

Toward Accessible Tourism: The Reality and Challenges of Accessible Tourism for Persons with Physical Disabilities in Ajloun Governorate, Jordan

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Abstract

Tourism has grown significantly worldwide due to expanded travel options and increased recreational opportunities. This research examines the current state of accessible tourism for individuals with physical disabilities in Jordan and identifies the primary challenges impeding its advancement. A descriptive survey was used, with data collected via a structured questionnaire comprising two principal dimensions: the status of accessible tourism and the challenges encountered. The sample included 120 individuals with physical disabilities, selected through simple random sampling. Results indicate that accessible tourism in Ajloun Governorate is at a moderate level. The reception and services domain at tourist sites ranks highest, followed by the ease-of-access domain, while tourism promotion ranks lowest. The challenges confronting accessible tourism are also assessed as moderate overall. Social challenges are most prominent, followed by economic and situational challenges related to tourist sites, with personal challenges ranking lowest. These outcomes highlight a distinct gap between the requirements of individuals with physical disabilities and the current state of tourism in the governorate. To improve accessible tourism, the study recommends infrastructure development, service enhancement, personnel training, and targeted tourism promotion to foster greater inclusivity and sustainability within the tourism sector.

Keywords: accessible tourism, physical disability, universal access, inclusive tourism, tourism challenges

Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2025) states that tourism is a vital sector that drives countries' comprehensive development. Tourism supports economic growth, enhances social and cultural interaction, creates employment opportunities, and stimulates investment. Additionally, it aims to strengthen cultural exchange between visitors and local communities.

In recent decades, tourism has become a key aspect of sustainable development policies in both developing and developed countries. This is due to its direct effect on improving living standards and enhancing social cohesion (Darcy, McKercher & Schweinsberg, 2020). As the role of tourism has grown, countries and tourism institutions have begun to develop diverse tourism patterns. These patterns accommodate individual differences among tourists and meet the needs of various groups. As a result, tourism can achieve inclusiveness, equity, and equality in the benefits it provides (Al-Zoubi, 2023).

As the focus on including diverse social groups in tourism activities grows, the concept of accessible tourism has emerged as a modern tourism pattern. It focuses on providing a barrier-free tourism environment for people with disabilities. This concept has seen rapid global expansion, particularly in European countries, driven by growing awareness of its importance in promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities and enabling them to participate in tourism activities independently and safely.

The year 2016 marked a pivotal turning point in international policy. UNESCO and the World Tourism Organization celebrated World Tourism Day 2016 under the slogan “Tourism for All – Promoting Universal Accessibility.” This celebration reflects an institutional commitment to integrating accessible tourism into the global tourism agenda as a fundamental factor in comprehensive development and in achieving sustainable economic and social benefits for member states, especially in the European Union. Practices and frameworks have been adopted to enhance accessibility and equality in tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that enables persons with disabilities and individuals with special needs to participate in tourism activities independently, with dignity and equality. This is achieved by providing services, products, and tourism environments that are designed to address a range of physical, sensory, and cognitive needs (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2013). By accommodating functional and sensory requirements, accessible tourism facilitates autonomous, barrier-free participation. As a result, accessible tourism has become recognized as a developmental and social trend within the contemporary global tourism landscape, promoting inclusion and social justice in the tourism sector (Kaganek et al., 2017).

Accessible tourism is grounded in a robust international rights-based framework. Article 30 of the 2007 International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms that people with disabilities have the right to fully and equally enjoy basic rights and freedoms, including access to recreational spaces, tourism services, and cultural sites (Alasim & Algraini, 2025). Regionally, the Arab Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2003–2012) reinforced this principle by emphasizing the right of people with disabilities to participate in recreational activities and to access inclusive environments. It also highlighted the need to train qualified professionals, provide essential devices and equipment, and ensure freedom of movement and easy access to public facilities (Al-Zahrani, 2022).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopts a social and environmental view of disability, identifying environmental barriers as the primary cause of participation limitations, not individual traits. Article 9 requires State Parties to ensure that people with disabilities can access buildings, transportation, information, communication, and public services. Removing obstacles is key to improving accessibility (United Nations, 2006). This approach provides a rights-based foundation for applying universal design to the planning of environments and services, ensuring they are usable from the start and do not require later changes.

Jordan offers tourists a wide range of historical and archaeological sites, as well as natural and environmental attractions. The country’s cultural heritage is evident in places such as the Wadi Rum desert, the Roman ruins in Jerash and Amman, and the forests in Ajloun Governorate (Visit Jordan, 2025). However, local reports indicate that many tourist sites still lack universal accessibility standards, making it harder for people with disabilities to enjoy these attractions (Jordan Times, 2023). In response, authorities in Jordan, especially the government and the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have taken initiatives, in collaboration with international institutions, to make these heritage and archaeological sites accessible. Such initiatives will help the tourism industry cater to different sections of society (Reform Secretariat, 2025).

The Ajloun Governorate is a major tourist destination in Jordan, particularly in the northern region. Key attractions include Ajloun Castle and the surrounding forests. The governorate's mountainous terrain offers a variety of tourism opportunities, making it vital for both domestic and international tourism (Visit Jordan, 2025). Despite this, there remains a need to develop accessible tourism at the destination site. Challenges include inadequate infrastructure, limited support services, and a lack of specialized expertise for the disabled population (UNWTO, 2025; Reform Secretariat, 2025).

Statement of the problem

Accessible tourism is booming as a contemporary approach to supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities and enhancing equity in tourism services. However, practical realities indicate that structural, organizational, and human challenges persist, limiting this group's participation in tourism activities. The most prominent of these challenges include (1) weak implementation of universal design principles, (2) inadequate tourism infrastructure and hotel services, (3) limited skills among tourism workers and guides in working with people with disabilities, and (4) a shortage of specialized support services (Alasim & Alqraini, 2025).

Moreover, many tourist establishments lack accessible facilities, including parking spaces, accessible transportation, transportation services, and hotel accommodations suitable for disabled people. The guidance and communication services offered to disabled tourists also remain inadequate (Abd-Elraof & Dawood, 2018). Personal, social, and economic factors contribute to this problem. These factors include psychological issues related to travel, low-income family and community support, and high travel-related expenses, especially when accompanying individuals are needed (Al-Zahrani, 2022).

However, in Jordan, despite the rapid growth of the tourism industry, the rise in tourist numbers, and the expansion of national services, accessible tourism still faces practical challenges. According to local news reports and activists' opinions, the universal accessibility standard is poorly implemented at several tourist locations. This leaves people with disabilities unable to access the facilities at these locations (Jordan Times, 2023). Efforts by the Jordanian government and the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to promote accessible tourism cannot bridge the gap between formulated policies and their implementation. Furthermore, little research has been conducted locally to assess the accessibility of tourism services for people with disabilities (Jordan News Updates, 2025; Reform Secretariat, 2025). Given this, the problem is situated within the realities of accessible tourism and the challenges faced by physically disabled individuals in Jordan. Specifically, the study focuses on Ajloun Governorate as the fieldwork site. The purpose of this study is to provide a body of knowledge for the inclusive planning of tourism activities. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the reality of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate from their perspective?
2. What are the challenges of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate from their perspective?

Significance of the study

The importance of the research lies in its focus on accessible tourism as a key strategy for developing an inclusive and sustainable tourism industry, owing to its inherent links to human rights, development, and economic aspects. Providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities to access tourism-related services and activities can be viewed as an exercise of human rights, equality, and social justice. Moreover, it facilitates their integration into society through the corresponding international agreements.

In addition, the research fills a gap in local knowledge in a highly applied manner, specifically for Ajloun Governorate. In doing so, it presents evidence from practice based on the real-life experiences of physically disabled individuals. This contributes to theoretical discussion and paves the way for comparison with experiences from abroad. On a more practical note, the results will assist tourism planning by identifying destination readiness and gaps in infrastructure and services.

Moreover, it offers a scientific framework for formulating policies and training programs consistent with the philosophy of universal design and accessibility for all. This research also supports the development of sustainable tourism and the economic and social inclusion of people with disabilities, including those with physical disabilities. Moreover, it helps formulate

an inclusive tourism approach that considers economic and social aspects while elevating the status of Ajloun Governorate as a human and diverse tourist destination.

Methods

The descriptive survey method was used in this research because it is the most effective way to describe reality and analyze social and touristic phenomena as they occur. This method was chosen because it best suits this research, as it addresses the realities and challenges of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate.

The methodology used a questionnaire to collect quantitative data on various aspects of accessible tourism. The questionnaire was administered to individuals with physical disabilities aged 20-60 years to diversify the sample and represent the beneficiaries of accessible tourism in the governorate.

The objective of the descriptive survey design is to provide a comprehensive, objective overview of the realities and challenges of accessible tourism in Ajloun Governorate. Additionally, the approach highlights key gaps and needs that the relevant authorities can leverage to develop tourism facilities and services.

Study population and sample

It was not easy to locate all individuals with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate. The Ajloun Club for Persons with Physical Disabilities was used as a means of cooperation to gain access to participants. This club is among the largest community organizations offering a range of services and activities for people with disabilities. Members of the club with physical disabilities were willing to take part in the research. This helped ensure representation from different segments of the target community.

The research sample comprised 120 physically challenged individuals selected through simple random sampling, including 67 males and 53 females aged 20 to 60 years. Data were collected during the summer of 2025. The survey used in the research was made available electronically via Google Forms in collaboration with the club's administration. The participants received the survey via their personal email addresses and WhatsApp. The questionnaire was available from June 1 to June 20, 2025.

Questionnaire

The study uses one research instrument: a questionnaire. The main purpose of the study is to investigate the state of accessible tourism in Ajloun Governorate and analyze the associated challenges. Related literature was consulted to identify the domains and items of this instrument (Abd-Elraof & Dawood, 2018; Alasim & Alqraini, 2025; Al-Zahrani, 2022).

The instrument, in its final form, consisted of two sections. The first section aimed to measure the extent of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate. It comprised 15 items distributed across three main domains: (1) tourism promotion of sites, consisting of five items intended to assess the clarity and availability of promotional information for persons with disabilities; (2) ease of access to tourist sites, consisting of five items covering physical aspects and infrastructure that facilitate access for visitors with disabilities; and (3) reception and services at tourist sites, consisting of five items designed to measure the quality of visitor reception and the services provided to visitors.

The purpose of the second part was to identify the problems people with physical disabilities would encounter when planning a visit to Ajloun Governorate. This section comprises 28 questions, grouped into four categories: personal problems faced by tourists (9), social problems (5), economic problems (5), and situational problems at the site (9).

The study used a five-point Likert scale to evaluate each item, with the following values: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The scores for the questionnaire items and the overall results were classified as follows: 1.00–1.80 = very low

level; 1.81–2.60 = low level; 2.61–3.40 = moderate level; 3.41–4.20 = high level; and 4.21–5.00 = very high level.

This instrument was designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of all key dimensions of accessible tourism; to assess promotion, accessibility, and reception; and to address challenges. It thus provides an accurate quantitative database that supports the extraction of results and the analysis of gaps in the tourism reality for people with disabilities in the governorate.

Validity

Content validity of the study instrument, the questionnaire, was ensured. The questionnaire, in its initial form, was reviewed by 10 faculty members with expertise and experience in tourism and special education at Jordanian universities. They were asked to evaluate the extent to which each item belonged to its domain and the instrument's overall suitability for achieving the study objectives. They also verified the accuracy of the linguistic formulation and the clarity and ease of understanding of the items for respondents.

Based on the experts' evaluations, the necessary modifications were made. Any item that received an agreement rate of at least 80% on the need for modification was revised. The most notable comments from the experts included rephrasing certain items linguistically to enhance clarity, comprehension, and measurability. Accordingly, the study instrument was finalized and prepared for application to a sample of persons with physical disabilities. Therefore, the accuracy of the results and their alignment with the study objectives were ensured.

Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the study instrument, two methods were used. The first was the test–retest method. The instrument was administered and then readministered to a pilot sample after a two-week interval. The pilot sample consisted of 30 individuals with physical disabilities, drawn from outside the main study sample. This procedure aimed to calculate Pearson's correlation coefficient between participants' responses across the two administrations for each instrument domain and for the instrument overall. The second method involved calculating Cronbach's alpha for the instrument's domains. Table 1 presents the reliability coefficients obtained via both methods.

Table 1. Reliability coefficients of the study instrument

No.	Domain	Test–Retest Reliability	Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)
1	Promotion of the tourist site	0.86	0.80
2	Access to the tourist site	0.88	0.87
3	Reception at the tourist site	0.83	0.77
	Total score of the first section	0.90	—
1	Personal challenges related to the tourist	0.81	0.75
2	Social challenges	0.83	0.80
3	Economic challenges	0.92	0.76
4	Situational challenges related to the tourist site	0.79	0.83
	Total score of the second section	0.85	—

Source: Author

Table 1 shows that the reliability coefficients of the study instrument, whether calculated using the test–retest method or the internal consistency method (Cronbach's alpha), were high and statistically acceptable across all domains and totals. These results demonstrate that the study instrument has satisfactory reliability and is suitable for use in the present study.

Results

The reality of accessible tourism for people with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate

Means and standard deviations were calculated to assess the extent of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate from their perspective. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the reality of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate

Rank	No.	Domain	Mean	Standard deviation	Level
1	3	Reception and services at tourist sites	2.77	0.55	Moderate
2	2	Ease of access to tourist sites	2.65	0.56	Moderate
3	1	Tourism promotion of sites	2.58	0.59	Moderate
		Overall reality score	2.67	0.35	

Source: Author

Table 2 shows that, from the perspective of persons with physical disabilities, the level of accessible tourism in Ajloun Governorate was rated as moderate. The overall mean was 2.67, with a standard deviation of 0.35. The analysis of the subdomains indicates that the highest-rated domain was reception and services at tourist sites, with a mean of 2.77, followed by ease of access to tourist sites, with a mean of 2.65. Tourism promotion of sites ranked lowest, with a mean of 2.58. Figure 1 illustrates these results.



Figure 1. Means and standard deviations of the reality of accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate (Source: Author)

Challenges facing accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate from their own perspective

Means and standard deviations were calculated for persons with physical disabilities in the Ajloun Governorate regarding the challenges they face in accessing tourism. Table 3 presents these results.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the challenges facing accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate

Rank	No.	Domain	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
1	2	Social challenges	3.35	0.46	Moderate
2	3	Economic challenges	3.33	0.49	Moderate
3	4	Situational challenges related to the tourist site	3.32	0.50	Moderate
4	1	Personal challenges related to the tourist site	3.24	0.38	Moderate
		Challenges overall	3.30	0.32	

Source: Author

As shown in Table 3, the degree of challenges encountered in developing accessible tourism for people with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate was moderate. The mean total score was 3.30, with a standard deviation of 0.32. The subdomain results showed that social challenges had the highest scores, with an average of 3.35, while the travelers' own challenges had the lowest, with an average of 3.24. However, all domains fell within the moderate range for challenges to the development of accessible tourism in the governorate. Figure 3 presents the results.

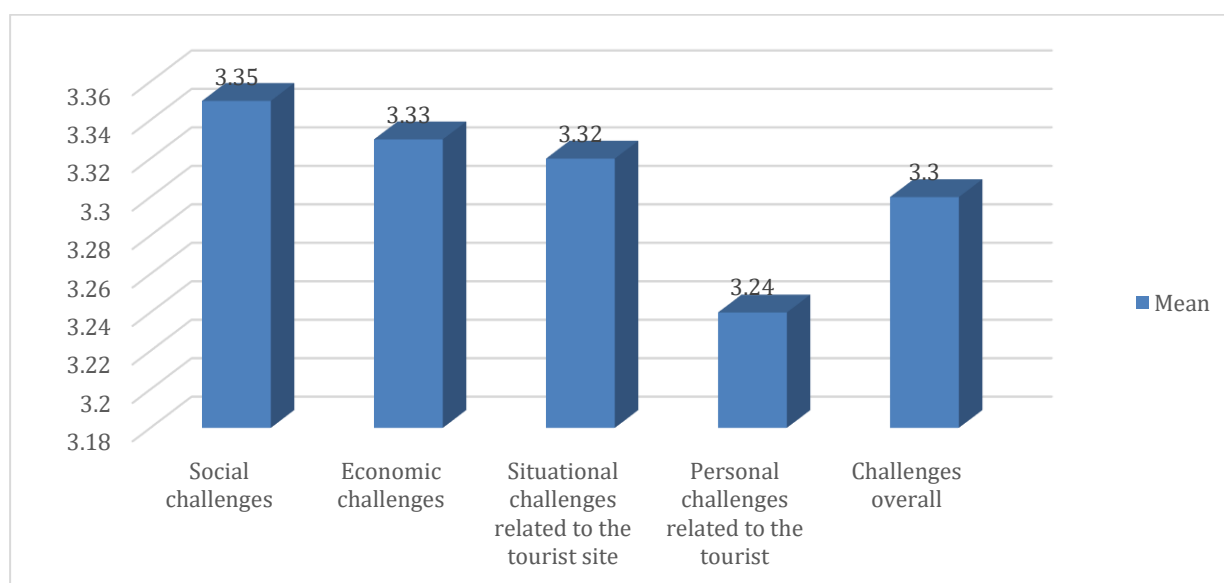


Figure 2. Means and standard deviations of the challenges facing accessible tourism for persons with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate (Source: Author)

Discussion

The reception and service area at the tourist facilities received a top ranking; however, it remains at a moderate level. This result implies that the area has basic infrastructure, such as reception facilities and parking areas. Nevertheless, these facilities lack necessary assistive devices for people with physical disabilities, including ramps, elevators, audio or visual guidance, and well-equipped waiting areas. Such a situation points to the necessity of developing an integrated strategy to improve reception and service and to involve disabled tourists in tourism activities.

The domain of ease of access to tourist sites was also rated as moderate, reflecting some positive aspects in the provision of physical facilities, such as sloped pathways and designated parking spaces. Nevertheless, these efforts are not consistently implemented across all tourist sites in Ajloun Governorate. Previous studies have indicated that improving access to tourist sites

requires continuous efforts to develop accessible transportation systems and infrastructure (Al-Zahrani, 2022).

The domain of tourism promotion ranked lowest. This result highlights weaknesses in media campaigns and promotional materials aimed at people with disabilities, including electronic brochures, accessible websites, and specialized tourism programs. Additionally, the results highlight the urgent need to develop inclusive promotional strategies that specifically target people with disabilities. Moreover, they highlight tourist sites equipped to meet their needs, thereby enhancing their social inclusion and increasing their participation in tourism activities. These results are consistent with previous studies, including those by Ovriu et al. (2018) and Alqarni, Hamadneh, and Abduh (2023). These studies highlighted clear shortcomings in the accessibility of tourist sites for people with disabilities. The findings also support the need to formulate comprehensive policies and strategies to enhance accessible tourism, encompassing infrastructure, services, promotion, and training.

As for problems related to the tourists themselves, people with disabilities face several challenges. These difficulties are associated with feelings of embarrassment or discomfort stemming from negative social perceptions or excessive overprotection by others. These difficulties may reduce their willingness to participate in tourism activities. In addition, inadequate healthcare services at tourist sites may lead to fatigue and exhaustion. As a result, they may limit their readiness to undertake travel and tourism trips (Alqarni, Hamadneh & Abduh, 2023). In Ajloun Governorate, some tourist sites do not offer programs and services adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. This problem further increases their sense of limited ability to interact and participate.

For social challenges, the higher mean in this domain indicates that people with disabilities often rely on support from family members and friends. However, this support may be constrained by embarrassment among family members or companions, or by a lack of competence and experience in providing appropriate assistance.

Another reason that makes the matter of disabilities more socially complicated in Ajloun governorate is the shortage of trained personnel to assist people with disabilities at tourism destinations. Another problem is that some people with disabilities travel unaccompanied by a trained attendant, and negative attitudes of other tourists may prevent them from engaging in tourism activities.

Among the major obstacles to access to tourism are financial limitations. The vast majority of people with disabilities earn low incomes, which can lead to additional expenses for companions or devices needed for travel (Alasim & Alqraini, 2025). In addition, the prices for transportation, accommodation, and food can be too high for people with disabilities to afford tourism. This is evident in Ajloun Governorate, where the prices for trips and tourism-related activities are rather high, thus making this challenge clear.

Regarding situational problems associated with tourist attractions, the findings indicate that the tourist attractions in Ajloun are poorly prepared in terms of accessibility, the presence of appropriate facilities, and tools to facilitate people with disabilities. In addition, the lack of tour guides who are well-versed in working in this field, due to the nature of the terrain, especially in forests and mountains, prevents access for people with disabilities (Al-Zahrani, 2022). These situations underscore the urgent need to develop accessible infrastructure at tourist sites.

Regarding consistency with previous studies, the findings align with prior research indicating that accessible tourism in Arab countries has faced numerous obstacles to development. Such obstacles include poor promotion, limited accessibility, low staff competencies, and inadequate facilities and services (Alqarni et al., 2023; Al-Zahrani, 2022; Ovriu et al., 2018). These obstacles call for comprehensive policies and strategies to boost tourism for people with special needs in Jordan overall and in Ajloun in particular.

Conclusion

The results indicate that the accessibility of tourism for individuals with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate is at a medium level. This is due to the partial development of the tourism environment to accommodate their needs. Although there are some positive aspects, such as accessible paths and designated parking areas, these services remain limited and have not been implemented across all tourist destinations. Consequently, this affects the effectiveness of these individuals' use of tourism facilities and their ability to benefit from the governorate's tourism resources fully.

Findings from the study further identified a clear weakness in tourism promotional efforts targeted at people with disabilities. The lack of accurate information about the accessibility of tourist sites in promotional materials and media programs undermines the group's confidence in the services available, thereby limiting their participation in tourist activities. In addition, findings indicate that the reception and services offered at tourist sites were average. They also show a lack of expertise in service provision and in the use of supportive tools and assistive devices that promote safe, dignified, and inclusive tourism.

Regarding the difficulties faced, the research found that accessible tourism in the Ajloun governorate encounters a range of challenges, including personal, social, economic, and site-related difficulties, all rated as moderate. This suggests that these difficulties accumulate and affect the decisions of physically disabled individuals to participate in tourism. Psychological and social factors, economic constraints, limited access to infrastructure, and terrain at some tourist sites are among these barriers.

The research findings show that achieving accessibility in the tourism industry of Ajloun Governorate requires a holistic vision rather than a partial or fragmented one. This can be achieved by applying universal accessibility principles to tourism development and by harmonizing efforts among government, private, and local community institutions. These steps will ensure that tourism is sustainable and equitable. They will also help empower individuals with physical disabilities by enabling them to exercise their tourism rights.

Limitations

This study is limited to examining the realities and challenges of accessible tourism for people with physical disabilities in Ajloun Governorate, Jordan. It is also confined to the views of a specific sample of persons with disabilities, including individuals with physical disabilities, within the age range of 20-60 years. They are registered with clubs and organizations concerned with persons with disabilities in the governorate.

From a temporal perspective, the study is limited to the summer of 2025, which coincides with the peak period of local tourism activity. This allows an examination of tourism services and facilities during the most intensive period of use. Methodologically, the study relies on a single research instrument, a questionnaire. This may limit the diversity of data sources and make the generalizability of the findings dependent on the instrument's validity and reliability, as well as on the seriousness of respondents' participation.

Moreover, the conclusions are primarily applicable to tourism for people with physical disabilities in the Ajloun Governorate. Hence, they might vary when the study is applied to other governorates or age groups, or when different research methods, such as interviews and fieldwork, are used. Consequently, the study will have certain boundaries that define its scope, target group, research tool, and time period. These boundaries will provide a clearer framework for interpreting and analyzing the findings. In addition, the current findings can inform the development of accessible tourism in Jordan and enhance its inclusivity for all beneficiary groups.

Recommendations

The research suggests that the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Jordan should cooperate with the Tourism Directorate of Ajloun Governorate, municipalities, and the private tourism sector to implement a comprehensive strategic plan to advance accessible tourism. This strategy will involve incorporating universal accessibility criteria into the design and implementation of all tourism projects. It will entail developing improved infrastructure for tourism facilities, including sloping ramps, proper amenities, and other necessary devices. There will also be improvements to transportation systems to ensure safe, independent mobility for people with disabilities. Also, the research highlights the need to design and implement continuous training programs for tourism industry employees in collaboration with educational institutions and specialized civil society organizations. The purpose of these programs is to enhance their skills and help them provide inclusive tourism services. These services take into account the needs of people with disabilities, especially those with physical disabilities. In addition, the research highlights the need to develop targeted media campaigns, involving official agencies and the media, to promote easily accessible tourist spots for people with disabilities and their families. This should be achieved through awareness programs for families and companions to provide positive social support. Furthermore, the research suggests that the government and private sectors offer financial incentives and discounted rates to reduce the costs associated with accessible tourism. Programs and services specific to tourism should also be created to cater to individual needs, including medical services while traveling.

Acknowledgment

"The authors are grateful to the Deanship of Scientific Research at Jadara University for providing financial support for this publication"

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