"Libraries and Accessible Tourism": a Conceptual Framework for Developing a Theme-Based Web Portal

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Abstract

Accessible information is one of the seven key elements of the tourism industry chain, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism). The challenge of finding information about suitable accessible destinations can be a significant obstacle – especially for people with special needs planning to participate in tourism activities. Museums and galleries are often among the most popular tourist attractions, and in recent years, ensuring accessibility in these venues has become a priority for many stakeholders in the tourism sector. Along with them, libraries (most often public ones) have increasingly been recognized as sites within the scope of cultural tourism. However, so far, little effort has been made to explore the connection between libraries' accessibility and their potential to expand tourism offerings. This paper introduces a conceptual model for a specialized online platform, "Libraries and Accessible Tourism", focused on the opportunities libraries in Bulgaria can offer in this area. The methodology includes analyzing literature and examples of best practices in accessible and library tourism, which highlight the need for greater awareness of the role libraries can play in expanding and strengthening accessible tourism. The goal of creating such an online hub is to develop a resource repository relevant to the topic, serve as an information bridge among various stakeholders, and inspire new initiatives. By design, the platform aims to become a valuable tool for library professionals, tourism entities, and, most importantly, the end-users of accessible tourism.

Keywords: *Libraries, accessible tourism, library tourism, information portal, Bulgaria*

1. Introduction

Although tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy and accounts for one in every eleven jobs worldwide, its activities can pose significant challenges for the roughly 15% of people living with some form of disability who require accessible options. In the tourism environment, the barriers they face vary widely and may be physical, sensory, or cognitive [7]. When searching for suitable tourism services and destinations, they often encounter a lack of clear, accurate information about accessibility. Finding details about accessible destinations, booking a room that meets specific needs, planning the trip, and using relevant accessible transportation options are typically complex, costly, and time-consuming tasks. To enable these individuals to participate freely, or at least with minimal obstacles, both the public and private sectors need to develop and implement accessible services, products, and infrastructure [17]. To achieve this, accessibility must be integrated throughout the tourism value chain, and connections among activities, services, and facilities must be carefully planned and verified.

As part of this framework, UN Tourism identifies seven distinct elements, each with corresponding accessibility recommendations, with information and marketing being key components. For individuals with specific accessibility needs, these channels should provide clear, precise guidance on accessible services and facilities, preferably using international symbols. It is advisable to present this information in a detailed list, indicating, for example, whether there is a nearby medical supply store offering assistive devices for people with disabilities or a veterinary clinic for travellers with guide dogs. The reservation process should be as simple as possible to allow each tourist to interact independently, while also being informed of various ways to contact a facility representative if questions arise. Both reservation systems and destination websites must be designed in accordance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to ensure usability for everyone [22].

This publication introduces a conceptual model for the first specialized online platform of its kind, "Libraries and Accessible Tourism", which focuses on the opportunities libraries in Bulgaria can offer in this area.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Accessibility of Information in Tourism

In today's information society, the Internet is a primary source of information for travellers, especially those with special needs. Therefore, it is essential to develop effective information channels and use online platforms to communicate destination accessibility clearly [3]. K. Park, H. Jeon, and S. B. Park argue that web accessibility is no longer a secondary service for tourists with specific requirements but is a fundamental part of the environment, directly linked to human rights. In their study of 246 tourism-related websites across different countries, the authors identify inadequate conditions for supporting a wider range of electronic inclusion (e-Inclusion) in tourism information systems [14].

A shortcoming in current accessible tourism practices is that accessible spaces, products, web pages, advertisements, and informational materials often lack aesthetic appeal and can even face social rejection, according to L. Rubio-Escudeross, F. J. U. de la Rosa, and H. García-Andreu. To address this, the authors suggest expanding the concept of universal design to include aesthetic aspects where they are missing. They argue that applying this approach – especially to websites and tourism information – would foster acceptance and make these products more appealing [15].

Specifically regarding national tourism organizations, S. Darcy notes that their websites often lack accessible content that users with disabilities need to plan their trips by impairment type and support level, enabling informed consumer choices [2]. These findings are supported by an analysis of accessibility-related information on 198 national tourism organization websites conducted by T. D. Vila and S. Darcy. The authors identify issues related to visibility, level of detail, accuracy, and completeness of the information. They mention that such shortcomings may negatively impact the appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of providing accessible tourism content [19]. In this context, T. Domínguez Vila, E. Alén González, and S. Darcy recommend that tourism organizations must focus their strategies and efforts not only on developing and updating website content but also on ensuring its accessibility. According to the researchers, best practices include training programmers in accessibility issues and fostering collaboration with organizations serving people with special needs [4].

2.2 Tourism Potential of Libraries

Museums and galleries have traditionally been seen as popular tourist destinations. However, in recent years, library tourism has become increasingly prominent in global tourism and cultural activities [26]. With their special collections of important cultural artifacts, libraries are vital parts of the heritage of the communities they serve. In fact, not only their collections but also their history and architecture constitute cultural assets that can enrich local communities and, alongside other cultural attractions, contribute to tourism in a specific city or region [12]. This idea has the potential to be further developed by library and tourism organizations as well as by cultural ministries. Through coordinated planning among relevant institutions, libraries can play an even more noticeable role as tourist destinations. This would allow more visitors to explore local libraries and discover a living aspect of local culture [20].

According to S. Khaydarova, S. Khujamova, M. Toshbaeva, D. Muhitdinov, G. Mamanazarova, O. Tukhtakulova, and N. Karimov, when tourists want to explore, learn about, and interact with the places they visit, libraries can be essential partners in this process. They offer suitable conditions for gaining knowledge about a destination's history, culture, and features. The authors see a bright future for library tourism and stress that careful planning and innovative thinking are needed to meet upcoming challenges. For example, they suggest that libraries might use digital tools, build partnerships, encourage community involvement, and strengthen their role in modernizing tourism [10].

In recent years, many academic publications have explored the potential for library tourism within specific geographic areas. In a survey-based study examining the possibility of Bulgarian public libraries engaging in cultural tourism, M. Modeva - Nankova finds that library management teams support this idea and would work toward making it happen. The author notes that "libraries have significant potential to serve as sites of cultural tourism, as centers for events related to creative tourism, and this potential should be utilized" [25]. Analyzing the characteristics of various Croatian libraries in the context of tourism, I. Slivar, M. Orbanić, and J. P. Topler conclude that these institutions have untapped potential as tourist attractions, especially in their architecture and collections, which play a crucial role in preserving national heritage and strengthening cultural identity [16]. T. Jiang, Y. Xu, Y. Li, and Y. Xia examine the specific features of public libraries in China that make them attractive to tourists. In their study, they gathered 70,301 online reviews from major travel platforms written by tourists visiting libraries. The results highlight architecture and interior design as the main

factors, with the library's location and transportation options as supplementary factors. Based on these findings, the researchers recommend that visually appealing, easily accessible public libraries have the most significant tourism potential [8].

Despite the increasing number of publications on the subject, the idea of successful partnerships between libraries and the field of accessible tourism remains a new concept that has not yet gained the attention of the academic community. In a pilot study on this topic, R. Hristov examines the experiences and attitudes of public libraries in Bulgaria towards such cooperation. The study finds a low level of awareness among library professionals, both regarding their interactions with users with special needs and opportunities for library partnerships in accessible tourism. As a result, it recommends encouraging librarians to play a more active role in providing essential information to users of accessible tourism, helping these individuals become fully integrated participants in the cultural institution's life [6].

3. Methodology

The methodology involves analyzing literary sources and best-practice examples in accessible and library tourism, emphasizing the need for greater awareness of how libraries can enhance and expand accessible tourism services. In the realm of library tourism, the concept for the information portal integrates ideas from well-known websites like Library Planet [11] and 1001 Libraries to See Before You Die [1], while in accessible tourism, it relies on the expertise of the Bulgarian experience, represented by the official website of the Bulgarian Association for Recreation and Tourism (BART) [24].

To illustrate the layout of the key elements of the information portal "Libraries and Accessible Tourism", static models of several main platform pages were created in the graphic design tool Canva. In practice, such models are used to present a website concept along with the components that define the brand for which it is being developed. The static models include a carefully chosen color palette, typography, and graphic style. These details are absent from standard prototypes, which aim solely to display the webpage's primary elements. In contrast, the static model offers a more accurate visual representation of its final appearance [21]. The logo and the homepage illustration were generated using an artificial intelligence tool (Microsoft Designer) by specifying the keywords "libraries", "accessible tourism", and "people with special needs".

4. Results

4.1 Concept and Purpose of the Information Portal

The purpose of creating this online platform is to showcase examples of best practices at both national and international levels, thereby motivating new successful initiatives. To support this goal, the platform plans to compile a collection of relevant resources on the topic and serve as an informational hub for interested stakeholders. The portal also allows users to contribute to its content and stay updated on library- and accessible-tourism-related events they can participate in.

4.2 Accessibility

In line with contemporary requirements for website accessibility, and given the thematic focus of the platform, its development aims at maximally simplified navigation, a clean design, an intuitive interface, inclusion of only the most essential sections corresponding to the content, avoidance of bright colors and moving elements, optimal contrast, and the use of sans-serif fonts. The ambition is for the platform to comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), Level AA, as well as the requirements set out in the European Accessibility Act (EAA).

4.3 Target Audience

The information portal is designed for library professionals, library managers, national and regional public administrators, representatives of non-governmental organizations and organizations for people with disabilities, stakeholders in the tourism industry, students and researchers in library and information science and tourism, library enthusiasts, and participants in library tourism, including end users of this tourism product with specific accessibility needs.

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4.4 Content

The homepage elements (Fig. 1) include a search bar, a language settings button, and an accessibility options button. The information portal consists of the following sections:
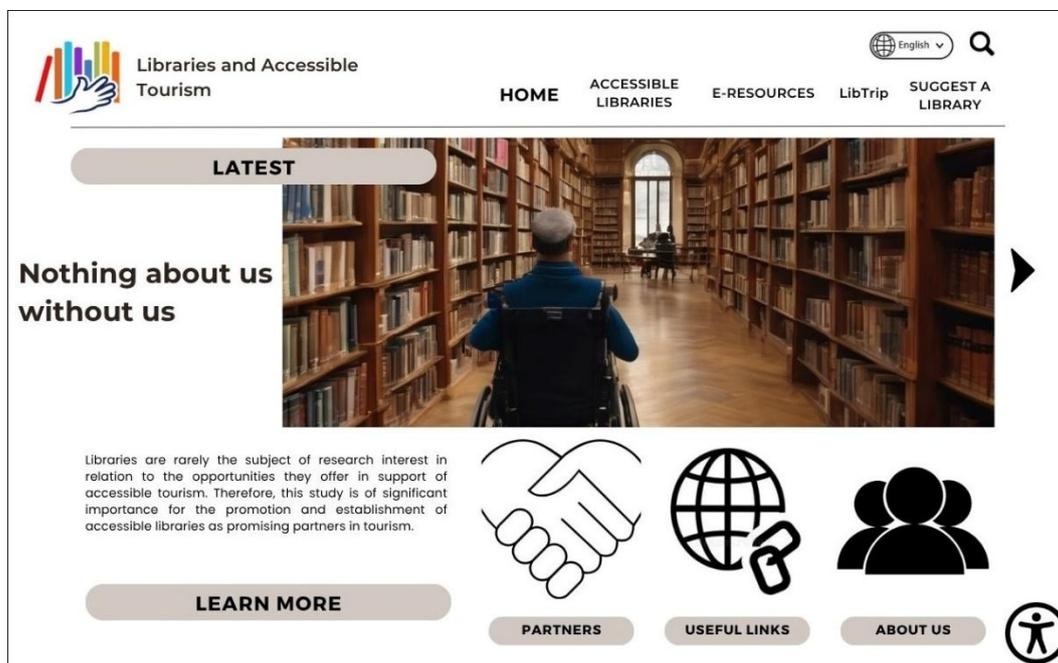

Fig. 1. Static Model of the Homepage on the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" Information Portal

- Latest
The "Latest" page offers current information on libraries' tourism potential and accessibility efforts, both nationwide and worldwide. It includes updates on legislative changes affecting these topics, completed or ongoing projects, and interviews with people involved in these areas. The "Latest" section also seeks to inform users about upcoming events they can join.

- Accessible Libraries
The "Accessible Libraries" page serves as the core of the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" information portal (Fig. 2). Its purpose is to bring together in one location Bulgarian libraries that offer opportunities for accessible tourism. The goal is for users to obtain detailed information about the accessibility options each library offers. Precise details about what visitors can expect upon arrival are essential for people with special needs during the planning and destination selection stages, and this aspect of accessible tourism applies equally to libraries. In addition to accessibility, the focus is also on the library's tourism potential – that is, everything that sets it apart from a typical book repository and can draw additional visitors.

Fig. 2. Static Model of the "Accessible Libraries" Page on the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" Information Portal

- E-Resources

The "E-Resources" page functions as the platform's digital library. It provides full-text, open-access materials on accessible tourism and accessibility in libraries. These include practical tools such as Access to Libraries for Disabled Persons Checklist: a practical tool [13] and Libraries for the Blind in the Information Age: Guidelines for Development by IFLA [9], as well as A Library Without Obstacles: A Guide to Accessibility, highlighting the experience of libraries in Malmö, Sweden [18]. Additional resources related to accessible tourism include Discover Europe`s Hidden Treasures by EDEN [5] and UNWTO Recommendations on Accessible Information in Tourism [23].

- LibTrip

LibTrip is a virtual space for anyone interested in library tourism (Fig. 3). The idea behind this author-run YouTube channel is to take both beginner and seasoned library travelers to some of the world's most stunning libraries. The videos highlight extraordinary architectural marvels, valuable and rare editions, and carefully preserved artifacts, sharing stories from the past, influential figures of our time, and lesser-known events. Each video emphasizes libraries' mission to ensure accessibility for everyone and showcases best practices worldwide. Every video also includes a link to the library's official website.

Fig. 3. Static Model of the "LibTrip" Page on the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" Information Portal

- Suggest a Library

On the "Suggest a Library" page, the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" portal allows library professionals (and others) to submit proposals for Bulgarian libraries as examples of best practices in accessible tourism (Fig. 4). Submissions are not limited to public libraries. This approach aims to identify opportunities for partnerships in accessible tourism across various types of libraries in the country. The requirement is that proposed libraries be accessible to all and capable of attracting tourist interest. The submission form includes the library's name, location, email address, and descriptions of accessibility features (physical environment, materials in accessible formats, accessible services, etc.) and elements of tourist interest (architecture, valuable collections, informational materials, events, etc.). A photo of the library can also be attached to the description. Upon approval, submissions are published on the "Accessible Libraries" page.

Fig. 4. Static Model of the "Suggest a Library" Page on the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" Information Portal

- Partners
The partner network of the information portal "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" may include, but is not limited to: libraries and library associations; agencies involved in tourism activities; non-governmental organizations; foundations; web developers; universities; and others. The names in the partner list are provided with hyperlinks directing to their official websites.

- Useful Links
The "Useful Links" page offers direct links to legislative acts (laws and their implementing regulations; ordinances; conventions; programs relevant in Bulgaria or within the European Union), to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), to the websites of library associations (IFLA, EBLIDA, LIBER, BLIA), and organizations involved in accessible tourism (UN Tourism, ENAT, ISTO). It also includes links to thematic portals dedicated to library tourism and tourism accessibility.

- About Us
Information about the mission of the "Libraries and Accessible Tourism" information portal and the team behind it is provided. Contact options, including phone, email, and social media links, are also listed.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Accessibility in the digital environment should not be viewed as an added benefit for a specific group of users but rather as a fundamental element of service quality, aligning with UN Tourism's approach to the tourism industry value chain. Investing in web accessibility also offers financial advantages, boosting visitor traffic and increasing market share. The proposed concept demonstrates how a thematic portal focused on the opportunities libraries provide for partnerships in accessible tourism can serve as a valuable tool for promoting social inclusion and opening new avenues for cultural and economic growth. The outlined framework has the potential to act as a cross-sector intermediary, gathering, organizing, and promoting not only best practices but also valuable resources to support stakeholders – including library professionals, tourism industry representatives, and, most importantly, users of accessible tourism. By nature, libraries are natural cultural hubs for local communities. Through creating a thematic digital platform, they can also become preferred destinations for people with special needs – including individuals with permanent or temporary disabilities, older adults, families with young children, and pregnant women.
Furthermore, combining theoretical and practical models could facilitate the development and application of new strategies for accessible tourism within libraries. This subject has not been a primary focus of research, but is likely to attract more attention in the future. The increasing interest in libraries as tourist destinations and the rising demand for accessible tourism services support this.

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