

Online communications of accessibility in hotel restaurants

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Previous attention to examining how well hotels cater to the access needs of customers with disabilities has predominantly focused on problematic hotel infrastructure, bathroom facilities, service failures and a lack of knowledge among industry workers in dealing with customers with disabilities. This study examined the online information available on hotel websites to uncover best practices of those New Zealand hotels viewed as accessibility champions. The focus of the study was the online communications about the accessibility of hotel restaurants, given the lack of scholarly attention to the accessibility of the hotel dining experience in New Zealand's hotels and the rhetoric of those organisations championing accessibility.

The concept of accessible tourism has gained attention in tourism studies. Its focus is enabling people with access requirements/disabilities, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently with equity and dignity through the provision of universally designed tourism products, services, and environments.¹ There is a need for tourism and hospitality champions to encourage the take-up of the accessibility agenda so that others may follow from their example in the pursuit of social change. Without efforts to champion change, customers with disabilities may remain marginalised and excluded, find it difficult to access information and experience barriers to the dining experience (e.g. aisles not wide enough, difficulty reading menus, lack of support accessing buffets, etc.). Current research still reports many barriers to accessing transport, buildings, services and accessibility information, as well as social barriers imposed by negative attitudes from service providers.²

Organisations' websites play a very important role for hotels as they promote customer reviews, as well as the espoused values of the organisation and the championing of a particular cause. Very rarely have hotel websites been used to look at rhetoric, or the persuasive types of language for social change, and the best practices implemented by accessibility champions. We examined the website communications of three case study New Zealand hotel restaurants, deemed champions in accessible best practice, to determine their strategies and tactics for accessibility, and critically examined the rhetoric of accessibility communicated online on their websites. We followed the methodology employed by Greenwood et al.,³ involving categorical, content and rhetoric analysis of the visual design, content, language and meaning of the website communications in relation to the hotel's accessibility agenda. The limited available information about accessibility communicated online is a noted limitation of the research.

The study revealed common use of high colour contrast for the accessible visual display of information on the websites, and the use of a two-step click process to access accessible information quickly and easily. Common to three hotels' communications was promotion of logos of their accreditations with social change organisations, photos including employees with disabilities in their workforce, use of inclusive language (e.g. the term 'accessibility' was preferred to 'disability'), and the effective use of inclusive imagery (e.g. the interior of the restaurant with a sign language menu on the wall). Examples of common tactics used by the hotels included provision of Braille/Sign Language menus, accessible restaurant and bar areas, and availability of trained restaurant staff to support customers with disabilities (e.g. staff who can speak New Zealand Sign Language, or who are trained for general disability support). Common rhetoric included commonly communicated themes around accessibility for all (e.g. "It's about removing discrimination"), persuasion for the inclusion of people with disabilities (e.g. "true accessibility means empowering people"), validity of the accessible facilities provided (e.g. through displaying their accessibility rating), and persuasion for social change (e.g. "A 100% accessible society can only be achieved through a commitment from us all").

New Zealand statistics indicate that one in four New Zealanders live with a disability, and 60% of adults are over the age of 45.⁴ The growing disability rates and ageing population in New Zealand, and the opportunity for change in a post-pandemic climate, are pressing reasons to make greater accessibility efforts in the hotel industry. Existing champions, through their best practices and persuasions for social change, can inspire other hotels who have not yet thought about accessibility of their services. More champions of social change are urgently needed.

The original research on which this article is based is available here: <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/13848>.

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