

ACCESSIBLE TOURISM AND DISABILITY SERVICE INFORMATION PROVIDED ON LEADING AIRLINE WEBSITES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

Ph.D. Matthew Lee Smith¹, MPH, CHES

Ph.D. Éricka Amorim², MSc

Ph.D. Jorge Umbelino³, MSc

Abstract

The global population is aging, and older adults have more chronic conditions and disabilities relative to their younger counterparts. Aging and disabled populations have limitations associated with physical functioning, cognitive impairment, and loss of sense functioning. This group of people travelers represents an interesting segment in the tourism industry; however, the current market offers inadequate products and services to meet their needs and demands. The inability and unpreparedness of the touristic infrastructure to offer these necessary services compromises the quality of the tourism experience. The primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on official websites of major airline carriers as related to information, services, and resources to accommodate aging and disabled travelers. Airlines were selected for meeting one of the following criteria, ranked as: (1) one of the 10 best airlines; (2) one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of safety ratings; and (3) one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of lowest cost. The results show that many airlines did not provide adequate information. It is also important to notice that the safest/securest airlines were frequently those who reported most disability-related content on their websites.

Keywords: touristic offer; accessible tourism; airline; website

1. Introduction⁴

Until quite recently, disability was predominantly understood as a medical problem, directly caused by disease, accident, or a health condition. Presumed

¹ The University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA; Texas A&M Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health, College Station, TX, USA

² Instituto Politécnico de Tomar, Portugal; e-Geo, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Planeamento Regional, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

³ Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril, Portugal; e-Geo, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Planeamento Regional, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

⁴ In this conceptualization topic is close to a previous paper that was co-written by two of the authors: Umbelino, J.; Pinto, P.C.; Amorim, É. and Garcia, A. (2012) "Can we promote Accessible Tourism? Yes, we can. And we should". *Design for all – Institute of India*, Aug, 2012, Vol.7, nº 8, pp. 16-30

unable to meet the standards of *normal living*, people with disabilities were, therefore, institutionalized and hidden away from a society that saw no real imperative for change. During the 70s, however, disability activists began to challenge such views focusing instead on the *disabling society* which excludes people with disabilities through barriers and its inability to accommodate different forms of embodiment. This politics of disablement found intellectual expression in the so-called social model of disability (Oliver, 1983). The social model maintains that persons are disabled not by their impairments but by a society that is not organized in ways that address their needs. Hence, what must be fixed and changed is society itself, not the individual with the impairments.

In 2006, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has brought increased political and economic attention to the plight of persons with disabilities. The new Convention applies the term *persons with disabilities* to all persons with “long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UN, 2006). People with disabilities can thus expect the same right to participate fully in the community and to enjoy the same quality of life as people without disabilities.

What does this mean for the tourism sector? According to the Disability Convention, full participation explicitly includes the right to travel and participate in leisure activities. Indeed, Article 30 asserts the right to access all areas of cultural life including that of tourism. This puts tourism operators formally on notice to change their operations in order to guarantee access to tourism goods and services for people with disabilities (Barton, 1993; Bickenback, 2001; Buhalis and Darcy, 2011; Darcy and Taylor, 2009). In a sentence, Accessible Tourism (AT) is a set of facilities and practices in order to permit or improve the tourism experience for a large spectrum of people (Cole and Morgan, 2010).

Over their life span, most people will experience some form of disability, either temporarily or permanently (for example broken limbs, difficult pregnancies and, fortunately for a growing number, the impairments associated with old age). The demographics of people with disabilities confirms that this is an interesting and profitable market (Chan, 2010), but this fact is not known or is systematically ignored by the tourism industry. Darcy (2008) estimates that the AT market segment represents over 650 million people, which means 10% of the world population. A conservative estimate allows to think that the number of tourists in this segment was somewhere between 65 to 75 million. Considering that these tourists tend to travel accompanied, these figures may still increase significantly. The research developed by Legacies Now (2010) with the aim of understanding the market for accessible tourism, pointed that only 29% of disabled tourists travel alone. Thus, in a market with an estimated average of 70 million people, this slice can easily involve more than 120 million people.

Being more specific, we can highlight some characteristics of AT that are particularly interesting to raise awareness amongst the Tourism Offer regarding the economic potential of this market (FMET, 2004; Chan, 2010; DCMS, 2010):

- a. The number of people with some kind of impairment is already huge, nowadays, but it is still growing, namely in the *developed countries*, which are, at the same time, the most aged and the most important demand markets for international and national tourism.
- b. Whenever a family or a group of friends demanding a tourism experience includes someone with disabilities or impairments, that person most likely will be the centre of the group decisions, which means that the *economic* dimension of this market is much wider than the officially reported.⁵
- c. People with disabilities and/or impairments (including aged people) are frequently available and more likely to travel during low season.
- d. Sometimes, this kind of tourism can be supported by social funds or personal insurances, widening the economic dimension of the market.
- e. When they feel their needs are adequately addressed, these clients tend to be more loyal to their holiday destinations and service providers.

Although we intend to highlight the economic opportunities and benefits related to this issue, we contend that in mature and developed societies AT is (or must be) a social and human rights concern; if we consider democratic access to tourism an important civilization progress, we cannot accept in this process any kind of negative discrimination of any group of people, even less if there are disadvantaged citizens involved (WTO, 2010).

In the tourism world, the most common way of travel is by airplane, so airlines have good reasons to be ahead in this kind of thoughts. AT is not the future of tourism, but the future of tourism is less promising without AT. We believe that AT is a matter of intelligence, because it synthesizes a culture requirement with an economic opportunity that soon will become inevitable. At the moment, from a destination manager or a service provider (like airlines) point of view, the global market of AT is, at least, an interesting alternative niche.

Enabling environments and facilities should not just ensure access to all; they must also empower people with access requirements to make informed decisions about whether accessible experiences are appropriate for their needs. Contrary to what many believe, research has shown that people with disabilities (including aged) desire to travel, and many do it when their information and access needs are adequately addressed (Packer, MCKercher and Yau, 2007). That is why it is

⁵ DCMS (2010), in a study conducted for the London Paralympic Games 2012, states that disabled people tend not to travel alone and are often accompanied by careers, family or friends, with more than 50 per cent traveling with a partner, 20 per cent with a child, and 21-25 per cent with an assistant, which actually impacts on occupancy rates and spending.

important to analyze the service information provided on this subject by airline websites.

Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on official websites of major airline carriers as related to information, services, and resources to accommodate aging and disabled travelers. Airlines were selected for meeting one of the following criteria: (1) ranked as one of the 10 best airlines; (2) ranked as one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of safety ratings; and (3) ranked as one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of lowest cost.

2. The Role of Airlines in the Touristic Offer and Rankings

Tourism is an economic activity that requires a high-level of organization and global coordination. The demand for tourism appeared after the Second World War, and the increase is attributed, in part, to aircraft advancements during this time. Once the War ended, the use of airplanes was recognized as a viable technology in other contexts, and resulted in the emergence of modern commercial airlines that offer flights covering great distances within short periods of time. In 2011, there were over 980 million international tourist arrivals globally (UNWTO, 2013), with receipts surpassing \$1 trillion (UNWTO, 2012). With a steady increase in passenger volume projected in forthcoming years, the ability of the tourism industry to accommodate international travel demands is reliant on a consistent mass transportation system (Reisinger, 2009; Senguttuvan, 2006). It is estimated that around 15% of the international tourists use the air transportation, which is especially true for travel across continents. And, in certain markets, airline travel is more predominant. For example, in the European market, 86% of tourists use air transportation when traveling external to Europe (Cooper et al, 2008).

With the expansion of desirable travel destinations and advancements in aircraft technology, the competitive market for airlines has escalated. To date, there are an estimated 230 major airlines worldwide registered with the International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2013). Each year, airlines compete for patrons, revenue and status in the industry. For market ratings, criteria typically used to evaluate airlines include topics like the number of passengers carried, distance flown, fleet size, and number of destinations. However, these rankings do not include other aspects related to customer satisfaction, price, and other relevant consumer-centered aspects or qualities.

For the purpose of this study, airlines selected for assessment and comparison included those ranking in the top 10 in one of three categories: (1) being the best airline; (2) being the safest airline; and (3) being a leading low cost airline. These topics were purposively selected to meet the aims of this study, which examines airlines' offerings and capacity to serve tourists with AT needs. Basic definitions for each airline category used in this study are below:

- **Best Airline Rankings:** This ranking is based on passengers' reported satisfaction about airline performance indicators including check in, boarding, onboard seat comfort, cabin cleanliness, food, beverages, in-flight entertainment, and staff service (World Airlines Awards, 2013a).
- **Safe Airline Rankings:** This ranking is based on the lack of "hull loss accidents and serious incidents in the last 30 years of operations in relation to the revenue passenger kilometers" (JACDEC, 2013).
- **Low Cost Airline Rankings:** This ranking is based on the same indicators as those in the "Best Airline" category above; however, only airlines considered "low cost" can be considered for this ranking (World Airlines Awards, 2013b). Low cost airlines (also known as no-frills, discount, or budget carriers) are those that charge less money to patrons for travel, but offer fewer comforts or amenities. For example, while these airlines have inexpensive ticket prices, they often charge for other services like onboard food, seat assignments, and baggage.

3. Accessible Tourism in Airport Settings

Airports are high-paced venues with large volumes of travelers and time-sensitive schedules and procedures. In addition to managing an abundance of daily travelers and ensuring flights depart as intended, airport staff is charged with screening all passengers for potential security threats and upholding protocol to ensure safety and efficiency. Beyond these operational obligations, airports and airlines offer services, equipment, and resources to assist aging and disabled travelers. AT issues are especially important in airport settings because travelers with special needs may encounter require additional time and assistance when navigating ticketing and security lines, traveling to their gate, boarding their flight, and traveling onboard the aircraft. These services and accommodations are then required again once the disabled traveler arrived at their destination and must again transport across the airport, navigate lines, and collect their baggage.

The types of AT accommodations provided at airports are typically the responsibility of the airport facility; however, many airlines provide AT services to their passengers anywhere within the airport. Airlines are especially responsible for the AT services provided onboard the aircraft, which can dramatically differ based on the priorities of each respective airline. Despite variations in the types of services provided, and the level of quality of such services, airlines are responsible for informing their potential patrons about the services they offer. The provision of AT-related information enables disabled travelers to make travel decisions based on airlines capable of meeting their needs and adequately prepare for their travel experience before, during, and after air travel (which can alleviate stress and travel complications when travelers know the amount of additional time required at

the airport and/or if any of their service or equipment needs are associated with additional costs).

4. An Emphasis on Websites

Websites serve as fundamental tools to promote and sell tourists products and services as well as provide useful information to future travelers (Smith and Amorim, 2013). The virtual space can reach millions of potential clients worldwide for a low maintenance costs and in an easily accessible format. Among the most important aspects of websites is their ability to provide content that is timely, relevant, and accurate. Considering the websites are sponsored by airline companies interested in selling products/services, the information contained should be adequate for the target public. However, from the consumer perspective, the Internet is a tool for the finding and accessing of information sources, and the visitors expect to have easy access to the information they require (Poel and Buckinx, 2005 cited by Law, *et al*, 2010). Tanrisevdi and Duran (2011) highlight that the tourism industry typically sells seemingly intangible products to consumers, which makes it virtually impossible for the consumer to evaluate the utility or quality of these products until the time of utilization (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). The authors conclude that the amount of effort spent searing for needed information during the decision-making process is a key factor and can influence decisions about purchasing travel-related products and services.

As discussed before, aging and disabled travelers have a unique set of AT-related needs for travel. Thus, these tourists prefer and often require assurances that that travel facilities and travel destinations are able to attend to their needs, especially within the current travel and tourism market that is unprepared to accommodate them. Stated another way, considering the public should have access to details about the products and services they will purchase, the need for easily accessible information is more evident as it applies to special needs travelers.

For travelers with AT-related needs, the travel information available to them can be the determining factor about whether or not the travel is possible/feasible impact the quality of the touristic experience (Umbelino et al, 2012; Cole and Morgan, 2010). In the context of airlines and air travel, the touristic experience begins in the purchasing process, which is preceded by potential travelers collecting and assessing available information about services and products. Therefore, websites are essential from the perspective of the touristic offer. And, from the demand perspective, it is a practical and cheaper source of providing useful and necessary content to the masses. The information available on official airline websites must be reliable and should aim to seduce (gain and loyalty) the client by offering informative basic and high-level descriptions and details about organizational characteristics, services and products offered, and hospitality characteristics, for example.

Typically, airline websites serve as distribution channels in the tourist chain, which allows the client to select travel arrangements and buy them directly from the service producer. Beyond the provided information on these websites, there is no other intervening to guide or influence, with exception of the possibility that the traveler contact the airline and request support (essentially forfeiting one of the most advantageous and practical elements of website-based purchasing) (Law *et al*, 2010).

5. Methodology

As mentioned previously, the primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on official websites of major airline carriers as related to information, services, and resources to accommodate aging and disabled travelers. Airlines were selected for meeting one of the following criteria: (1) ranked as one of the 10 best airlines; (2) ranked as one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of safety ratings; and (3) ranked as one of the leading 10 airlines in terms of lowest cost. Given 3 airlines met two of the above categories, a total of 27 websites were independently evaluated utilizing a content rubric, which was developed by study investigators and guided by literature pertaining to relevant accessible tourism topics.

A total of 30 topics were identified and included in the rubric. The rubric captured information pertaining to the availability of disability services, reserving disability services, and requirements and restrictions associated with medications, electronic medical devices, and service animals. Topics were compared by airline category type. Using previously established review methods (Smith and Amorim, 2013), all portions of the airline websites were systematically reviewed for content regarding the above mentioned topics. Information obtained from each website was recorded in the content rubric. Rubric cells were marked with an “x” to indicate the website included content about the topic, or content pertaining to each topic was explicitly documented to capture details about the information provided. Frequencies were calculated for each airline category independently. Frequencies were then calculated for all airlines ($n = 27$), omitting those classified in more than one category ($n = 3$).

6. Findings

Table 1 reports findings from the content analysis of airline websites regarding disability services and dietary restrictions. Findings indicate 89.9% of airlines offered mobility services, 70.5% vision services, 62.9% hearing services, 40.7% cognitive services, and 7.4% language services. For available disability services, between 11.1% and 92.6% of websites provided no information. Approximately 63% of airlines provided onboard staff assistance to disabled passengers. No websites provided information about safety training requirements for staff members. Approximately 19% of websites provided safety cards in braille, whereas 77.8% contained no

information on the subject. In terms of dietary provisions onboard, 63% of websites reported information about options based on observances (e.g., vegetarian, Kosher) and 59.3% reported information about options based on allergies (e.g., peanuts, gluten, shellfish). Approximately one-third of websites did not contain information about dietary options.

When comparing website content based on airline category, a larger proportion of leading airlines in terms of safety reported having mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive services. A larger proportion of leading airlines in terms of safety reported having onboard assistance available. Further, a larger proportion of leading safety airlines reported dietary option availability.

Table 1: Disability Service Availability and Dietary Restrictions

	Total** (n = 27)	Best (n = 10)	Low Cost (n = 10)	Safe (n = 10)
Onboard Staff Assistance				
No	14.8%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Yes	62.9%	50.0%	60.0%	90.0%
No information available	22.2%	30.0%	30.0%	0.0%
Safety Training Requirements for Staff				
No information available	100%	100%	100%	100%
Available Services: Hearing				
No	7.4%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Yes	62.9%	50.0%	60.0%	90.0%
No information available	29.4%	40.0%	30.0%	10.0%
Available Services: Vision				
No	3.7%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	70.5%	50.0%	70.0%	100.0%
No information available	25.9%	40.0%	30.0%	0.0%
Available Services: Mobility				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	89.9%	90.0%	80.0%	100.0%
No information available	11.1%	10.0%	20.0%	0.0%
Available Services: Cognitive				
No	11.1%	20.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Yes	40.7%	30.0%	40.0%	60.0%
No information available	48.1%	50.0%	50.0%	40.0%
Available Services: Language				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	7.4%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%
No information available	92.6%	90.0%	100.0%	90.0%
Safety Cards Available in Braille (for Vision Impaired)				
No	3.7%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Yes	18.5%	30.0%	10.0%	30.0%
No information available	77.8%	60.0%	90.0%	60.0%

	Total** (n = 27)	Best (n = 10)	Low Cost (n = 10)	Safe (n = 10)
Dietary Options: Observance (e.g., vegetarian, Kosher meals)				
No	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Yes	63.0%	80.0%	20.0%	90.0%
No information available	33.3%	20.0%	70.0%	10.0%
Dietary Options: Allergies (e.g., peanuts, gluten, shellfish)				
No	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Yes	59.3%	70.0%	20.0%	90.0%
No information available	37.0%	30.0%	70.0%	10.0%
** Three airlines were omitted from the total count because they were represented in more than one category				

Table 2 reports findings from the content analysis of airline websites regarding the disability service reservation process. Findings indicate disability-related information was available on 74.1% of websites, while 3.7% had limited information on their website, 7.4% did not have information available on their website, and 14.8% need to call a representative via telephone to obtain disability-related information. All websites provided disability-related information in more than one language. In terms of reserving disability services, websites indicated services could be reserved by telephone (40.7%), website (25.9%), or other mechanisms (3.7%). Almost 30% provided no information about reserving services. While 92.6% of websites indicated disability assistance can be reserved before the ticket is purchased, the majority of airlines required services be reserved a minimum of 24 hours in advance (70.4%). Almost 30% of websites indicated there were no additional charges for disability services, whereas 3.7% of websites indicated additional charges applied and 66.7% provided no information about additional costs for services. The majority of websites (88.9%) provided no information about the needs for additional security screening requirements for disabled passengers. Most websites indicate wheelchairs were available to disabled travelers (92.6%), and 11.1% indicated crutches were available.

When comparing website content based on airline category, a larger proportion of leading airlines in terms of safety had disability-related information available on their websites, reported the ability to reserve disability assistance via their websites, and charged no additional cost for disability services. A larger proportion of the best airlines provided no information on their websites regarding advance time needed to reserve disability services, how disability services are reserved or purchased, and additional charges for disability services.

Table 2: Disability Service Reservation Processes

	Total** (n = 27)	Best (n = 10)	Low Cost (n = 10)	Safe (n = 10)
Disability-Related Information Availability				
Available on website	74.1%	70.0%	70.0%	90.0%
Limited information on website	3.7%	10.0%	00.0%	0.0%
Not available on website	7.4%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%
Need to call a representative	14.8%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Disability-Related Information Available in Multiple Languages				
No	0.0%	0%	0%	0%
Yes	100.0%	100%	100%	100%
When Assistance is Reserved				
Before ticket is purchased	92.6%	100.0%	90.0%	90.0%
In airport before check-in	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%
No information available	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Advance Time Needed to Reserve Services				
No advanced notice necessary	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
1 or 2 hours before departure	7.4%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%
24 hours before departure	11.1%	0.0%	20.0%	10.0%
48 + hours	59.3%	70.0%	50.0%	70.0%
No information available	18.5%	30.0%	0.0%	20.0%
How Assistance Is Reserved / Purchased				
By telephone	40.7%	20.0%	70.0%	30.0%
On website	25.9%	20.0%	20.0%	50.0%
Other	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%
No information available	29.6%	60.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Additional Charges for Disability Services Apply				
No	29.6%	0.0%	10.0%	70.0%
Yes	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
No information available	66.7%	100.0%	80.0%	30.0%
Additional Security Screening Requirments				
No	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Yes (documentation of physician prescription)	7.4%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
No information available	88.9%	80.0%	100.0%	90.0%
Assistive Device Availability				
Wheelchair	92.6%	80.0%	80.0%	100.0%
Crutch	11.1%	20.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
No information available	3.7%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%
<i>** Three airlines were amotted from the total count because they were represented in more than one category</i>				

Table 3 reports findings from the content analysis of airline websites regarding requirements and restrictions about medications, electronic medical devices, and service animal restrictions. Findings indicate 66.7% of websites provide medication transport suggestions, 40.7% reported no restrictions on medication type, and 44.4% reported no restrictions on medication amount. Over 40% of websites provided no information about medication restrictions. In terms of

electronic medical device restrictions, 29.6% reported restrictions for respirators, 29.6% for ventilators, 29.6% for continuous positive airway pressure devices, 63.0% for portable oxygen concentrators, and 63.0% for electronic wheelchairs. For electronic medical device restrictions, between 33.3% and 70.4% of websites provided no information. In terms of service animal accompaniment, 74.1% websites reported service animals were allowed to accompany disabled travelers, 70.4% reported there was no additional charge to travel with service animals, and 74.1% reported service animals were allowed to travel in the passenger cabin. Approximately one-quarter of websites provided no information about service animal accompaniment.

When comparing website content based on airline category, a larger proportion of leading airlines in terms of safety reported medication-related restrictions and more allowances pertaining to service animal accompaniment.

Table 3: Medication, Electronic Medical Devices, and Animal Requirements and Restrictions

	Total** (n = 27)	Best (n = 10)	Low Cost (n = 10)	Safe (n = 10)
Medication: Transport Suggestions				
No	7.4%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Yes	66.7%	60.0%	70.0%	70.0%
No information available	25.9%	30.0%	30.0%	20.0%
Medication: Type Restrictions				
No	40.7%	30.0%	60.0%	20.0%
Yes	18.5%	20.0%	0.0%	40.0%
No information available	40.7%	50.0%	40.0%	40.0%
Medication: Amount Restrictions				
No	44.4%	40.0%	60.0%	20.0%
Yes	14.8%	10.0%	0.0%	40.0%
No information available	40.7%	50.0%	40.0%	40.0%
Electronic Medical Devices Restrictions: Respirator				
No	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Yes	29.6%	30.0%	10.0%	30.0%
No information available	70.4%	60.0%	90.0%	60.0%
Electronic Medical Devices Restrictions: Ventilator				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	29.6%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%
No information available	70.4%	50.0%	100.0%	50.0%
Electronic Medical Devices Restrictions: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	29.6%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%
No information available	70.4%	50.0%	100.0%	50.0%
Electronic Medical Devices Restrictions: Portable Oxygen Concentrators				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	63.0%	70.0%	50.0%	80.0%
No information available	37.0%	30.0%	50.0%	20.0%

	Total** (n = 27)	Best (n = 10)	Low Cost (n = 10)	Safe (n = 10)
Electronic Medical Devices Restrictions: Wheelchair				
No	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Yes	63.0%	40.0%	80.0%	60.0%
No information available	33.3%	60.0%	20.0%	30.0%
Service Animal Accompaniment: Allowed				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	74.1%	70.0%	60.0%	100.0%
No information available	25.9%	30.0%	40.0%	0.0%
Service Animal Accompaniment: Additional Charge to Travel				
No	70.4%	70.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Yes	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
No information available	29.6%	30.0%	50.0%	0.0%
Service Animal Accompaniment: Travel in Passenger Cabin				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	74.1%	70.0%	60.0%	100.0%
No information available	25.9%	30.0%	40.0%	0.0%
Service Animal Accompaniment: Travel in Cargo Compartment				
No	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yes	3.7%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
No information available	96.3%	90.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<i>** Three airlines were omitted from the total count because they were represented in more than one category</i>				

7. Discussion

The global population is aging. Alongside advancing in years, older adults have more chronic conditions and disabilities relative to their younger counterparts. Aging and disabled populations have increased needs for special assistance, services, and equipment to accommodate limitations associated with physical functioning, cognitive impairment, and loss of sense functioning (e.g., vision, hearing). This group of aging and disabled travelers represents an interesting segment in the tourism industry; however, the current market offers inadequate products and services to meet the needs/demands of this special population. The inability and unpreparedness of the touristic infrastructure to offer these necessary services compromises the quality of the tourism experience, which can create discomfort among this population and make them feel marginalized and disempowered. Thus, it is especially important for the tourism industry to embrace basic concepts of Accessible Tourism (AT) by providing adapted structures/services to ensure these individuals are not deterred from travel and find their experiences pleasurable.

This study assessed websites of leading airlines in three categories from the prospective of consumers. Findings from this content analysis revealed that AT-related content provided on airline websites differed by airline category. Generally, leading safety airline websites provided more content about available AT services.

These leading safety airlines allowed AT services to be reserved online and were less likely to charge patrons for AT services. These safety airlines also reported more information on their websites about medication restrictions and more allowances related to service animals.

Websites serve as important communication tools, which should provide reliable information to attract and facilitate the purchasing process in a way that enhances the touristic experience. While most of the airlines assessed in this study contained a section on their website for “special needs,” the information provided within these website sections differed dramatically. Often, information about only a few topics was provided. And, even when topics were listed, only limited information about these topics was provided. The absence of detailed information on websites often forces customers to contact the airline via telephone or face-to-face. This can increase the likelihood of frustration, stress, or dissatisfaction if services are not provided or there are associated costs, which may result in travel complications, delays and/or cancellations. While there are instances that require telephone or face-to-face interaction, we recommend the addition of AT-related content on websites to maximize their potential benefit for the user and avoid inefficiencies for the airline. Such inefficiencies increases overhead for the airline in terms of personnel, time, and may result in a reduction in customer satisfaction and sales.

Despite being capitalistic in a competitive market, we recommend AT-related services be uniformly provided across airline categories and AT-related topics and information be accurately and uniformly reported on airline websites. While some airlines will elect not to offer these AT services, at least explicitly stating they do not offer such services enables the customer an opportunity to make an informed decision about pursuing travel plans with said provider. It eliminates uncertainty, which is important for aging and disabled travelers with special needs. Further, if airlines do not provide AT-related services, we recommend they consider the costs and resources needed to offer such services (i.e., in airports and onboard). Given the large and growing number of aging and disabled travelers, who are often accompanied by other individuals when they travel, the financial return on investment of catering to this subsection of travelers is vastly promising.

Airlines have the responsibility to provide information on their websites to inform potential travelers of the services they provide. It is essential that websites provide this content to ensure travelers have adequate time and information to make travel arrangements with airlines that best meet their needs. In addition to influencing the selection of airlines, this information should be provided on websites to allow travelers to prepare for their trip well prior to purchasing and departure. Travelers with AT needs may appreciate knowing the additional time required for reserving services and equipment, additional time needed to arrive at the airport, and/or whether the airline offers services or has restrictions. Further, information

about additional costs for AT services and equipment should be known in advance to avoid frustration and complications during travel. This information is also useful for the parties accompanying the traveler (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, caregivers). Possessing adequate information to plan for travel has potential to increase satisfaction among aging and disabled travelers and ensure their travel plans are not compromised upon arrival to the airport, which may lead to repeat patronage and increased loyalty.

Generally, findings indicate that most of the assessed airlines provide mobility (89.9%) and vision (70.5%) services for disabled passengers. Fewer airlines provided services related to hearing (62.9%) or cognitive (40.7%) impairments. While it can be argued that mobility impairments are the most prevalent form of disability, cognitive impairments are seemingly more common than those associated with vision or hearing (Norman and Grandgenett II, 1997). One interpretation of this finding is that the personnel training and resources needed to accommodate disabled travelers with cognitive impairments are greater relative to hearing and/or vision impairments, thus airlines are less inclined to or capable of providing cognitive services. Additional research is needed to determine the specific needs of cognitively impaired travelers and the training and resource demands on the workforce to adequately accommodate the volume of these disabled tourists.

Interesting findings also emerged about the provisions of braille safety cards and food options for travelers with dietary preferences or restrictions. Many airlines did not provide whether or not they offer braille safety cards onboard on their websites, and others stated that such cards are not available. Safety cards in braille are an inexpensive and important resource for the travelers with vision impairments. Information in braille fosters autonomy to these travelers when learning about safety procedures and equipment on the aircraft. Without this autonomy, these individuals may not feel they can protect themselves in a time of emergency. While airline staff and crew could read safety information to vision impaired travelers, this option goes against the promotion of quality AT experiences because it keeps the tourist dependent upon special treatment instead of being able to act on their own. In terms of dietary options onboard, a higher number of leading safety airlines and the best airlines offer foodstuffs that cater to those with food-related allergies and observances (90% and 70%, respectively). It is of no surprise that low cost airlines are less likely to offer food alternatives because they aim to save travelers from spending money by offering limited amenities. However, low cost airline websites should be updated to provide information about limited food provisions so travelers can adequately prepare for their flight.

Findings also indicate that leading safety airline websites provided more content about available AT services, relative to those in the other airline categories. This finding is somewhat intuitive because airlines providing a more comprehensive set of

AT-related services may increase the likelihood that they are ranked highly in terms of safety. Regardless, findings from this study suggest that leading safety airlines better serve tourists requiring AT-related services in many aspects. As such, the industry should consider modeling AT-related trainings and protocols from the practices of leading safety airlines. This has potential to increase the number of airlines providing AT-related services to disabled travelers and foster uniformity in service provisions industry-wide.

While none of the airlines included in this study reported safety training requirements for their staff, reporting this information is less important because of industry regulations that mandate basic first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and evacuation training requirements (ICAO, 2011). However, these trainings may or may not take into consideration the needs of aging and disabled travelers. Therefore, we recommend the creation and delivery of uniform AT and sensitivity training to enhance the workforce's capacity to accommodate aging and disabled travelers in the event of an emergency situation. In addition to protecting airlines against potential legal liability in the instance of adverse incidents, such training also has implications to foster customer satisfaction, comfort, and loyalty.

8. Limitations

There were limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the format and organization of airline websites differed based on their category and the country in which they were based. Therefore, despite systematic website reviews, some rubric content may have been provided on the website, but unintentionally overlooked by the content assessor. Second, only one content assessor was used to assess all 27 websites in this study. While this is seen as a limitation because there it limited the ability to measure inter-rater reliability, having the same content assessor ensured consistency in review processes and content documentation. Third, the rubric created for this study was not all encompassing and may have omitted important topics related to AT. Therefore, future studies should utilize this rubric, assess its relevance, and add additional categories, as needed. Finally, many of the airline websites did not provide AT-related content for many rubric categories. Although the information was not contained within the website, this does not guarantee that the airline did not provide this service. Additional efforts are needed to determine if airlines are actually providing AT services, despite that information not being present on their websites.

9. Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of airline websites to inform aging and disabled travelers about AT-related services and equipment as well as associated costs. Airlines have the responsibility to provide information on their websites to inform

potential travelers of the services they do and don't provide. Official airline websites serve a vital role to facilitate the tourist's planning process to minimize frustration and stress while increasing the likelihood of a positive and satisfying experience. Airlines are encouraged to revisit the content provided on their websites to ensure accuracy and consider expanding the offerings of AT-related services and equipment to meet the needs of this growing tourism market.

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