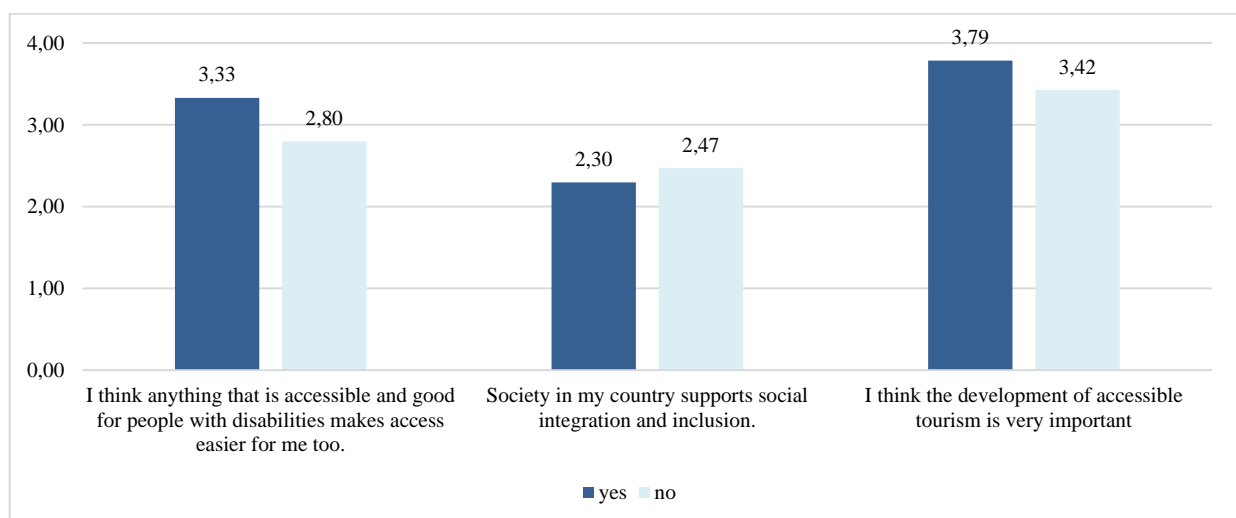


Figure 2. Differences in opinions on accessible tourism, based on contact with PwDs (Mean values on a scale of 1 to 4, with one being "Fully disagree" and four being "Fully agree.")



In summary, we found a significant difference in most variables between respondents who had contact with people with disabilities and those who did not. Research on people with disabilities (e.g., Grigoraş et al., 2021) draws attention to the barriers that PwDs face in both their tourism activities (e.g., access to reliable information, use of accommodations, and visiting tourist attractions) and in their daily lives (e.g., public transport, use of restaurants, and sports activities). People with disabilities often have limited access to sports, leisure activities, and travel (Grigoraş et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, those who do not have contact with them do not consider these to be serious barriers. These are not meaningless when considering that over half (58%) of PwDs did not walk in green spaces or parks in the year before the survey, over four-fifths (85%) did not stay in hotels, guesthouses or other accommodation, a similar proportion (88%) did not play sports, and the vast majority (91%) did not assist in sporting events (Grigoraş et al., 2021).

Therefore, the opportunities for PwDs to participate in tourism are inadequate in the country, and the population is not even aware of them, unless they have PwDs in their families, friends or close acquaintances. In addition to physical barriers, there is room for improvement in treating PwDs, particularly in terms of respectful attitudes and overall goodwill. Still, these are most often perceived by those in contact with PwDs. Solutions that require relatively small investments, such as developing hiking trails near cities and creating a reliable online collection of these trails, but which would greatly facilitate the participation of PwDs in tourism, are less visible to those who are not in contact with them. At the same time, despite respondents with no contact with PwDs agreeing that the development of accessible tourism is essential, they perceive it less as a benefit for themselves. Many people are unaware that accessibility is decisive for PwDs and other groups, such as families with young children and older adults.

At some point, anyone can experience a loss of functionality and thus experience some form of disability (WHO, 2002). However, the number of PwDs increases with age in Romania as well (MMSS, 2023). In light of this, a substantial proportion of the population will experience disability to a lesser or greater extent throughout their lives. The boundary between PwDs and those without disability is, therefore, not as sharp as can be seen from the definitions presented in the theoretical part, and raising awareness of this among the Romanian population is an essential social agenda.

## CONCLUSION

PwDs in Romania face serious challenges in their recreational activities, which are hampered not only by physical limitations but also by society's mentality. Nevertheless, the Romanian population is not aware of this unless they have a people with a disability in their family, friends or close acquaintances.

This study highlights the low level of public awareness of the difficulties faced by PwDs, many of which could be reduced by a more understanding and accepting attitude from society. This article has enriched the academic discourse on accessible tourism by drawing attention to the relevance of direct contact with PwDs in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by PwDs in tourism, and not only.

Much of the knowledge on reducing prejudice in the contact literature stems from studies on children or young adults, with a notable lack of research on prejudice in adults over 25 (Paluck et al., 2019). Thus, by broadening the subjects of the study, the present study also contributes to the contact literature. The empirical importance of this research lies in exploring the opinions of the adult population in Romania regarding tourism opportunities for PwDs.

Although we can find examples of surveys of population opinions in smaller areas, e.g., in Braşov (Brătucu et al., 2016) or around Timișoara (Babaita et al., 2011), to the best of our knowledge, no such survey has been conducted on a national sample in Romania. This further supports the empirical relevance of the research.

The analysis pinpoints the importance of contact with PwDs in fostering a more positive attitude. This is particularly relevant for creating accessible tourism opportunities, as it is a moral obligation and a legal requirement, since any barrier directly interferes with human rights (Krajinović & Čavlek, 2024). Therefore, we are responsible for reducing the obstacles to PwDs' participation in tourism, and not only. As such, this article contributes to the ongoing arguments that draw attention to the need to promote accessible tourism (Bordeianu, 2015) and the importance of achieving the related objectives, especially since in Romania, accessible tourism is still a rare reality (Rabontu, 2018; Nagy et al., 2025) and tourism services for PwDs are underdeveloped (Grigoraş et al., 2021).

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