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Accessibility information and rhetoric: an evaluation of the website communications of three New Zealand hotels

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ABSTRACT: Previous scholarship highlights the physical, social and informational barriers to participation in tourism and hospitality for people with disabilities. The provision of reliable and up-to-date information, especially via websites, is crucial to ensuring accessibility and inclusion in hospitality services and experiences as it enables essential pre-visit planning. It also establishes a communication platform for wider social advocacy. This study sought to examine the website communications of three case study hotels known as being accessibility champions in New Zealand to evaluate how well they communicated information about inclusion and the accessibility of their hotel services, including in-hotel dining experiences, to customers with disabilities. An evaluation of the website communications of accessibility champions may reveal wider lessons for other hotels to improve their provision of information as well as contribute to broader social change in the hospitality industry. This interpretive study employed Greenwood et al.'s three-phase analysis process to analyse the design, content and rhetorical elements of the website communications. Findings of the study reveal common themes, strategies and tactics for the design and delivery of accessibility information on the hotel websites. Rhetorical analysis reveal how the three websites used persuasive communication to create a common social narrative around inclusive hospitality.

KEYWORDS: accessible tourism, disability, hotel dining experience, inclusion, rhetorical analysis

Introduction

This article considers how well hotels communicate information about the accessibility of their facilities and services to customers with different dimensions of disability, and whether this communication may help contribute to broader social change in the hospitality industry. In tourism and hospitality scholarship, much previous research has related disability to the concepts of accessibility and "accessible tourism" (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). Previous research has determined various barriers faced by travellers with disabilities which mean they are not able to access, or fully participate in, hospitality and tourism activities (Michopoulou et al., 2015; Tutuncu, 2017; Gillovic et al., 2024). Barriers include a lack of knowledge and education among service providers, a lack of accessible infrastructure and a lack of accessibility information provided to them to plan their travel. The accumulation of these barriers prevents people with disabilities from having equal access and satisfactory tourism experiences, despite holding the same motivations to travel as people without disabilities (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). The concept of "accessible tourism" therefore emphasises tourism for all, and refers to tourism that gives people with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy tourism and hospitality experiences without barriers (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). However, the tourism and hospitality industry has not yet found a coordinated way to cater for customers with disabilities, despite the market being large and predicted to grow as populations age (Gillovic et al., 2024).

Scholars of accessible tourism have argued that there is a need to showcase the organisations employing best practices in accessibility provision so other tourism organisations can follow the practices used by these "champions" (Buhalis et al., 2012). Accessibility champions are therefore tourism and hospitality organisations who prioritise and exhibit best practice in providing accessible facilities and a positive and inclusive customer experience which promotes independence, equity, dignity and diversity for customers with disabilities. Accessibility champions also advocate for social change by pushing boundaries; they challenge policies, processes and established ideas, empower staff and shift organisational cultures and mind sets. By showcasing their best practices and success stories, and leading by example, accessibility champions can pave a pathway for others to follow, which contributes to building momentum for change (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). However, there remains a lack of information about how accessibility champions are communicating their efforts to lead change, or how effective those efforts are.

In the pursuit of inclusion and accessibility, if an organisation is a particular leader or champion, then its website becomes a channel through which it can externally communicate what it is championing in order to lead change (Kim & Lehto, 2012). In this regard, there is a need therefore to not only evaluate how well a champion provides important accessibility information to support customers with disabilities with pre-visit planning, but also how the organisational communication may promote social

advocacy through rhetoric (Greenwood et al., 2019). Hospitality organisations' websites have rarely been analysed to look at the use of persuasive types of language for social change. Instead, most of the extant research relating to accessibility investigates improper hotel infrastructure and facilities, service failures and a lack of knowledge among industry workers in dealing with people with disabilities. Further attention is therefore needed to understand the best practices implemented and communicated by accessibility champions, and the rhetoric of their communications in the pursuit of social change. To this end, the study reported here sought to examine the website communications of three hotels known as being accessibility champions in New Zealand to evaluate how well they communicated information about the accessibility of their hotel services, including the in-hotel dining experiences of customers with disabilities. This was done to reveal common themes, strategies, tactics and rhetoric for the design and delivery of accessibility information on hotel websites.

Literature review

The right to participate in travel is a fundamental human and citizenship right, as proclaimed by the United Nations Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities. Hence, providing a suitable environment where meaningful social inclusion can take place, such as dining and staying in a hotel, is an imperative. Previous research has highlighted, however, that people with disabilities face challenges in accessing facilities provided by hotels and restaurants due to inaccessible building and facility design, and this serves to marginalise or exclude them as customers (Dias de Faria et al., 2012; Figueiredo et al., 2012; Linderová, 2015). For example, studies by Darcy and Pegg (2011), Poria et al. (2011) and Bowtell (2015) concluded that, even though most hotels met a few access provisions, not all areas of the hotels were accessible. To provide a barrier-free environment for all guests, including those with different impairments, whether they be physical, sensory, intellectual, mental or other, attention to the concept of universal design is advocated in the design of buildings and digital communication (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Ostroff, 2011).

One major constraint for people with disabilities is the lack of accurate and reliable information about the accessibility of a hospitality facility. Research suggests that people with disabilities often tend to abandon travel plans because of the unavailability of reliable and accurate information (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). This is mainly because they require a high degree of pre-planning in terms of reaching their destination, returning home, moving about at the location and sourcing the availability of accessible facilities (Shaw & Veitch, 2011). The webpages of tourism and hospitality organisations have become a vital source of information for travel planning, and assist travellers with disabilities by providing crucial accessibility information to reduce the uncertainty and risk of destinations or facilities being inaccessible to them (Singh et al., 2021). However, according to Darcy (2010) and Buhalis and Darcy (2011), the tourism and hospitality industry generally fails to provide sufficient detailed, accurate and up-to-date accessibility information on their webpages, nor provide it in accessible formats. The identification of best practice for website communication would therefore make an important contribution to existing knowledge about accessibility in hospitality.

Previous literature has highlighted the need for accessible web

design as a fundamental best practice communication strategy. This involves the designing of webpages that are compatible with the different assistive technologies used by people with disabilities (Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). While accessing online information, people with hearing, motor, sensory, or cognitive impairments make use of assistive technologies such as screen readers, voice recognition, pointing devices, alternative keyboards and refreshable Braille displays (Paciello, 2000). People with disabilities rely on these assistive technologies to operate the computer, control software, or navigate on the internet (Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). For example, people with visual impairments may use Braille displays with audio output, which uses screen reading software. The screen reading software verbalises the content of the graphical user interface into text, plain text, buttons, lists and menus, and makes it readable for people with visual impairments (Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011). For a website to be accessible, it should allow the use of all these assistive technologies so that people with disabilities can access online information universally and without difficulty. Despite the existence of established guidelines and policies for accessible website design and development, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG), it has, however, been determined that information provided on the official websites of most tourism and hospitality organisations does not comply with accessibility guidelines (Singh et al., 2021).

Previous research has also highlighted best practice in presenting accessibility information on webpage content. Puhretmair and Nussbaum (2011) advised that webpages must avoid low colour contrast, rich graphics, animations and pop-ups. Provision of images, videos, maps and street views of locations on webpages, on the other hand, help to improve the accuracy of information available for people with disabilities so they can independently make informed decisions about whether they can access a particular place (Darcy, 2002; Kim & Lehto, 2012). People with disabilities search for information that fits their particular access requirements, so it is important that accessibility information is detailed, accurate and reliable. Unfortunately, many hotels and restaurants have claimed to offer services to wheelchair users, for example, by promoting the use of the wheelchair symbol, but specific details of the services are rarely provided (Bowtell, 2015). Misleading and missing information about accessibility is a major reason many tourists with disabilities may abandon their plans, and choose alternative leisure activities (Michopoulou et al., 2015).

Following best practice in accessible website design and communication is critical to ensuring customers with disabilities can access detailed information and derive a feeling of certainty, trust and confidence from the communication they retrieve. In this way, an organisation's website has a practical role in helping to remove informational barriers that often serve to marginalise and restrict access for people with disabilities (Kim & Lehto, 2012). Through their website communications, hospitality organisations thus play an important social advocacy role, providing essential accessibility information to facilitate equitable participation in hospitality experiences, ensuring customers' with disabilities satisfaction, social engagement and inclusion, and improving their quality of life (Singh et al., 2021). Best practice in accessible website communication supports the social model of disability (Oliver, 1995) that highlights barriers that are imposed by society (rather than an individual's impairment), such as inaccessible web design and content, that make it difficult for people with

disabilities to participate in mainstream activities, and for which social solutions are possible (Gillovic et al., 2024).

In addition to informational barriers, wider social barriers caused by stigma, the negative attitudes held by hospitality staff, coupled with their lack of awareness and knowledge about disability, serve as further significant challenges for achieving accessible and inclusive tourism and hospitality (Daruwalla & Darcy, 2005; Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Michopoulou et al., 2015; McIntosh & Harris, 2018). Because of these barriers, people with disabilities represent a marginalised segment of the global tourism and hospitality industry, and many industry providers mistakenly consider this segment as a weak source of profit and unworthy of investing effort into (Gillovic et al., 2024). This is despite evidence that customers with disabilities often return to hotels or restaurants that best serve their needs and provide positive experiences (Poria et al., 2011). In addition to the hospitality industry needing direction about how to provide accessibility information to ensure people with disabilities have equitable participation in hospitality experiences, therefore, there is also a need for champions from within the industry (Buhalis et al., 2012) to showcase best practice and actively advocate for wider social change to help dismantle social barriers.

Removing social barriers involves the need for greater awareness, knowledge and persuasion, in addition to guidance information about how to achieve inclusion and accessibility in the hospitality industry (Dias de Faria et al., 2012; Kim & Lehto, 2012; Linderová, 2015; Singh et al., 2021). In this important social advocacy role, hospitality organisations' website communications can serve to influence industry-wide transformation, beyond organisation-level advocacy. This means that an organisation's website communications can serve two important roles: a practical role in providing accessibility information; and a persuasive role for wider social change. This latter role has not received sufficient consideration in hospitality management, yet remains important for dismantling social barriers for people with disabilities.

Scholars of management communication have drawn attention to the way organisations' websites have a rhetorical function; that is, websites are visual platforms through which the organisation produces desired messages to persuade the audience about its nature, performance and reputation, conveys its identification with wider social discourses, ideologies, values and attitudes, and is an influential mediator of this identification and source of wider impact (Cheney, 1983; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Greenwood et al., 2019). The communication of promotional messages or rhetoric within and beyond the organisation itself can be analysed through a critical examination, for example, of the use of text, language, headlines, images, symbols, testimonials and espoused values in the communications (Cheney, 1983). These elements interactively produce meanings that invoke "myths" that may be ideologically constitutive and work to symbolically generate organisational significance and legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2019, p. 821). Cockburn-Wootten et al. (2018) have argued that there remains an important need to critically evaluate the communications of tourism and hospitality organisations to uncover and challenge existing practices, dominant ideologies and discourses that facilitate exclusion of certain marginalised groups. Analysis of the rhetorical potential of organisational website communications could help reveal website communications that advocate or exclude people with disabilities and enable determination of what accessibility

champions "do well" in communicating accessibility information and persuasion for social change across the hospitality industry.

To contribute important knowledge in this regard, the current study drew on a management communication approach developed by Greenwood et al. (2019) to examine the website communications of three hotels, known for being accessibility champions in New Zealand, to evaluate how well they communicated information about inclusion and the accessibility of their hotel services, including their in-hotel dining experiences, to customers with disabilities. Rhetorical analysis of the three hotels' website communications also sought to reveal wider lessons for other hotels seeking to improve their provision of information to guide potential customers who live with a disability, and consider the potential for these communications to contribute to broader social change in the hospitality industry.

Methodology

To analyse the website communications of New Zealand hotels in relation to communicating strategies, tactics and rhetoric around accessibility, the study applied an interpretivist lens to a case study method. Case study methods include gathering information systematically so the researcher can understand how an organisation functions or operates (Stake, 2013). While findings from case study research cannot be generalised, they can reveal new information about practices found to be common to the cases. To ensure the hotels examined could be viewed as accessibility champions in New Zealand, hotels were chosen after a search was conducted through the websites of social change organisations, including Be.Accessible, The Blind Foundation New Zealand and CCS Disability Action New Zealand, to find which hotel restaurants had been accredited by, or affiliated with, the organisations in the strategic pursuit of becoming accessible. Three further criteria were used to select our hotels. Firstly, they offered accessible facilities/features including accessible in-hotel dining facilities and/or restaurants. Secondly, the hotels' website communications included strategic promotion of accessibility (text, images, company statements), and thirdly, the hotels had been heralded for their leadership in inclusion, for example, through the employment of staff with disabilities. Three hotels were selected from the search as the case studies for this research.

The first hotel, Sudima Hotels New Zealand, promoted the organisation as passionate about delivering and promoting accessibility in its multiple properties around New Zealand, and it had implemented a number of programmes around inclusivity. At the time of the study, the hotel chain had won multiple tourism, sustainability, diversity and inclusion awards, and had worked with the social change organisation, Be.Accessible, to improve the accessibility of its hotels and attain accessibility rankings. Likewise, the second hotel, CQ Hotels Wellington, had implemented a number of accessibility features, claimed to have fully accessible hotel and dining establishments, and had achieved Be.Accessible accreditation as a measure of its accessibility. It had won an award for its inclusive employment practices and promoted itself as the first hotel in New Zealand to introduce Braille and sign language menus in its in-hotel dining establishments. The third hotel, Rydges Auckland, had a number of dining establishments and, although its accessibility information was less prominent, at the time of the study it hosted Dans le Noir? ("Dining in the Dark") restaurant in the

hotel. This was significant because Dans Le Noir? has become the largest positive disability awareness experience around the world as diners eat in the dark served by staff who are blind or have visual impairments.

All information relating to accessibility and inclusion was selected from these three hotels' webpages for analysis. The study followed the three-phase data analysis process employed by Greenwood et al. (2019) to analyse the content and reveal the rhetoric used in the organisational communications. The methodology, developed by organisational scholars, seeks to analyse, explain and critically interpret rhetoric in organisational communications. This method was chosen over alternatives because the study did not seek to analyse the data with critical consideration of the broader discursive social, cultural and political contexts, such as in critical discourse analysis (Willson et al., 2023). Furthermore, more common qualitative data analysis methods, such as content and thematic analysis, according to Greenwood et al. (2019), are not adequate in guiding the analytical process to determine how visual data works rhetorically as part of organisational communications.

Following the first phase of Greenwood et al.'s (2019) methodology, categorical analysis, the purpose was to categorise and describe the visual elements (e.g. website structure, photographs, colour, layout and written elements) of the three hotel websites' communications by counting the number of occurrences to provide first-order meanings. The second phase, content analysis, focused on both describing and interpreting textual meanings found in the websites' content to provide second-order meanings around their potential ideological function. The third phase, rhetorical analysis, used the first two phases to provide more criticality to the analysis of the visual elements and textual meanings (first- and second-order meanings), to link the communications to their rhetorical use in the context of the specific organisational settings. Rhetorical analysis is helpful in identifying and analysing the way in which a text communicates, what strategies it employs to connect with its audience, what claims are being made, and whether it persuades the audience to accept the claim (Greenwood et al., 2019). Using rhetorical analysis, a researcher can analyse a rhetorician's goals and the techniques used, and can evaluate the effectiveness of those techniques. The findings emerging from the data analysis are presented below, supported by quotes taken from the websites, where appropriate, to illustrate the communications and their possible social meaning.

Findings and discussion

Categorical analysis findings

Categorical analysis, in terms of categorising and describing the visual elements of the three hotel websites' communications, revealed common findings that serve to highlight best practice in presenting accessibility information on websites. In relation to website layout and finding accessibility information, surprisingly, the information was not obvious to find from the main home page. For Sudima Hotels, it took a minimum of three clicks, or pages, to reach the main accessibility information. For CQ Hotels and Rydges-Dans le Noir?, it took a minimum of two clicks, or pages, to reach the main accessibility information. Previous literature suggests that it is preferable for organisations to provide two-step access to information, either in terms of pointers to the entirety of the information, or context-related

shortcuts to categorised pieces of information on a website, as this prevents user disorientation among people with disabilities (Halbach, 2010; Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011; Michalska et al., 2014). Facilitating easy access to the information they need is critical, as it removes the informational barriers that are a major issue faced by people with disabilities (Buhalis et al., 2012). The literature on accessible webpages also advocates that it is helpful to people with disabilities if organisations use a central/main bar on their webpages with all the links to further webpages in one location and in the same sequence (Halbach, 2010; Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011; Michalska et al., 2014). Consistent with this, all three cases had a common booking bar on the top of their webpages that had all the links to further webpages, and in the same sequence.

All three cases were found to use a high colour contrast combination on their website communications, primarily white and black, with minimal use of colour, such as gold in the case of Sudima Hotels and Rydges-Dans le Noir?, and grey in the case of CQ Hotels. The use of highly contrasting colours in the display of content is not surprising, as visual impairment is a notable form of disability, and the literature has shown that high-contrast colours in the visual design of websites are the most accessible for people with visual impairments. Furthermore, the literature also confirms that, as people with visual impairments use assistive technologies to interpret data on a computer, information presented in black and white is the most visible and accessible (Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011; Michalska et al., 2014).

The categorical analysis revealed similarities in the visual design elements across the websites of the three cases. The use of images indicating accessibility was notable in all three cases, highlighting helpful indicators of accessibility. Of the three cases, CQ Hotels used the most imagery (photographic images [$n = 11$], non-photographic images [$n = 8$]) in relation to accessibility, compared to Sudima Hotels (photographic images [$n = 5$], non-photographic images [$n = 7$]) and Rydges-Dans le Noir? (photographic images [$n = 2$]). While a range of non-photographic and photographic images relating to accessibility were found, their content varied. The website of Sudima Hotels, for example, included an image of Braille writing with a hand on it, the Be.Accessible logo, and a group photo of Sudima staff members emphasising accessibility. The website of CQ Hotels included a photograph of the restaurant with a sign language menu on the wall, the accessibility symbol, the Be.Accessible accreditation symbol, a group photo of CQ staff members posing with the 2015 "Attitude ACC Employer Award" for employing people with disabilities, a picture of the menu in sign language, a map indicating the hotel's location, and a picture of an accessible bathroom, all emphasising accessibility. Just two photographic images relating to accessibility were used on the website of Rydges-Dans le Noir?. The two main images used were a map of the restaurant indicating its location, and an image of a group of customers in a line, each with their hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them, being led by a waiter with visual impairment. Rydges-Dans le Noir? also presented non-photographic images of logos of different awards it had won, but information about their awards for accessibility was not provided. Sudima Hotels was found to portray its accessibility message more through text than through images, whereas CQ Hotels used more images than text, as did Rydges-Dans le Noir?. That hotels use images to highlight accessibility is to be commended because previous research suggests that

people with disabilities are strongly reliant on website images to provide information before they visit a particular place (Darcy, 2010; Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011; Kim & Lehto, 2012).

A further significant finding was in relation to the language employed in the website communications. The analysis showed two of the cases' preference for the term "accessibility" rather than "disability", although the Rydges-Dans le Noir? website, not surprisingly, most frequently used terms relating to visual impairments. Specifically, Sudima Hotels used the terms "accessibility" ($n = 11$) and "accessible" ($n = 21$) more than the term "disability" ($n = 1$). Similarly, on the website of CQ Hotels, the term "accessible" ($n = 10$) was used more than "disability" ($n = 3$). The website of Rydges-Dans le Noir? used more specific language relating to "blind" ($n = 11$), "partially sighted people" ($n = 2$) and "visually impaired person" ($n = 2$), compared to terms such as "accessible" ($n = 0$) and "accessibility" ($n = 0$). The use of terms such as "accessible" and "accessibility", rather than "disability", on the websites highlights a preference for less medicalised language, consistent with the social model of disability that promotes person-first terminology (Gillovic et al., 2018). Reliance on medical-based terminology can hinder progress in removing the social barriers imposed on people with disabilities (Oliver, 1995).

Content analysis findings

Content analysis revealed comparable content relating to two main organisational strategies and various tactics to promote accessibility. These findings potentially indicate common strategies and tactics that may help determine the best practices of an accessibility champion in the hotel industry.

The first common organisational strategy employed by the three hotels was the implementation and promotion of successful accreditations and awards from social change organisations. For instance, all properties of the Sudima brand had been accredited by Be.Accessible, and this information was communicated on its website at the time of the study. Sudima Hotels claimed to be the "first hotel group to prioritise accessibility nationally". The organisation promoted its many awards for its efforts in accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. Similarly, CQ Hotels also promoted its Be.Accessible accreditation. According to CQ Hotels website communications, its hotels were the first to be ranked by the Be.Accessible group, while it also claimed to have the "most accessible hotels in New Zealand". CQ Hotels had also won multiple awards relating to accessibility and inclusion. The Rydges Auckland hotel had introduced an unusual concept that became widely popular, Rydges-Dans le Noir?. Globally, Dans le Noir?, as an international restaurant movement, has won multiple awards over the years through its efforts to promote social and human values. Rydges-Dans le Noir? promoted how it had worked in association with organisations such as Blind Low Vision NZ and CCS Disability Action NZ to provide jobs for people with visual impairments in New Zealand, as reported in their website communications. Potentially, the achievement and communication of successful accreditation, awards and partnerships with social change organisations had been considered by the three hotels as an effective strategy to display service reliability, quality and standards. Indeed, this type of communication can help customers better understand the quality of service to expect, and removes an informational barrier for people with disabilities (Darcy, 2010; Darcy & Buhalis, 2011; Puhretmair & Nussbaum, 2011;

Kim & Lehto, 2012). Partnering with social change organisations also establishes legitimacy for the hotels' accessibility practice (Cheney, 1983).

The second common strategy noted across the three hotels was the promotion of the inclusion of employees with disabilities in their workforce. Sudima Hotels stated on its website that the organisation has many staff with disabilities working in various departments of the different hotel properties throughout New Zealand. The promotion of the inclusion of staff with disabilities in its workforce was also a feature in the website communications of CQ Hotels. Rydges-Dans le Noir? was among the first restaurant type in the world to include people with visual impairments in their workforce. According to their website information at the time of the study, the Rydges Auckland hotel branch claimed to employ six staff members with visual impairments. As reported above, some of this communication involved the promotion of photos of employees with disabilities on the websites. The communication of information about the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforces can be considered as a strategic advantage and as promoting a positive social image. Displays of information about inclusion can be beneficial to potential customers as the literature shows that customers with disabilities prefer hotels and restaurants that employ people with disabilities, as they provide a barrier-free and non-judgemental environment and facilities (Gröschl, 2004; 2007; Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). Supporting this communication with inclusive imagery also serves to increase the representation of people with disabilities who are otherwise commonly marginalised in tourism and hospitality communications (Benjamin et al., 2021).

The content analysis also revealed tactics employed by the three hotels and communicated in their website communications. These tactics related to the accessible facilities and amenities offered on the hotel premises and in the restaurants at the time of the study. These are summarised in Table 1, where the presence or availability of a particular accessible feature is indicated with a tick (✓). If a particular accessible feature was not communicated on the website, then the cell corresponding to the particular feature is left blank. The availability of accessible features was determined for the hotel premises (rooms and public spaces), and the in-hotel restaurants because a restaurant diner with a disability needs to be able to access other areas of the hotel beyond dining in the restaurant. Absence of an accessible feature, as noted in Table 1, does not necessarily mean that it was not offered by the hotel, but that the information was not available from the website communication analysis. Table 1 is a good summary indication that potential customers requiring accessibility information before visiting the hotel may or may not find the specific information they require to plan their visit. The findings also serve to indicate that, even though a hotel may be championing communication around inclusion and accessibility, the hotel's website may still not fully present the necessary detailed accessibility information needed by potential customers.

As shown in Table 1, Sudima Hotels reported various accessible features in their rooms, such as the options of their K9 working dog package, accessible rooms with adjoining rooms if required, as well as lowered peep holes in accessible rooms, visual and audio doorbells, vibrating alarms, vibrating pillows, flashing lights for people with hearing impairments, and the availability of a voice-controlled intelligent assistant in rooms

TABLE 1: Tactics implemented by the three case study hotels

| Tactic | Sudima Hotels | CQ Hotels | Rydges-Dans le Noir? |
|--|---------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Hotel room and hotel public spaces | | | |
| Accessible car parking | ✓ | | |
| Availability of ramps near hotel lobby | ✓ | | |
| Availability of mobility aids | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Lowered check-in desks in lobby | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Lifts with tactile and Braille numbering | ✓ | | |
| Availability of accessible rooms, with adjoining rooms if required | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Lowered peep holes in all accessible rooms | ✓ | | |
| K9 working dog package offered | ✓ | | |
| Visual and audio doorbells | ✓ | | |
| Vibrating alarms | ✓ | | |
| Vibrating pillows | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Flashing lights for people with hearing impairments | ✓ | | |
| Non-slip floors in all accessible rooms | ✓ | | |
| Availability of pull-out bed for companions or caregivers | | ✓ | |
| Availability of voice-controlled intelligent assistant in rooms (e.g. Amazon Echo) | ✓ | | |
| Trained staff for emergency evacuation | ✓ | | |
| Availability of evacuation chairs | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Wheelchair-accessible conference facilities | ✓ | | |
| Accessible bathrooms in all guest rooms, ground floor and conference floors | ✓ | | |
| Hotel information available in Braille | ✓ | | |
| Accessible common areas such as spa and pool | ✓ | | |
| Service animals allowed on premises (e.g. guide dogs) | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Restaurants | | | |
| Braille menus | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Availability of menu in sign language | | ✓ | |
| Availability of trained team for general support | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Accessible restaurant and bar areas | ✓ | | |
| Staff who can speak NZ Sign Language | ✓ | ✓ | |

(e.g. Amazon Echo, a voice-controlled, hands-free speaker). In terms of public spaces, Sudima Hotels reported the availability of features such as accessible car parking, ramps near the hotel lobby, mobility aids and wheelchair-accessible conference rooms. Sudima Hotels also reported that common areas, such as the pool and spa were accessible, and that it provides accessible bathrooms in all rooms, as well as on the ground and conference floors. The accessible bathrooms are reportedly equipped with anti-slip flooring. For emergencies, the website reported that Sudima Hotel locations have a team of trained staff to support people with disabilities and with special evacuation chairs. It also reported lifts with tactile numbering to make it easier for those with visual impairments and allow service animals on the premises. Hotel compendiums and other information were reportedly available in Braille. In relation to its hotel restaurants, Sudima Hotels stated on its website that they provide accessible features such as accessible restaurant and bar areas, Braille menus, staff trained to support people with disabilities, and staff fluent in New Zealand Sign Language.

The website communications of CQ Hotels reported the availability of accessible facilities in the rooms, such as accessible rooms with adjoining rooms if required, pull-out beds for companions or caregivers, and vibrating pillows in the rooms. In terms of public spaces, the CQ Hotels website reported the availability of features such as accessible car parking, mobility aids and a lowered check-in desk in the lobby. Furthermore, it noted that service animals are allowed on the premises. For

emergencies, it was stated that CQ Hotels have accessible evacuation chairs. In relation to its hotel restaurants, the website information provided information about accessible features, such as a menu in Braille, as well as in New Zealand Sign Language, and having staff fluent in New Zealand Sign Language.

The website communications of Rydges Hotels mostly reported the availability of general facilities rather than a focus on accessibility features. Hence, the numerous blank cells in Table 1 correspond to a lack of information about accessibility facilities on their website. In relation to the Rydges-Dans le Noir? information more specifically, the website reported the availability of one accessible feature in the restaurant – staff trained to support people with disabilities. The lack of reporting of features relating to customers with visual impairments was rather surprising in the analysis, potentially reflecting their focus on promoting the “dining in the dark” experience to guests without visual impairments.

The implementation and communication of tactics to promote accessibility features to potential hotel customers with a range of different types of disabilities is important for overcoming the physical and interpersonal service-related constraints that people with disabilities often face in hospitality facilities (Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Poria et al., 2011; Dias de Faria et al., 2012; Linderová, 2015; Michopoulou et al., 2015). Previous literature has found that most people with disabilities will abandon their plans to visit a hotel or restaurant if they fear a lack of service caused by staff not knowing how to help, or staff lacking awareness of

accessible facilities (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011; Buhalis et al., 2012). Thus, provision of accessibility information is an important indicator of best practice in relation to whether customers with disabilities will find the crucial pre-visit information they need about accessible facilities and service. Table 1 serves as a potentially useful best practice list in that regard, although there is clearly scope for improvement. That said, an accessibility champion may still contribute effectively to broader social change in the hospitality industry through its organisational communications and broader strategies around inclusion and accessibility, even if it does not provide that same level of tactical information, as noted in the case of Rydges Hotels. As such, a rhetorical-based interpretation of the hotels' websites communications is required, as will now be presented.

Rhetorical analysis findings

The findings of the rhetorical analysis revealed evidence to show how, via their website communications, the three hotels indicated their espoused values and commitment to accessibility, as well as persuasion for others to follow. The three hotel organisations used statements, images and the legitimacy of the communication as identification strategies to indicate their organisational values and goals to their audience (Cheney, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2019); that is, what they as leaders were championing – in this case, their rhetoric around accessibility.

The website communications promoted by Sudima Hotels had a strong persuasive message about accessibility and inclusion as a human right. This can be illustrated through the following quote taken from the website:

For Sudima hotels, providing equal access protects a basic human right. It's about removing discrimination and creating an environment where everyone can feel at home, relax and be themselves. Our hotels are extensions of who we are so it is important to us that they are inclusive and can accommodate differences with respect and dignity.

True accessibility means empowering people so they can be independent. At Sudima we feel that the individual should be able to do what they need to do with a similar effort as anyone else – and in the same amount of time.

Sudima Hotels' website information also promoted a rhetoric around striving to be leaders in accessibility: "We strive to make our properties accessible to all guests, regardless of their needs, to make their stay more enjoyable", and "Sudima Hotels is one of the most accessible hotels in Australasia. We strive to be industry leaders in social and environmental responsibility". Supported by promotion of its Be.Accessible accreditation logo, the organisation made efforts to legitimise its communications; the website states: "We involve accessibility experts that test and refine a range of situations to give us the best chance of achieving access for all". Cheney (1983) confirmed that organisations indicating the legitimacy of their communications can be seen as having identification strategies not just to indicate the standard of service to expect, but also to communicate company values and the trustworthiness of those values. This potentially serves to persuade the audience of the authenticity and reliability of the accessibility information provided.

The CQ Hotels website also communicated rhetoric around being a champion of accessibility. Statements included:

"CQ Hotels prides itself on being a fully accessible hotel and warmly welcomes all guests with any kind of disability to enjoy our facilities", and "We cater to guests with diverse needs with our varied room offerings". Alongside the use of inclusive imagery and display of the organisation's Be.Accessible accreditation logo, the communications were promoted as a valid commitment: "We have been working with key people and organisations to get to know the accessible market and to improve our accessible features throughout the property".

Rhetoric around accessibility was also identified on the Rydges-Dans le Noir? website, which stated that "We promote the city's social and human values" and "we employ six visually impaired and blind guides in the Auckland restaurant and nearly thirty of our employees around the world are blind", indicating their rhetoric around being an inclusive employer. Use of inclusive imagery added support for the rhetoric around accessibility. The website communications also included rhetoric around education: "Not many visually impaired guests visit the restaurant as it is a daily experience for them. However, for those who want to educate their friends and family about their daily life, Rydges-Dans le Noir? provides that opportunity". Like the other two hotel cases, Rydges-Dans le Noir? also validated its communications, stating, for example: "We often employ blind consultants, experts or trainers in France, England and Europe" and "blind experts are also available for special events such as recruitment sessions, corporate events, official receptions, product launches, press events sensory workshops and brainstorming". As mentioned above, the presentation of such statements and images serves to legitimise accessibility information and engender trust with customers in terms of reliability and standards of service and present praise for the organisation and its espoused values (Cheney, 1983).

The website communications of the three hotels also promoted rhetoric around their leadership toward social change. As an example, a statement from the CEO of Sudima Hotels, promoted on the webpage, stated:

I have seen first-hand, with those close to me that have access needs, the difficulties they can face when trying to undertake everyday tasks, and the effect this can have on their confidence. A 100% accessible society can only be achieved through a commitment from us all, and I am proud to be part of this change. I hope that my participation as a member of Be's Fab 50 will encourage others to get involved in making our society more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

Similarly, Rydges-Dans le Noir? indicated persuasion for social change in numerous statements and, as an organisation, aimed to dispel preconceived notions around disability by communicating:

Thanks to the remarkable service of the blind and the visually impaired guides, this unusual restaurant offers a moment of positive empathy that breaks our prejudices about disability. Driven by role reversal, the experience allows us to perceive the richness of the diversity.

Rydges-Dans le Noir? also express the importance of raising awareness of blindness and disability by mentioning that when the blind guide sees this inversion [it] turns out to be an astonishing exercise in empathy which forces us to make an unusual transfer of

confidence. It is an amazing approach to positively raise awareness about blindness and disability in general.

The findings highlighted strong persuasive messaging around striving to be leaders for change, human rights, raising awareness, embracing diversity and inclusion, empowerment for people with disabilities, positive empathy to break prejudices about disability, and the need to encourage commitment from everyone. The effective use of organisational communication, supported by the legitimacy of statements and imagery, allows the audience to identify with, be open to, and trust, the persuasive efforts of the organisation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Greenwood et al., 2019). It also means other organisations/hotels may be persuaded of the need for change (Cheney, 1983).

Conclusion

While previous studies have drawn important attention to the barriers to participation in tourism and hospitality that people with disabilities continue to face (e.g. Figueiredo et al., 2012), there remains limited knowledge about how accessibility champions are communicating information about accessible and inclusive hotel services, facilities and in-hotel dining experiences, and persuasion for wider social change in the hospitality industry. From analysis of three hotels' website communications, it was found that, to be an industry leader or accessibility champion, it is important for a hotel to have an accessible website design, clear strategies and tactics and effectively persuasive communications on their websites denoting their commitment to and leadership in accessibility and inclusion. While many, but not all, of these elements were present across the three hotels' websites, it is a conclusion of this research that more could still be done. This is congruent with previous findings that have determined the New Zealand tourism and hospitality industry's awareness of and commitment to accessibility to be low (Rhodda et al., 2012; Gillovic & McIntosh, 2015). Indeed, that only three hotels were deemed accessibility champions through the search this study undertook indicates there is a need for more champions in the New Zealand hospitality industry to drive the accessibility agenda for change.

Despite a focus on accessibility champions, surprisingly, the findings of this study reveal that accessibility information is not always easy to find on hotels' websites and they are inconsistent in their reporting. This may serve to perpetuate the barriers for customers with disabilities if they cannot easily locate the important information they need for pre-visit planning (Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Michopoulou et al., 2015). Comparing the accessibility information provided by the three hotels does, however, provide best practice information about website design, strategies and tactics for other hotels seeking to become accessible and inclusive. Alongside information about accessible hotel features, findings of this study also highlight the importance of imagery, inclusive language and legitimacy in hotel website communications as they appear to represent important symbols of accessibility and inclusion. Understanding these symbols serves to move awareness and knowledge from the best practice presented by one case study to consideration of a community of practice that provides common directions that others can aspire to follow (Gillovic et al., 2024). Previous research has found that other social change movements, such as the climate change movement (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011), are effective due to increased awareness in society and

among stakeholders, which has resulted in more organisations implementing sustainability efforts for climate change.

Perhaps most notable for accessibility champions is not just the explicit communication of accessibility information for customers with disabilities for pre-planning, but also the rhetorical function of presenting the organisation as a leader in accessibility, advocating for social change and encouraging others to follow. This emphasis on persuasion aligns with the social model of disability that seeks to dismantle wider social barriers that serve to marginalise people with disabilities (Oliver, 1995). Findings of this study reveal a common social narrative around inclusive hospitality for these hotels and the need to break prejudices about disability. In the case of Rydges-Dans le Noir?, this was presented most notably through attention to the role reversal in the hotel dining experience to make an important statement about perceiving diversity. There is, however, a need to move from rhetoric to reality (Gillovic et al., 2024). Greater commitment could be made to bridge the efforts of hotels to work with social change organisations to effect the desired change (Cockburn-Wootten et al., 2018) and avoid communicating false claims about accessibility (Gillovic et al., 2024). At the very least, the strategies and tactics shown by the hotels presented here are all practices supported by social change organisations that can be adopted by other hotels to improve the experience for customers with disabilities and/or communicate their commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

To effect change, future research could thus be more pragmatic. For example, researchers could conduct participatory research in the hotels to evaluate how hotel services, facilities and in-house dining options could be made more accessible and inclusive for customers with disabilities and promoted via the hotels' websites, drawing on existing best practice and online accessibility guidelines. Also, co-designed research with customers with different types of disabilities would provide rich, authentic understanding for service design and accessibility, driven by those who live with a disability. Ultimately, as customers with disabilities best know their own requirements, hotels could establish a forum for their customers with disabilities to share their experiences and provide feedback on ways to improve hotel facilities and services for them (Poria et al., 2011). Globally, growing disability rates and the ageing population certainly provide an important reason to make greater accessibility efforts (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). Existing accessibility champions, through their best practices and persuasion for social change, need to inspire other hotels who have not yet thought about the accessibility of their facilities, services and in-hotel dining options while also striving to continue improving their own hotel's accessibility. Researchers, too, have a responsibility to drive a more inclusive future agenda for hospitality management.

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