

REPRESENTATION OF PERSONS WITH VISIBLE  
DISABILITIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA OF DESTINATION  
MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by  
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VANCOUVER ISLAND  
UNIVERSITY

**Representation of Persons with Visible Disabilities in Social Media of Destination**

**Management Organizations in British Columbia**

By Maharajan Alagesan

Presented as part of the requirement for the award of Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure  
Management within the Faculty of Management at Vancouver Island University

May 1, 2026

## Thesis Examination Committee Signature Page

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Department of Recreation, Tourism & Hospitality Management for acceptance, the thesis title “Representation of Persons with Visible Disabilities in Social Media of Destination Management Organizations in British Columbia”, submitted by Maharajan Alagesan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure Management.



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## Declarations

This thesis is a product of my own work and is not the result of anything done in collaboration.



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I agree that this thesis may be available for reference and photocopying at the discretion of Vancouver Island University.



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## **Abstract**

Tourism has grown continuously over the past few decades, with digital marketing platforms, particularly social media, now playing a central role in shaping how destinations are perceived and influencing travel decisions. Tourism promotional materials, however, have historically excluded and underrepresented persons with disabilities, which reinforces barriers to inclusive participation. While accessibility in tourism infrastructure has received scholarly attention, the representation of persons with disabilities in tourism promotion materials remains largely unexplored in the Canadian context. This research addresses this gap by examining how five Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in British Columbia represent persons with visible disabilities in their social media content during May 1-31, 2024.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to examine 226 social media posts published on Instagram and Facebook in May 2024. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. This analysis focused specifically on the presence, visibility, and representation of persons with visible disabilities.

Findings reveal four themes: 1) "Exploring The Destination," examining the types of tourism experiences promoted; 2) "Accessible Infrastructure Without Persons with Disabilities," showing accessibility features without users, 3) "Selective Visibility: Representing Persons with Disabilities", revealing minimal and uneven representation, and 4) "Lack of Diverse Representation," highlighting limited diverse representation of disability alongside race, age, and 2SLGBTQ+ identities. These findings contribute to the growing body of inclusive tourism research and offer practical recommendations for DMOs seeking more equitable and representative destination marketing.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all my professors at Vancouver Island University for their guidance, knowledge, and motivation throughout this program. Each of you has played an important role in shaping my academic journey, and I am truly grateful for your support and encouragement.

My deepest thanks go to Dr. Janet McKeown for her patience, support, and expertise. Your thoughtful and detailed feedback helped me think more critically and improve my writing over time. I am also thankful for your support and encouragement to participate in academic conferences and present this research, which helped me grow in confidence. I thank Professor Jenn Houtby-Ferguson, my committee member, for her practical insights and detailed feedback on my thesis drafts. Your guidance, especially from the tourism industry perspective, helped me connect academic ideas with professional practice and strengthened the direction of my research.

My sincere thanks to Professor Joanne Schroeder for her consistent guidance, encouragement, and support throughout my thesis journey. Your advice and motivation have been truly valuable. I would like to thank Dr. Amanda Johnson for kindly agreeing to be my external examiner and for taking the time to read and provide feedback on my thesis.

To my friends and fellow classmates from the MASLM 2023 cohort, and to my friends Maria, Fynn, Buvan, and Keerthi, thank you for your support, encouragement, and for always being there when I needed a listening ear. Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to my parents and siblings for their unconditional love and support. Thank you for sharing my responsibilities back home so I could focus on my studies here.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Tourism has grown continuously and diversified over the past few decades, and has emerged as one of the largest global economic sectors (UNWTO, n.d.). International tourism spending has reached USD 1.9 trillion in 2025, marking the highest figure recorded to date and reflecting a 5% increase over 2024 levels (UN Tourism, 2026). UN Tourism also projects continued growth of 3% to 4% in 2026 compared with 2025 (UN Tourism, 2026). In Canada, the tourism sector supported nearly two million jobs and contributed approximately \$38 billion or 1.76% of the country's GDP of 2.16 trillion U.S. dollars in 2022 (MENA Report, 2023). In 2022, tourism made a significant economic impact across Canadian provinces. In British Columbia, the industry contributed C\$7.2 billion, accounting for 2.4% of the province's GDP (Destination British Columbia, 2024). While tourism remains a significant part of the global and national economy, understanding the spending patterns and market potential of specific consumer groups, such as persons with disabilities, offers further insight into opportunities for industry growth.

As of March 2023, 1.3 billion people (16% of the global population) live with a disability (WHO, 2023). Disability can be defined as a physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment, whether permanent, temporary or episodic, which, in interaction with various barriers, can limit a person's ability to fully and equally participate in society (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020; United Nations, 2007). In Canada, the number of people living with disabilities increased from 6.2 million in 2017 to 8 million in 2022. This rise is driven by an aging population experiencing age-related conditions such as reduced mobility, vision or hearing impairments, and mental health-related disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2024). This rise is also due to the increase in non-communicable diseases such as heart attacks, strokes, and cancer,

as well as improvements in the methodologies used to measure disability (Benjamin et al., 2021; Government of Canada, 2023; World Health Organization, 2011).

The growing global population of persons with disabilities corresponds with the rising number of travellers with disabilities. Persons with disabilities represent a significant and growing consumer group in the tourism industry, with a global spending power estimated at over USD 1.2 trillion across various segments of the tourism sector (Destination Canada, 2019). This economic influence is also reflected at the national level, where adults with disabilities spend USD 17.3 billion annually on travel in the USA, A\$8 billion in Australia, and €352 billion in Europe (Domínguez Vila et al., 2019; White, 2016). These numbers highlight that persons with disabilities are a growing and economically important group of travellers and indicate a growing demand for tourism experiences that are accessible, inclusive, and equitable.

### **1.1 Tourism Experiences for Persons with Disabilities**

Tourism offers numerous benefits for all travellers, which contribute to individual and social well-being. These include relaxation, stress reduction, opportunities for social interaction, cultural enrichment, and increased life satisfaction (McCabe & Johnson, 2013; Pagán, 2015). It can also support psychological well-being by providing a break from routine, fostering a sense of freedom, and creating meaningful experiences and memories (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Cloquet et al., 2018). These benefits are relevant to all travellers, including those with disabilities, who may also experience increased well-being through accessible tourism experiences. For example, Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2011) emphasized that tourism may offer persons with disabilities opportunities to participate in leisure travel and to achieve social inclusion, while helping them overcome self-doubt and build self-confidence through vacation experiences. Pagán (2015) also found that although persons with disabilities tend to travel less

frequently, they experience greater life satisfaction from frequent holiday trips, such as excursions or extended vacations. Similarly, Lehto et al. (2018) examined how tourism experiences can empower persons with disabilities and their caregivers, helping them overcome social barriers and gain a sense of autonomy. Their study highlighted how travel can foster well-being, strengthen social bonds, and promote self-identity, and these benefits were meaningful for persons with disabilities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions and social isolation significantly limited opportunities for participation (UNWTO, 2020). These studies suggest that when accessible, tourism can significantly contribute to the well-being of persons with disabilities.

Despite its benefits, tourism remains inaccessible to many persons with disabilities, often due to structural barriers such as limited accessible transportation, poorly designed accommodations, and a lack of clear accessibility information (Benjamin et al., 2021; Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Darcy & Daruwalla, 2020; Nyanjom et al., 2018). In recent years, popular press publications have reported significant travel accessibility challenges for persons with disabilities. As an example, in May 2024, CBC News reported that a Toronto woman faced indignities while disembarking an Air Canada Rouge flight in Costa Rica. Despite the airport having a bridge, she was carried down a portable staircase in a broken aisle chair with faulty straps, no armrests, and malfunctioning wheels, highlighting inadequate equipment and poor staff training (CBC News, 2024). Similarly, in October 2023, Canada's Chief Accessibility Officer, Stephanie Cadieux, reported on X (formerly Twitter) that Air Canada had misplaced her customized wheelchair. This incident not only compromised her independence but also highlighted broader systemic failures in accessibility, as well as the emotional and logistical toll

such incidents impose on travelers with disabilities (Stephanie Cadieux [@Stephanie4BC], 2023).

In addition to structural barriers, persons with disabilities can face attitudinal barriers when travelling, including unequal treatment from hotel staff, managers, and tourism operators due to insufficient staff training (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018a; Fuente-Robles et al., 2020). They can also face negative stereotypes, such as assumptions that they are less capable of engaging in leisure activities. One common stereotype includes paternalistic attitudes, which is the belief that persons with disabilities always need help or supervision. This belief can lead tourism staff and service providers to underestimate their abilities. These biased assumptions can lead to exclusionary practices that ultimately limit their participation and independence (Devile & Kastenholz, 2018b; Fuente-Robles et al., 2020; Labbé et al., 2022; Ristevski et al., 2024; Salerno et al., 2022). For example, Donovan Tildesley, a 39-year-old competitive swimmer and Canada's flag-bearer at the 2008 Paralympics, has been blind since birth and has competed in four Paralympic Games. Despite his history of solo travel, Tildesley was asked to disembark from a Virgin cruise ship after being told it was unsafe for him to travel alone as a blind passenger (Paterson, 2023). These attitudinal barriers, combined with structural barriers, create significant constraints for persons with disabilities in accessing tourism services.

These constraints are further compounded by gaps in accessible and accurate travel information, making it difficult for persons with disabilities to plan and participate in tourism experiences with confidence (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011). Accurate and accessible information is crucial for persons with disabilities when planning travel, yet many tourism websites, booking platforms, and promotional materials lack detailed accessibility information and provide inconsistent descriptions (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Buhalis & Michopoulou,

2011; Devile & Kastenholz, 2018a). Research has identified several barriers that discourage participation in tourism for persons with disabilities. For example, Benjamin et al. (2021) highlighted inconsistencies in accessibility details, where information provided by tourism operators often can lack clarity or is outdated, making it difficult for travelers with disabilities to plan their trips with confidence. Similarly, Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2011) found discrepancies between advertised and actual accessibility conditions, with businesses frequently overstating their accessible features, leading to frustration and exclusion for travelers with disabilities. Moreover, Buhalis and Michopoulou (2011) emphasized the lack of standardized accessibility information, noting that many tourism providers fail to provide accurate descriptions of accommodations, transportation and attractions, contributing to uncertainty.

Alongside information quality, tourism marketing practices also shape whether travellers with disabilities feel represented and included. Cloquet et al. (2018) examined the representation of persons with disabilities in tourism marketing in Cornwall (UK) and found that they are often underrepresented or portrayed in a tokenistic manner, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion rather than inclusivity. Taken together, these studies reveal how unreliable information, misleading claims, and poor representation discourage participation among travellers with disabilities. Addressing these challenges requires accurate information on the accessibility of different tourism experiences to support the participation of persons with disabilities. To address these challenges, inclusive marketing features persons with disabilities in its marketing materials and considers representing people from diverse backgrounds, using inclusive messaging and accessible language that reflects the diverse needs of its audience. It aims to foster a sense of belonging, build trust and promote equitable representation in tourism for all travellers,

regardless of ability, age, gender, or background (Domínguez Vila et al., 2019; Francesconi, 2011).

Although reflecting persons with disabilities in destination marketing materials is crucial, how people with disabilities are represented (or absent) in tourism promotional content has received little scholarly attention in leisure studies research (for exceptions, see [Benjamin et al., 2021](#); [Cloquet et al., 2018](#)), particularly in the Canadian context. As tourism marketing continues to evolve, digital platforms, such as social media (Instagram, Facebook, etc.) play an increasingly significant role in shaping destination perceptions. Tourism businesses (e.g., tour operators, hotels, attractions) and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) often leverage social media as a tool to enhance tourism promotion and maximize their reach and effectiveness (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019; Mahajan et al., 2024). In particular, platforms like Instagram and Facebook have become central to tourism promotion, offering highly visual and interactive ways to engage potential travellers (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019). It is essential to examine how persons with disabilities are represented through these social media platforms.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to explore how DMOs in British Columbia (Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino) represent persons with visible disabilities in their social media content, focusing specifically on Instagram and Facebook pages as a research context. Additionally, this research examines the use of disability-related language and text in the captions. The decision to focus on visible disabilities is based on the visual nature of these platforms, where representations are mainly shared through photos and videos. Because non-visible disabilities are not identifiable in images, this study like Benjamin et al. (2021), limits its analysis to visible disabilities.

Disability is often overlooked in tourism research, but Richards et al. (2010) emphasized that examining disability in tourism research is important to drive social change and equity. By building on existing studies, this study examines how selected British Columbia DMOs represent persons with disabilities and share accessibility information in their destination marketing on Instagram and Facebook. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to academic discussions in destination marketing and DMO communication literature by extending disability-focused research into the underexamined area of DMO social media content and by demonstrating how disability representation and accessibility messaging appear within a Canadian DMO context. This research also provides practical recommendations to DMOs on how to strengthen inclusion in their social media (Instagram and Facebook) marketing, such as through more meaningful portrayals of persons with disabilities and clearer, more consistent accessibility information about destinations and attractions.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This study examines how persons with visible disabilities are represented in the social media content of selected DMOs in British Columbia. As such, the literature reviewed in this chapter provides the theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding disability in the tourism context. This chapter begins with a review of the literature on disability, examining definitions of disability, disability models, and the travel constraints faced by persons with disabilities. It then explores how accessible tourism, inclusive tourism, and sustainable approaches to tourism have been conceptualized, applied in tourism research and industry practice and how these concepts have evolved. It also reviews how persons with disabilities are represented in promotional materials, with a focus on social media content. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of gaps in the literature on promoting accessible and inclusive tourism experiences.

### **2.2 Defining Disability**

Disability is a broad and complex construct that can be difficult to define. Steadward et al. (2003) defined disability as the extent of functional limitations, emphasizing the need for systematic assessment of both impairment and ability to function. This definition acknowledges that barriers, whether physical or systemic, influence how disability is experienced. Similarly, Shaw and Coles (2004) defined disability as a loss or limitation of opportunities to engage in everyday community life on an equal level with others, emphasizing that these limitations arise due to both physical and social barriers rather than an individual's impairment alone.

The Accessible Canada Act (Canada, 2020) expanded on this perspective by defining disability as:

...any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation — whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society.

This definition explicitly highlights the interaction between impairment and barriers, reinforcing the idea that disability is not solely a medical condition, but a social construct influenced by environmental and structural barriers.

As highlighted in these definitions, disabilities can vary greatly from person to person and can be permanent, temporary or episodic. They can include vision, hearing, mobility, flexibility, pain-related, learning, developmental, and mental health-related disabilities (Canada, 2022; Darcy et al., 2010). Additionally, disabilities exist on a spectrum with a wide range of experiences and complexities shaped by the barriers that individuals encounter. Understanding these diverse experiences is crucial for identifying the physical, social, and systemic barriers that impact access to and engagement in tourism experiences and opportunities for persons with disabilities (Cloquet et al., 2018). Building on these definitions, various models of disability have been used to conceptualize and understand the role of barriers in shaping the experiences of persons with disabilities over time.

### **2.3 Models of Disability**

A disability model is a framework that outlines how society perceives and addresses disability. Since the late 1980s, two main models have shaped the discussion of disability: the medical and social models (Aitchison, 2009), although other models, such as the affirmation model, have also been proposed, offering additional perspectives (Swain & French, 2000). These

models offer contrasting perspectives that influence policies, public attitudes and support systems for individuals with disabilities.

### ***2.3.1 Medical Model of Disability***

The medical model of disability emerged in the mid-1950s when Thomas Szasz coined the term to understand disability through a medicalized lens (Zaks, 2024). While disability is also a cultural and societal identity, the medical model sees it as a medical condition that lowers a person's quality of life and needs treatment (Rajkumar, 2022). The medical model of disability views disability as a condition resulting from an individual's impairments, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychological limitations (Beaver, 2023; Buhalis & Darcy, 2010; Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011). It frames these impairments as problems to be fixed, emphasizing treatment and rehabilitation as the primary solutions. Medical professionals play a central role in managing disability, with a focus on helping individuals adapt to the environment rather than addressing broader social or environmental barriers (Aitchison, 2009; Zajadacz, 2015).

Beaver (2023) observed that many professional organizations in the therapeutic recreation field base their definitions and descriptions of recreational therapy on the medical model, reinforcing its influence in disability-related services. Mobily et al. (2015) further explained that the medical model places the responsibility for change on the individual rather than society, presuming that individuals seek to be cured, and that therapy serves as the means of achieving improvement. In this framework, a person with a disability is expected to adapt to societal norms rather than society adapting to accommodate diverse abilities (Mobily et al. 2015).

The medical model of disability has been criticized for its narrow, individualistic approach that frames disability as a problem to be treated, cured, or rehabilitated (Lim, 2024;

Withers, 2012). It prioritizes the perspectives of medical professionals over the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, reinforcing stereotypes of dependency (Lim, 2024). This model has also been criticized for ignoring the principle of “nothing about us without us,” which emphasizes that persons with disabilities should be seen as experts in their own lives and experiences (Lim, 2024). While the medical model serves a functional purpose in determining eligibility for disability benefits and support services, it has been criticized for its rigid criteria, which often overlook how a person’s experiences of disability can vary over time or across different environments (Lim, 2024). This criticism stems from the fact that medical qualifiers alone do not capture a person’s full needs, as the model’s fixed criteria often overlook social and environmental barriers that affect daily life and highlight the evolving nature of disability (Lim, 2024). By focusing on treatment and rehabilitation, the medical model overlooks the societal change needed to foster accessibility and inclusion.

### ***2.3.2 Social Model of Disability***

In response to ideas connected to the medical model, Michael Oliver, a British sociologist and disability rights activist, coined the term “Social model” to describe disability in 1990 (Tregaskis, 2002). The social model describes disability as shaped by social oppression, inequality and exclusion (Thomas, 2004). The social model underscores the need to remove environmental and societal barriers and advocate for accessible and inclusive experiences. Over time, perspectives have broadened, with the social model emphasizing that disability is shaped by societal barriers, including discrimination and exclusion (Hutchinson et al., 2018). This model challenged the traditional medical perspective by shifting the focus from “fixing” the individual to addressing the external factors that hinder full participation and inclusion in society (Hutchinson et al., 2018; Zajadacz, 2015). By framing disability as a product of discriminatory

practices and systemic inequalities, the social model underscores the need for structural and cultural change to create a more equitable and inclusive world. Over the past three decades, discussions within the academic research community and disability advocacy groups have increasingly emphasized the social perspective of disability (Darcy et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). These discussions have advocated for changes to policies, practices, and environments to reduce societal barriers and enable the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in community life (Evans et al., 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2018; Zajadacz, 2015).

While the social model has been influential in shifting the focus from individual impairments to societal barriers, it has also faced criticisms. The social model has been criticized for downplaying the physical realities of disability. While it emphasizes societal barriers, it may overlook the fact that impairments are an essential part of the lived experience, and that persons with disabilities often still need and benefit from medical care (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Terzi, 2004; Zaks, 2024). The social model also makes policy implementation challenging, as it emphasizes eliminating societal barriers rather than focusing on individual impairments, which can complicate resource allocation for essential supports, such as mobility aids and personal assistance (Terzi, 2004). Lim (2024) argued that it is crucial to balance both models when discussing the challenges and potential of persons with disabilities. In comparison, Terzi (2004) asserted that despite its limitations, the social model remains a powerful tool for challenging simplistic views of disability and advocating for more inclusive social structures.

Several leisure researchers (Benjamin et al., 2021; Darcy et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017) have used the social model of disabilities to inform their studies. Benjamin et al. (2021) used the social model to explore how societal barriers limit the participation of persons with disabilities in tourism, urging for more inclusive practices. Within a sports context, Darcy et al. (2017) applied

the social model to examine the constraints to sports participation among persons with disabilities, highlighting those societal and structural barriers, rather than impairments, limit access. They identified structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal constraints to participation, noting that structural barriers such as inaccessible facilities and inadequate policy support had the greatest impact. As a result, they advocated for policy and environmental changes to improve accessibility (Darcy et al., 2017). Similarly, Evans et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of making systemic changes to remove barriers in leisure and tourism, emphasizing the need for inclusion rather than focusing on medical solutions. Drawing on the social model of disability, the next section considers constraints to leisure that persons with disabilities can face in accessing and engaging in tourism experiences and opportunities.

## **2.4 Leisure Constraints**

In the leisure literature, models have been used to understand different types of leisure constraints that people can experience. Crawford and Godbey (1987) first proposed the leisure constraints model, highlighting how leisure constraints can shape a person's ability to engage in leisure activities. In the model, distinctions were made between three different types of constraints, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal constraints include psychological factors like stress and anxiety that influence leisure preferences. Interpersonal constraints arise from social interactions, such as a lack of social support and conflicting schedules with companions. Structural constraints are external factors that hinder participation, acting between leisure preferences and actual engagement, such as finances, work schedules, and climate (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

Expanding on this initial model, Crawford et al. (1991) developed a hierarchical model of leisure constraints, arguing that constraints are encountered in sequential processes rather than as

isolated barriers. They proposed that intrapersonal constraints, such as stress, anxiety, and lack of interest, shape preferences first, determining whether an individual is even motivated to participate in leisure activities. If these constraints are overcome, individuals may then face interpersonal constraints such as difficulty finding companions or social support. Finally, structural constraints, including financial limitations, accessibility issues or lack of time, act as external barriers to participation (Crawford et al., 1991). This hierarchical model of leisure constraints emphasizes that although structural constraints are often visible, intrapersonal and interpersonal factors must be addressed first before individuals attempt to navigate structural barriers.

Further contributing to this understanding, Smith (1987) examined the leisure barriers specific to persons with disabilities. They categorized the barriers into three main types: Intrinsic barriers, which stem from an individual's own physical, psychological, or cognitive limitations; environmental barriers, which include inaccessible infrastructure and transportation; and interactive barriers, which result from the interaction between a person with a disability and their surroundings. Smith (1987) also argued that these barriers do not operate in isolation, but collectively reduce the sense of freedom and personal control that define a fulfilling leisure experience, making participation in tourism and leisure disproportionately challenging for persons with disabilities. Building on these models, the following section explores how persons with disabilities experience these leisure constraints specifically in the context of travel, where accessibility, social perceptions, and personal motivations interact to shape tourism participation.

#### ***2.4.1 Leisure Constraints for Persons with Disabilities when Travelling***

Persons with disabilities encounter constraints during pre-travel planning, transit, and on-site tourism experiences, which can impact their sense of belonging and well-being (Blichfeldt &

Nicolaisen, 2011; Cloquet et al., 2018; Özogul & Baran, 2016). These constraints can be understood across three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Each category reflects a distinct dimension of the barriers persons with disabilities face when engaging in tourism, from personal concerns and social attitudes to physical and informational challenges in the tourism environment.

**Intrapersonal Constraints.** Intrapersonal constraints arise from within the individual and are often shaped by personal concerns about the feasibility of travel. Challenges such as concerns over cost, comfort, and flexibility often create anxiety and uncertainty about travelling independently, contributing to intrapersonal leisure constraints (Benjamin et al., 2021). Park and Kim (2024) found that concerns about mobility challenges, such as walking and inadequate transportation accessibility, were among the most discussed topics in disability travel communities. For persons with disabilities, these internal barriers can be particularly significant, as uncertainty about whether a destination will meet their accessibility needs may discourage them from travelling altogether.

**Interpersonal Constraints.** Research has shown that persons with disabilities can also face interpersonal constraints in leisure and tourism settings, often arising from others' attitudes and behaviours (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Nigg et al., 2024). As an example, Labbé et al. (2022b) found that staff in an adaptive sailing program in Vancouver initially held biases that influenced their interactions with persons with disabilities. These preconceived notions shaped their engagement with participants, creating interpersonal barriers to inclusive experiences. Similarly, Park and Kim (2024) also noted that inadequate wheelchair assistance from airport staff highlighted how poor staff attitudes and training create interpersonal barriers for travellers with disabilities.

**Structural Constraints.** Structural constraints are external barriers embedded in the physical, informational, and representational environment of tourism. Persons with disabilities can encounter significant structural barriers, particularly due to limited access to clear, reliable and comprehensive information about accessibility. While individual tourism operators such as hotels are increasingly required to provide detailed accessibility specifications (room size and dimensions) within their reservation systems, destination-level marketing content, including websites and social media, provides broad descriptions of accessibility, making it difficult for travellers with disabilities to assess suitability (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Devile & Kastenholtz, 2018a; Nyanjom et al., 2018).

Moreover, studies have highlighted that persons with disabilities must extensively pre-plan their vacations, yet often struggle to find sufficient accessibility details regarding transportation, accommodations, and attractions at the planning stage (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011). For instance, Devile & Kastenholtz (2018) examined the experiences of visually impaired travellers and identified various barriers such as poor staff training, lack of audio guides and Braille information, and inaccessible ticketing systems, all of which hinder independent navigation. The lack of standardized accessibility information and sign language interpretation further limits their ability to make informed travel decisions (Nyanjom et al., 2018).

Evidence from online disability community discussions further illustrates these structural information barriers. Park and Kim (2024) further identified accessible technology, including phone applications and accessible websites as a significant topic among disability travel communities. This reflects the importance of digital accessibility in improving their travel experiences.

In destination marketing, ensuring that accessibility information shared through digital channels such as social media posts and destination websites is clear, consistent, and specific is essential to helping travellers with disabilities make informed decisions. This includes the use of accessibility symbols, detailed descriptive captions (e.g. wheelchair access, sensory supports) and links to destination accessibility pages, all of which can improve how persons with disabilities perceive and engage with a destination before travel.

In addition to limited accessibility information, promotional content itself can become a structural barrier to travel. According to Benjamin et al. (2021) tourism promotion materials, such as physical and online travel brochures, frequently reinforce social barriers by a) displaying images of spaces that lack accessibility features, such as ramps, and b) by excluding photos of persons with disabilities enjoying destinations or engaging in activities like dining out. Moreover, tourism enterprises often fail to meet inclusive representation standards, portraying the travellers as young, persons without disabilities and conventionally attractive (Benjamin et al., 2021; Buhalis & Darcy, 2010; Cloquet et al., 2018; Shaw & Agarwal, 2011). Most brochures and travel guides continue to cater to non-disabled travellers, providing little to no visual or written references to persons with disabilities or accessibility features. This disparity in marketing priorities reinforces the exclusion of persons with disabilities from mainstream tourism image, limiting their visibility and reinforcing societal barriers to inclusive travel (Benjamin et al., 2021). Beyond representation, physical barriers such as transportation-related barriers further restrict travel for persons with disabilities.

Transportation barriers present another major challenge for persons with disabilities, often making travel difficult or impossible. Many public transportation systems lack step-free access, ramps, elevators, and adequate space for mobility aids, forcing travellers to rely on

expensive private alternatives (Darcy & Daruwalla, 2020). Economic and logistical constraints further compound these challenges, as persons with disabilities frequently face higher costs for accessible transport, specialized accommodations, and assistive devices (Michopoulou et al., 2015). For example, accessible rooms are often priced higher than standard options, which, combined with inadequate transportation infrastructure and limited accessible services, create significant economic barriers that reduce travel opportunities for persons with disabilities (Darcy, 2010).

To address these transportation-related constraints, it is essential to design travel environments that support equitable participation for all travellers. Ensuring accessibility extends beyond mobility infrastructure to the overall tourism experience, where inclusion must be embedded in every aspect of planning and delivery. This leads to the concept of accessible tourism, which emphasizes designing destinations, facilities, and services that be used and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age or ability.

## **2.5 Accessible Tourism**

Accessible tourism as a concept emerged in the tourism literature in the late 20th century, overlapping with disability studies and tourism studies (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). The term accessible tourism was first introduced in academic literature by Ralph Smith in 1987 (Smith, 1987). Accessible tourism gained recognition in 1999 when the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) endorsed the promotion of universally accessible tourism for persons with disabilities as part of its Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (UNWTO, 1999). The endorsement emphasized the rights of all individuals to engage in leisure and travel without barriers (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). As Buhalis and Darcy (2010) defined:

Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves collaborative processes between stakeholders that enable people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services, and environments.

In this way, accessible tourism, as argued by Qiao et al. (2022) is grounded in the principle of equal tourism rights, recognizing tourism as a fundamental human right.

Accessible tourism was initially focused on enabling persons with disabilities to travel independently and with dignity, by removing physical barriers, such as ensuring wheelchair-accessible infrastructure and transportation. However, as the understanding of accessibility evolved, it became clear that tourism experiences should cater to a wider range of needs, including sensory, cognitive and temporary impairments, which led to the adoption of universal design principles that aim to make all aspects of tourism, such as transport, accommodations, attractions, and online platforms, accessible to everyone (Buhalis & Darcy, 2010; Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

Universal design (UD) is defined as “The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (*Center for Universal Design*, n.d.). By anticipating diverse needs, UD reduces long-term costs and enhances usability for everyone, fostering inclusivity and sustainability. Michopoulou et al. (2015) emphasized that improving the accessibility of facilities, transportation, attractions, and destinations requires collaboration of diverse stakeholders such as policymakers, planners, and service providers. They argued that the adoption of UD has the potential to shape a more accessible future of tourism while also

enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations and organizations. DMOs can play an important role by offering insights, recommendations and by advocating for accessible infrastructure to stakeholders (Morrison, 2023).

In support of the evolution of accessible tourism, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020) developed a framework that promotes accessibility in the tourism sector, including public-private partnerships and good practices within the industry. This framework resulted in the manual on Accessible Tourism for all. It is meant to assist tourism stakeholders in improving the accessibility of tourism destinations, facilities and services worldwide (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020). The manual emphasizes the importance of collaboration between public entities and private sector to promote accessible tourism initiatives. It also showcases successful examples of best practices employed in various tourism destinations. For example, Swiss railways represents comprehensive accessibility design by integrating accommodations across multiple operational levels (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) & Fundación ACS, 2015). Station facilities include personal assistance services for passengers with visual or hearing impairments, accessible customer service counters, and real-time information systems. Train infrastructure is similarly designed with low-floor coaches to facilitate boarding, audible announcements to serve passengers with visual impairments, high-contrast visual displays and Braille signage to enhance navigation. The municipality of Socorro, Brazil, launched “Accessible Socorro” in 2008 to improve city infrastructure, train staff, and ensure that nearly 100% of hotels are adapted for people with all kinds of disabilities (World Tourism Organization & Fundación ACS, 2015). Its Special Adventurers initiative began in 2005, adapting adventure activities for persons with

disabilities, making Socorro a model for accessible tourism for the venues of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

In the Canadian context, Parks Canada maintains a dedicated webpage listing accessible facilities in various parks across provinces, along with contact details for reservations and obtaining more information (Parks Canada Agency, 2022). Tourism Vancouver Island (4VI) has developed Accessible Travel Guides, developed in consultation with accessibility experts and travellers with disabilities (Tourism Vancouver Island, 2022). These initiatives represent important steps toward improving tourism accessibility, yet more work is needed to create truly inclusive and welcoming experiences for all travellers. While these efforts highlight growing awareness of accessibility in tourism, they also reveal the need to move beyond physical access alone. This shift brings attention to the broader concept of inclusive tourism, which aims to ensure that travel experiences are not only accessible but also welcoming, meaningful, and equitable for people of all abilities.

## **2.6 Inclusive Tourism**

As understanding of accessibility has expanded, inclusive tourism has emerged to encompass a more holistic approach. It builds on the foundations of accessible tourism by addressing a wider range of needs beyond physical accessibility, including sensory, cognitive, and temporary impairments. Inclusive tourism emphasizes equitable participation, authentic representation, and fair distribution of benefits for all travellers, regardless of ability (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2025). Over the past two decades, inclusive tourism has attracted increasing attention in academic literature as part of broader discussions of social sustainability and equity in tourism (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

While accessible tourism focuses on addressing specific challenges, such as infrastructure, communication, and transportation limitations for persons with disabilities, inclusive tourism extends beyond access to emphasize belonging, social integration, and ethical participation across diverse social groups. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) defined inclusive tourism as “Transformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits” (p. 592). In this perspective, inclusion involves not only representing persons with disabilities as equal participants in mainstream tourism experiences (Halpern et al., 2024), but also actively involving marginalized groups in tourism planning, governance, and decision-making processes (Nyanjom et al., 2018). By integrating participation at multiple levels, inclusive tourism challenges structural and attitudinal barriers, reinforcing the idea that physical access is only the starting point for achieving meaningful inclusion.

As tourism research shifts from environmental and economic concerns toward social sustainability, inclusive tourism has emerged as a vital pillar. It promotes equitable access to tourism experiences, supports the integration of universal design, and creates inclusive employment opportunities (Happ et al., 2022; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Inclusive tourism also plays a crucial role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced inequalities and ensuring marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, can fully participate in and benefit from tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; United Nations, n.d.).

Although some scholars (Darcy et al., 2010) refer to this approach as an extension of accessible tourism, the goals align more closely with inclusive tourism’s emphasis on equity and social justice, thereby directly contributing to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through disability-inclusive participation and equal opportunity outcomes. Similarly, Popović et al. (2022) noted

that improving accessibility enhances destination competitiveness and benefits the entire sector by attracting broader market segments. However, this focus on destination competitiveness is better situated within the inclusive tourism framework, which prioritizes broad participation and representation across diverse traveller groups. In the post-pandemic context, there is growing momentum for inclusive tourism policies that promote both accessibility and participation (MENA Report, 2021), aligning with the global agenda for social sustainability and human rights (United Nations, n.d.).

While research has highlighted the impact of inclusive tourism marketing in shaping perceptions and encouraging travel among persons with disabilities, existing studies have primarily focused on regions such as Europe and the Americas (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2025; Rita & António, 2020). This leaves a significant research gap in the Canadian tourism sector, particularly concerning British Columbia, where the representation of persons with disabilities is unexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how inclusivity in tourism marketing can be improved within the Canadian context. This study addresses this gap by examining the social media posts of five British Columbia DMOs, Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver and Tourism Tofino. This study analyses content from these DMOs, published in May 2024, on Instagram and Facebook, focusing on the types of experiences promoted and on how diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and visible disability are portrayed.

## **2.7 Destination Management Organizations**

Destination Management and Destination Marketing are closely connected concepts in tourism, with Destination Marketing serving as a key component within the broader scope of Destination Management (Morrison, 2023). Morrison emphasized that Destination Management

Organizations serve dual roles: marketing and managing tourism destinations. Traditionally, DMOs focused primarily on promotional activities to attract visitors. However, their responsibilities have expanded to encompass strategic leadership in destination development. This includes coordinating tourism stakeholders, planning and research, product development, partnership building, and community relations. Effective destination management involves long-term planning and continuous monitoring to ensure that tourism development aligns with the destination's vision and goals (Morrison, 2023).

Destination marketing is an ongoing process in which DMOs plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to meet travelers' needs while aligning with the destination's overall marketing and management goals. DMOs provide destination leadership, and coordinate with tourism partners, policy makers and operators to monitor market shifts or trends, which helps to inform collective decision-making (Morrison, 2023). According to Morrison (2023), a DMO works with tourism partners to define and promote a unique destination image to target markets.

DMOs play a significant role in promoting accessibility and inclusion by embedding inclusive practices in their communications (e.g., including accessibility information and disability representation throughout their marketing and communications) and coordinating stakeholders to strengthen these practices across the destination (Halpern et al., 2025). DMOs have long used the internet to promote travel destinations (now referred to as Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)), relying on websites and digital advertising, such as social media, to attract visitors (Hays et al., 2013; Hornby, 2016; Morrison, 2023). Over time, the evolution of online marketing has led to a growing use of social media by tourism organizations to promote tourism experiences (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019; Mahajan et al., 2024). As more travellers rely on social media for trip planning, tourism providers are adapting their strategies to

be digital first, and rely less on printed documents. This aligns with Destination BC's Travel Path to Purchase, which outlines key phases in the travel decision-making journey: Dream, Plan, Book, and Share (Destination BC, 2021). Social media plays a key role across these stages, especially during the Dream, Plan, and Book phases, by influencing potential visitors through visual storytelling (Destination BC, 2021; Lever & Elliot, 2023) and by serving as a channel through which persons with disabilities seek disability-specific accessibility information, such as details about physical access and destination facilities to support their travel planning (Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2013). Despite the widespread use of social media by DMOs in tourism digital marketing, the representation of persons with disabilities in social media marketing materials remains an overlooked area of research, particularly within the Canadian context.

## **2.8 Representation of Persons with Disabilities in Tourism Promotions**

Promotional materials play a crucial role in shaping the destination image and influencing travel decisions, as they are crafted to inform, attract, and inspire potential travellers by presenting a destination's most appealing aspects (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Francesconi, 2011; Halpern et al., 2024). Promotional materials, including brochures, travel guides, websites, and advertisements, are used by tourism organizations to showcase attractions and target diverse visitor segments (Francesconi, 2011; Tercia et al., 2020). With the rise of digital platforms, DMOs rely on tools such as websites and social media to build community, share experiences, and engage travellers in real-time. Promoting accessible and inclusive tourism within these digital spaces also requires the representation of persons with disabilities in marketing content, particularly on social media - platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram,

where visuals play a central role in shaping public perception and destination appeal (Francesconi, 2011; Tercia et al., 2020).

The limited representation of persons with disabilities in social media marketing, including on Facebook and Instagram pages, highlights how their needs and experiences are often overlooked in the tourism industry (Benjamin et al., 2021; Halpern et al., 2024). Excluding persons with disabilities from promotional materials or showcasing inaccessible spaces reinforces societal barriers that discourage their participation in travel (Shaw & Agarwal, 2011). In contrast, authentic representation of persons with disabilities in tourism promotion materials enhances their sense of inclusion, encourages travel participation, and shape broader perceptions of accessibility within the sector (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018). Inclusive representation and messaging in social media marketing can also influence traveller confidence and signal a commitment to accessibility, encouraging more inclusive business strategies (Benjamin et al., 2021; Michopoulou & Buhalis 2013) In this way, DMOs can lead systemic change, fostering greater social inclusion and equitable travel opportunities by the broader tourism industry. To move beyond inclusive marketing and create truly welcoming tourism experiences, it is crucial to consider the role of DMOs in supporting the development of accessible and inclusive tourism.

## **2.9 Research Questions**

Despite growing scholarship on inclusive tourism marketing, several gaps remain. First, limited research has examined how persons with visible disabilities are represented in the social media marketing of Canadian DMOs, particularly in British Columbia, with existing studies (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2025; Rita & António, 2020) largely focused on other geographic contexts. Second, most studies have analyzed printed brochures and

destination websites, leaving a gap in understanding how diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and visible disability are portrayed in visual social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, which prioritize imagery and user engagement. Third, little is known about how DMOs communicate accessibility and disability representation during the tourism planning season, when destination marketing messages and campaign priorities are shaped to influence summer travel decisions. To address this gap, this study examines the representation of persons with disabilities in Instagram and Facebook posts from five British Columbia DMOs (Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino), focusing on content posted in May 2024. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What tourism (or destination) experiences do DMOs in British Columbia emphasize on their Instagram and Facebook pages?
2. How is diversity represented on the Instagram and Facebook pages of DMOs in British Columbia?
3. How are accessibility and inclusion represented on the Instagram and Facebook pages of the DMOs in British Columbia?
4. How are persons with visible disabilities represented on the Instagram and Facebook pages of DMOs in British Columbia?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Qualitative research approaches hold considerable potential for deepening understanding of the human dimensions of society. Qualitative research has gained recognition and validation within tourism studies (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Huang et al., 2024; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). In qualitative research, the process evolves as data is collected. The research plan may shift as new insights emerge, allowing the researcher to explore the topic more deeply. This flexibility is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the subject being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore and gain in-depth insights into how British Columbia DMOs' Instagram and Facebook posts emphasize tourism experiences and represent diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and persons with disabilities. Drawing on a qualitative approach, this chapter outlines the key components of how this approach to research was used to design this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), including a description of the worldview guiding the study, the research context, the methods selected for data collection and data analysis. In addition, this chapter highlights the ethical considerations related to the research process and the researcher's positionality.

### **3.2 Social Media Research**

Leisure studies are shaped by the "digital turn," which refers to how digitization affects our daily lives, including how we behave, interact, live and work (Schultz & McKeown, 2018). Related, advances in internet technology have fueled the rapid growth of social media platforms. Interest in social media research has increased in recent years (Laestadius, 2017; Teles da Mota & Pickering, 2020; Thirumaran et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), particularly in leisure studies

(e.g., Lopez et al., 2019; McKeown & Miller, 2020; Park & Kim, 2024). There are examples in the leisure literature of social media research that are grounded in a transformative lens.

Lopez et al. (2019) explored how Twitter acts as a digital space for feminist discussions, shaping and challenging dominant narratives. An analysis of tweets containing #feminism showed how social media can support, defend, or attack feminist discourse, highlighting its role in both promoting and hindering social change. These studies highlight the role of social media in shaping discussions on accessibility, inclusion, and empowerment within leisure and tourism. Similarly, some studies in leisure and tourism have used Instagram to explore how experiences and identities are represented online. For example, McKeown and Miller's (2019) #TableForOne study examined how solo dining is depicted on Instagram, revealing how users challenge stigma and express autonomy through visual storytelling. In a related tourism-focused study, Low et al. (2022) studied Instagram posts with hashtags like #womenoutdoors to see how women share their outdoor adventure experiences, showing that Instagram acts as a digital space where people create and express the meaning of their leisure activities. Building on this, the visual nature of Facebook and Instagram makes them valuable tools for examining how the DMOs represent persons with disabilities in their posts.

### **3.3 Instagram and Facebook as a Research Context**

Instagram was launched as an iPhone app in October 2010 and attracted 25,000 users on its first day (Statista, 2025b). By 2025, the platform had grown to 3 billion monthly users, an increase of one billion since 2021 (Statista, 2025b). Instagram, now owned by Meta (the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, Threads and WhatsApp), has become the fourth most popular social media platform globally, behind Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp (Gilliard et al., 2023). Instagram is a widely used free photo and video-sharing mobile application primarily

available on iPhone and Android devices but also accessible through a web browser, making it highly visual and interactive. Users can upload photos or videos to share with followers while viewing, liking, and commenting on others' posts (Instagram, n.d.). Businesses can create a business account on Instagram with a professional dashboard to track the performance and access insights into their interactions with the account (Instagram, n.d.). This helps companies to understand audience behaviour and improve their growth strategy to attract more customers. With features like hashtags and geotags, Instagram enables businesses, including DMOs, to engage with audiences and influence travel decisions through social media marketing. Its emphasis on imagery and user-generated content makes it a preferred platform for showcasing destinations, experiences, and accessibility features, shaping perceptions of tourism inclusivity (Theofanous et al., 2024).

Instagram's unique combination of images, videos, captions, hashtags, and comments makes it a valuable platform for research, particularly in qualitative studies (Laestadius, 2017). Unlike Twitter or Facebook, every Instagram post must include an image or short video, fostering a highly visual culture in which meaning is often conveyed through visuals, with text and hashtags providing context when needed (Laestadius, 2017). This rich multimedia content makes it well-suited to qualitative research (Highfield & Leaver, 2014). For this reason, Instagram serves as a suitable research context for examining how DMOs communicate tourism experiences, accessibility and inclusion through social media content.

As of July 2025, men accounted for approximately 52.5% of Instagram's global users, and more than half of all users were aged 34 or younger, with men aged 25-34 representing the largest demographic group at approximately 18.7% (Statista, 2025b).. It also reported that, in addition to gender and age, Instagram has large user bases in countries such as India, the United

States, and Brazil. Due to Instagram's popularity and its recognition as a key platform for leisure and tourism research (Dinis et al., 2020; E. Smith et al., 2023; Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019; McKeown & Miller, 2019), along with its rich multimedia content, it will be used as the research context where data is collected from Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino.

Facebook was launched in 2004 and now has over three billion active monthly users (Statista, 2025a). As a subsidiary of Meta, Facebook shares the same parent company as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger (Meta, n.d.). In terms of its user demographics, as of October 2025, men aged 25 to 34 represented the largest user group, accounting for approximately 18.9% of Facebook's global audience, and male users outnumbered female users across all age groups except those aged 65 and older (Statista, 2025a). Facebook also has especially large audiences in India, the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil, and its user base remains broad across age groups, making it one of the most widely used social networking platforms globally (Statista, 2025a). A Facebook Business Page is a free public platform allowing businesses and organizations to reach a broad audience. Unlike private profiles, Pages are indexed by Google, making them easier to find through search engines (Facebook, n.d.). Organizations can quickly share updates by posting content and can add action buttons to encourage specific user engagement. Additionally, Facebook provides publishing tools to schedule posts in advance and access to analytics that offer insights into audience engagement, allowing businesses to adjust their content strategy based on follower responses (Facebook, n.d.). These characteristics make Instagram and Facebook appropriate platforms for the data collection process described in the following section.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Tourism marketing activities are typically undertaken by the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to ensure the tourism destinations remain competitive and sustainable (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2019). For this research, I selected five British Columbia DMOs registered with the British Columbia Destination Management Organization Association: Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino (BCDMOA, n.d.). These five destinations were chosen to include a variety of destinations within British Columbia and to compare different tourism contexts, including urban and smaller destination settings. Together, they represent a mix of mainland and Vancouver Island destinations, allowing for a broader examination of how different DMOs communicate tourism experiences and accessibility on social media. Three of the selected destinations are located on Vancouver Island: Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, and Tourism Tofino and were selected based on their substantial visitor volume and consistent social media activity. In 2023, Vancouver Island attracted nearly three million visitors (4VI, n.d.), demonstrating the region's tourism importance. The remaining two destinations: Tourism Kelowna and Destination Vancouver are major mainland centres selected based on large resident populations, strong tourism economies (City of Kelowna, 2016; City of Vancouver, n.d.) and active social media platforms. Taken together, these destinations provided a diverse set of tourism contexts and actively maintained social media channels, making them suitable sources for the Instagram and Facebook data set in this study.

Before commencing data collection, Laestadius (2017) recommended that researchers create their own Instagram accounts to familiarize themselves with the platform's interface and common usage patterns. In alignment with this recommendation, I created personal Instagram and Facebook accounts and spent time exploring these platforms before data collection. For the

actual data collection process, I accessed the Instagram and Facebook handles of each selected DMO and searched for posts within the specified timeframe (May 1 – 31, 2024). This timeframe was selected strategically to capture content posted during the planning period for summer tourism in British Columbia. According to Destination BC's path to purchase framework, travellers typically dream about and plan their trips weeks to months before they travel, using this time to seek inspiration and gather information about destinations (Destination BC, 2021). Visitor numbers are highest during the summer months (June – August), in all of the selected destinations, making May Instagram and Facebook content particularly relevant as DMOs actively market summer destinations and experiences during this period (Destination BC, 2025). Analyzing posts from this period provides insight into how DMOs represent persons with disabilities at a critical moment in their annual marketing cycle.

Data were extracted manually from Instagram and Facebook user interfaces between April 25 and May 5, 2025. As noted by Laestadius (2017), there are three primary options for the data collection approach: (a) extracting data from the Instagram API, (b) using a third-party tool that connects with the Instagram API, (c) manually extracting data from the Instagram user interface. Following a similar approach to Kayaga's (2021) study on the social media posts of Kenyan and Tanzanian tourism boards, I manually collected data from Instagram and Facebook's user interfaces. Manual extraction enables researchers to engage with images, videos, and captions as intended by users, offering a deeper understanding of visual intent and user experience (Laestadius, 2017). Additionally, this hands-on approach not only fosters greater familiarity with the data but also enables researchers to evaluate the relevance of each post, minimizing the inclusion of irrelevant content (Laestadius, 2017).

The analysis examines Instagram and Facebook content published by the selected DMOs, focusing on the types of destination experiences promoted and on how diversity, inclusion, accessibility and visible disability are portrayed, including the extent to which posts highlight accessibility features or promote accessible travel experiences. Specifically, the study investigates three key dimensions: 1) the types of imagery used and whether persons with disabilities are depicted, 2) the language and tone used in captions and descriptions regarding accessibility, and 3) the prominence given to accessibility information in destination marketing communications. This multidimensional approach enables a comprehensive examination of both the explicit representation of disability and the implicit communication of accessibility in tourism marketing.

Laestadius (2017) emphasized that analyzing small samples of Instagram data can uncover nuanced insights that larger-scale, automated data collection methods might overlook. This finding is particularly relevant to the qualitative analysis of how DMOs represent disability and accessibility, which requires close examination of visual and textual communication. Carah and Shaul (2016) demonstrated the value of focused, manual analysis in their study of Instagram branding practices. By analyzing 100 posts from four brand-related hashtags associated with Smirnoff and General Pants, they identified how consumers shape brand identity through interactions and content creation. Their analysis revealed that users associate products with specific lifestyles and trends, demonstrating that engagement-driven marketing is a key aspect of Instagram branding. This research illustrates that targeted sampling, and manual analysis can reveal rich patterns in visual communication, as applied in the current study to examine disability representation in destination marketing.

As outlined in Article 2.2 of the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2022), REB review is not required for research relying exclusively on publicly available information where individuals have no reasonable expectation of privacy (TCPS, 2022). This exemption applies to this study because all data were collected from publicly accessible social media accounts of DMOs, where content is intentionally shared for broad audiences. Being mindful of ethical considerations and aligned with these guidelines, I ensured that data collection was limited to publicly accessible accounts of the five selected DMOs.

For each post, I opened it individually and used a snipping tool to capture screenshots of images and text, saving them in folders labelled with the respective DMO name and timestamp. Video content was downloaded and saved in the appropriate folders. Both screenshots and videos were renamed to include the DMO name and were sequentially numbered for analysis. Additionally, captions from each post were copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet, which was securely stored on a password-protected computer. This systematic approach ensured consistent, organized data storage and easy retrieval for analysis.

Data were collected several months after the specified period (May 2024), rather than in real time. Following the work of McKeown and Miller (2019), this delayed approach was intentional, providing users time to reconsider their posts and make changes, such as deleting content or adjusting privacy settings, thereby respecting their control over their profiles. Additionally, I deliberately chose not to analyze comments and likes on each post, as these can change over time and may alter the meaning of the original post (Laestadius, 2017; McKeown & Miller, 2019). By excluding these variable elements, the analysis focuses on the static content that best reflects the users' intended message at the time the post was initially published. This

approach minimizes the risk of misrepresentation and ensures the analytical focus remains on the core content created and shared by the DMOs.

Throughout the research process, data security and ethical standards were prioritized. All collected data were stored on a password-protected computer and retained for the duration for the duration of this thesis. Multiple safeguards were implemented to ensure research integrity. Firstly, all identifiable information in the data was removed to protect the privacy of users whose content was analyzed. Secondly, data were used exclusively for the purposes outlined in this study and were not misused or misrepresented. Thirdly, the data will be securely deleted following the completion of the thesis. These measures align with the ethical guidelines outlined in the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS, 2022) and ensure that research respects both the confidentiality of the source organizations and the broader ethical principles of qualitative research.

Following the data collection process stated above, a total of 333 posts were collected from the Instagram and Facebook pages of the five selected DMOs. The distribution of analyzed posts across the destinations was as follows: Tourism Kelowna (126 posts), Destination Greater Victoria (99 posts), Tourism Nanaimo (51 posts), Destination Vancouver (41 posts), and Tourism Tofino (16 posts). After removing duplicate posts (those appearing on both platforms) and posts in which the DMO was tagged, but did not reshare the content (107 instances), a final sample of 226 unique posts was analyzed. In addition to the systematic methodological approach outlined above, specific measures were implemented to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this research process. Having outlined the data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and the organization of the collected posts, the analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The following section describes the six-phase process, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006)

framework, used to identify patterns and themes related to disability representation in the collected social media content.

### **3.5 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a widely used research method in social science research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and leisure research (Huang et al., 2024; Najafi, 2023; Walters, 2016). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a dataset, providing an organized and detailed understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is especially valuable for research that involves interpreting both written and visual texts or analyzing content from social media (Walters, 2016). Given its flexibility and capacity to be used to make sense of text and visual data, thematic analysis was an ideal method for this study to identify recurring themes and patterns in the collected data.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the analysis of the collected data proceeded systematically. The first phase involved organizing all the collected data, including text and images, into a structured digital database for easy access and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis began with thoroughly familiarizing oneself with the collected textual and visual data by repeatedly reviewing and immersing in the content, following Braun and Clarke's, (2006) guidelines. This foundational step allowed for a deeper understanding of emerging patterns before proceeding to coding. Notes were taken during this phase to reference in the following coding stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Walters, 2016).

In the second phase, the data were revisited, and the captions, images and videos were coded inductively, focusing on what was explicitly visible or stated in each social media post (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Walters, 2016). Although codes were generated inductively, they were organized deductively around the study's research questions. For instance, codes related to

‘tourism experiences’ (RQ1), ‘diversity of people represented’ (RQ2), ‘accessibility features and inclusivity in representation’ (RQ3) and ‘the representation of persons with visible disabilities’ (RQ4) were organized in groups, allowing posts to receive multiple codes where relevant and ensuring comprehensive coverage of all research questions. This process included analyzing both the visual representation of individuals in the images and the use of inclusive language or image descriptions in the captions, even when the individuals depicted did not have an apparent physical disability. This study focused on visible disabilities, which can be identified in the collected images, thereby excluding individuals with non-visible disabilities. However, similar approaches have been adopted in other studies (Benjamin et al., 2021).

In the third phase, building on the coded data, the identified codes were analyzed to explore how they combined to form broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Saldana (2021) coding serves as the bridge between data collection and the deeper stages of analysis and synthesis. This bridging function was evident as similar codes were grouped together into broader thematic categories. Any codes that did not fit into a specific category were temporarily assigned to a provisional theme labelled "miscellaneous" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process of searching for themes involved looking for patterns and connections among the codes to develop potential themes that addressed the research questions.

In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed for coherence and consistency by examining the data and examples that supported each code within the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The basic themes from the previous phase were assessed to determine if they formed coherent patterns. Each theme was assessed to ensure it was meaningfully distinct from other themes and that the data within it demonstrated sufficient coherence to be treated as a single theme. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the fifth phase, each theme was defined and refined to understand its core meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data within each theme were analyzed, and consideration was given to what each theme revealed and how it fit within the broader picture of the study, ensuring minimal overlap between themes. Clear labels and definitions were developed for each theme to accurately capture its essence and significance in relation to the research questions.

In the sixth and final phase, the findings were written up and presented in a detailed and comprehensive manner using thick description, as described by Tracy (2010), which helps ensure the credibility of qualitative research. Both textual and visual formats were used to present the findings, including screenshots of selected posts, to enhance clarity and comprehension. The textual summary explained the key themes that emerged and the insights drawn from the data. Screenshots of Instagram posts will visually represent the data, facilitating comparison and interpretation of the findings. In representing the findings, efforts were made to respect content creators by accurately reflecting their work without misinterpretation. As Laestadius (2017) noted, when obtaining consent for studies like this is not always necessary or feasible, the responsible handling of images becomes a key consideration for Instagram researchers. To address this, care was taken to select images in which individuals' faces are not identifiable (Laestadius, 2017; McKeown & Miller, 2019). Instagram's current policy permits others to use its products to create and re-share content (Instagram, 2022).

### **3.6 Credibility and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this research process, several specific tools were selected and applied systematically. Triangulation was employed by analyzing data from multiple sources, such as Facebook and Instagram and by cross-verifying posts across five DMOs (three on Vancouver Island and two on the mainland) to confirm patterns in how persons

with disabilities are represented in these marketing contexts. This approach enhanced the rigour and credibility of the thematic analysis by promoting a structured and reflective interpretation of the data (Lisa & Jenny, 2004). Thick description was used to report the findings through detailed excerpts, screenshots, and post contexts (Tracy, 2010), enabling readers to assess transferability.

Demonstrating credible, honest, and authentic research does not mean removing personal involvement; rather, it requires integrating both research and human perspectives, acknowledging that emotions and subjectivity are integral to qualitative inquiry (Dupuis, 1999). To uphold credibility, detailed records of the decisions (coding-to-theme mappings), emotions, and assumptions were maintained throughout in a reflective journal; it directly informed analysis by leading to re-checks, such as revisiting ‘miscellaneous’ codes in Phase 3 after noting a bias toward urban DMOs and refining themes for better data fit. This study recognized that researcher’s perspectives may shape the thematic analysis, and reflexivity was maintained to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Reflexivity, as highlighted by Johnson and Rose (2024), is essential in ensuring that researchers critically examine their own perspectives and understand how these influence their interpretations. These tools align with widely accepted markers of quality in qualitative research, including credibility, rich rigour, sincerity, ethics, and meaningful coherence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Tracy, 2010).

### **3.7 Researcher Positionality Statement**

As a researcher without a disability and with prior experience in the tourism industry, this study examines the representation of persons with disabilities in tourism marketing. As noted by Olukotun et al. (2021), reflecting on oneself while doing research helps identify problems that need more understanding. This is an essential part of qualitative research, which examines phenomena closely. With a degree in tourism and a robust professional background

encompassing hands-on experience in tourism operations worldwide, the researcher is familiar with tourism landscapes and marketing them to travellers. During the researcher's tenure, barriers encountered by persons with disabilities were observed in multiple instances. The absence of accurate information and the exclusion of persons with disabilities from tourism suppliers' promotional materials reduced their motivation to travel. The researcher's international travel experience and marketing of destinations that promote inclusive design, along with the notable gap in the literature, motivated this study to examine promotional materials for the representation of persons with disabilities.

This study aims to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the representation of persons with disabilities in tourism marketing. Reflexivity involves recognizing how a researcher's background and experiences can significantly influence every stage of the research process, from design to interpretation of results (Bukamal, 2022). Researchers should recognize and reflect on their biases, values, and personal backgrounds, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status (SES), as these factors influence their interpretations during a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Tracy, 2010). A reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process to regularly assess how the researcher's background and perspective affected the work.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings of the thematic analysis of Instagram and Facebook posts from the selected British Columbia DMOs. It describes how tourists and destinations are portrayed in this social media content and outlines how diversity, accessibility, and visible disability appear across the dataset. The chapter is organized around four central themes (1) Exploring the Destination, (2) Access Without Presence, (3) Selective Visibility: Representing Persons with Disabilities, (4) Lack of Diverse Representation. Each theme is presented in the following sections and illustrated with visual and textual examples from the posts.

### 4.2 Findings of the study

#### *4.2.1 Theme 1: Exploring the Destination*

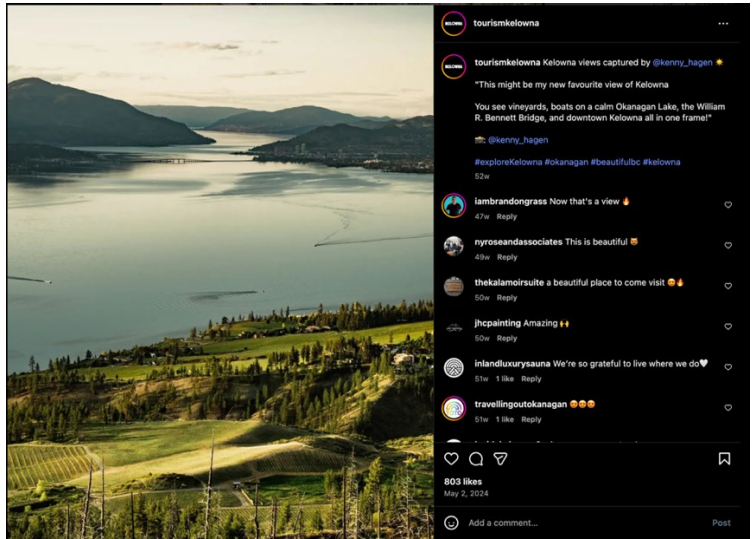
Across all five destinations, ‘Exploring the Destination’ is a central strategy for inviting visitors to engage with the place. DMOs do this by highlighting different combinations of landscapes, outdoor activities, food and drink, events, and cultural experiences. Together, these elements shape what exploration looks and feels like in each destination.

Scenic landscapes appear across all DMOs, but they are presented differently. Tourism Kelowna often uses wide, open views of mountains, lakes and vineyards, such as an Instagram post (Figure 1) showing Okanagan Lake, boats, downtown, and the William R. Bennett Bridge with hashtags like #ExploreKelowna and #BeautifulBC. Destination Greater Victoria focuses more on gardens and seasonal flowers, including posts about Butchart Gardens and Cherry blossoms, tagged with #ExploringVictoria and #CherryBlossoms, which present exploration as the enjoyment of carefully curated natural beauty. Tourism Tofino frequently shows beaches and dramatic skies, including Northern Lights scenes (Figure 2), and connects these landscapes to

Indigenous territory by tagging Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation lands. In contrast, Tourism Nanaimo and Destination Vancouver include fewer stand-alone landscape images, reflecting their more urban and community-centred focus.

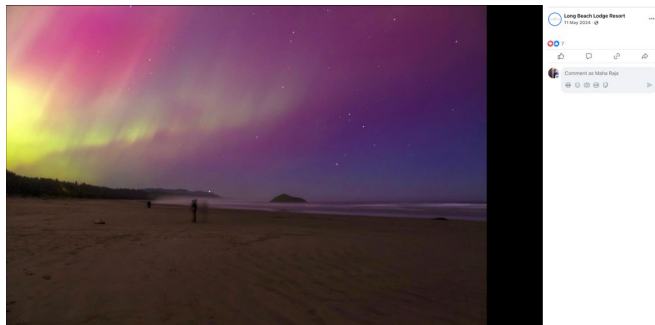
### Figure 1

*Okanagan Lake view, Instagram: Tourism Kelowna; May 2, 2024*



### Figure 2

*Tofino Beach During Northern Lights, Facebook: Tourism Tofino; 11 May 2024*



Outdoor activities and adventure experiences are another important way DMOs frame exploration. Tourism Kelowna highlights high-energy, family-oriented activities such as hiking, biking, water sports, and mountain recreation; for example, a Facebook post (Figure 4) features a mountain biker at Knox Mountain Park, tagged with #Bucketlistadventures and #BeautifulBC. Destination Greater Victoria and Destination Vancouver link outdoor activities with urban life, promoting paddleboarding, hiking, cycling, and sports such as pickleball in connection with city events and campaigns, using hashtags like #GetOutside and #VeryVancouver. For example, a Facebook post (May 1, 2024) from Destination Vancouver promoting pickleball as a social, urban activity with captions highlighting it as “the fastest-growing sport in North America” and describes it as “beginner-friendly”. Tourism Tofino emphasizes outdoor experiences that centre on the coast and close contact with nature, while Tourism Nanaimo place less emphasis on outdoor adventure and more on its waterfront and relaxed community spaces, highlighting local culture in line with its Five-Year Strategic Business Plan (Tourism Nanaimo, 2025).

### Figure 3

*A biker on Knox Mountain Park, Facebook: Tourism Kelowna; May 4, 2024*

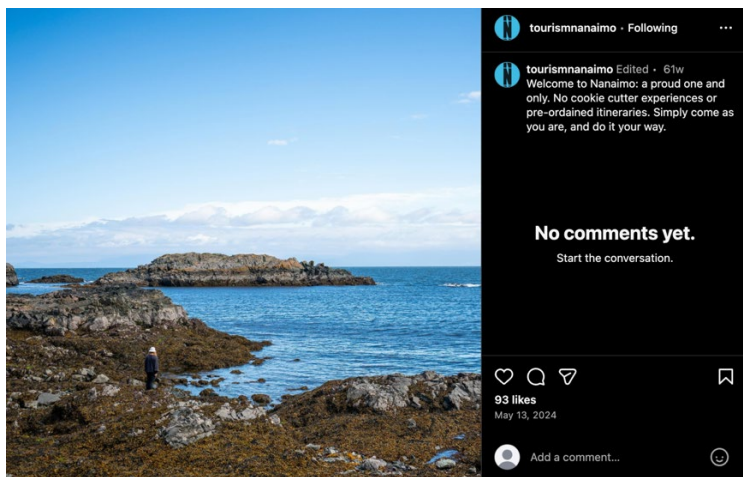


Across the DMOs in this study, the invitation to “explore” extends beyond physical landscapes to include food, culture, and community events. Tourism Kelowna combines culinary

experiences with scenic outdoor settings such as an Instagram post (May 17, 2024) that shows wine, fresh produce, and golden-hour lighting, set outdoors. Destination Greater Victoria promotes a busy event season, including festivals such as the Victoria International Jazz Fest and the Bacon Beer & Bourbon Festival, presenting exploration as joining lively gatherings. Destination Vancouver highlights events like the Concord Pacific Dragon Boat Festival and a variety of dishes from different cuisines, positioning the city as diverse and cosmopolitan. Tourism Nanaimo uses messages like “Come as you are, and do it your way” alongside images of its waterfront (Figure 5) and independent cafes such as White Rabbit Coffee Company (Figure 6), inviting visitors to explore at their own pace through local businesses and everyday spaces.

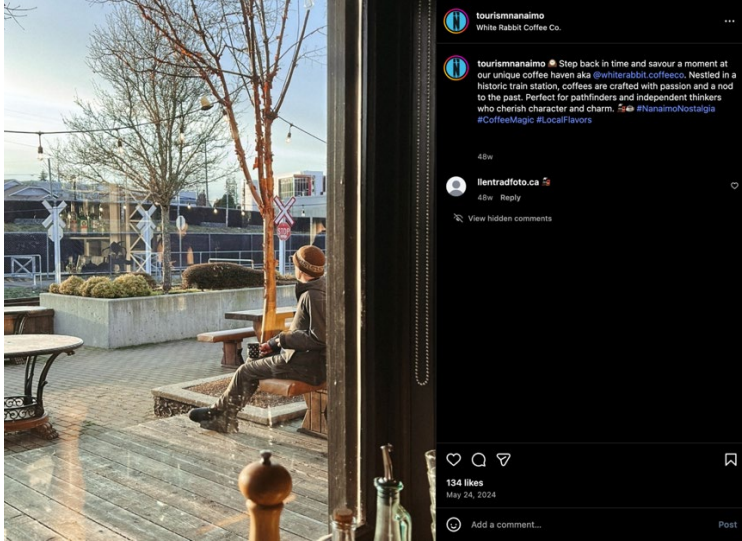
#### Figure 4

*A Person at Nanaimo Waterfront, Instagram: Tourism Nanaimo; May 13, 2024*



#### Figure 5

*An Older Adult at the White Rabbit Coffee Company, Instagram: Tourism Nanaimo; May 24, 2024*



Tourism Tofino presents cultural exploration through experiences such as the naa?uu event, described as a “delicious bridge to Tla-o-qui-aht storytelling and cultural teaching,” where visitors connect with feasting, song, and dance rooted in Indigenous homelands. Together, these examples show that each DMO emphasizes different ways of exploring, through nature, outdoor activity, culture, food, and community life. This lays the foundation for the next theme, which looks more closely at how accessibility (and is not) highlighted within these invitations.

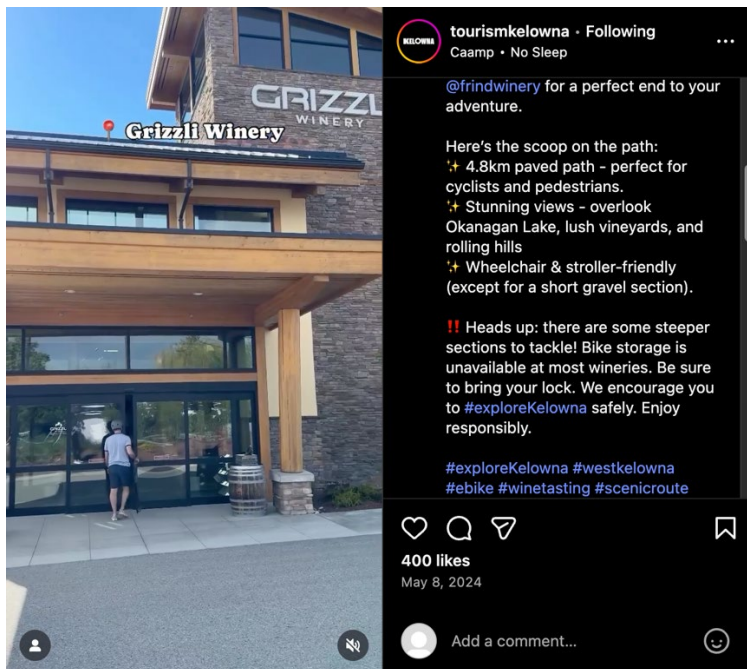
#### ***4.2.2 Theme 2: Accessible Infrastructure Without Persons with Disabilities***

This theme focuses on posts that highlight accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, wide pathways, and flat terrain, but do not show persons with visible disabilities using these spaces. The findings reveal a critical distinction between accessibility (the presence of infrastructure) and inclusion (the presence of persons with visible disabilities). DMOs have begun to acknowledge accessibility in their messaging, but this focus remains anchored in infrastructure rather than the people it is designed to serve. Consistent with Universal Design principles, features such as paved trails benefit many users, including parents with strollers, older adults and persons with disabilities.

This analysis revealed that among the five DMOs, only Tourism Kelowna and Tourism Nanaimo shared a total of five posts featuring accessibility infrastructure. For example, a video post from Tourism Kelowna (Figure 7) explicitly discusses accessibility in the caption, emphasizing a “wheelchair & stroller-friendly” paved path for an e-bike wine tour. However, the visual content itself does not include a person with a visible disability; instead, it centres on an automatic accessible door, reinforcing a focus on infrastructure rather than users. Similarly, another Instagram post from Tourism Kelowna (May 7, 2024) promoted the accessible pathway on Abbott Street. The image features cyclists and a pedestrian walking a dog, illustrating the path’s utility for a broad range of users. However, by excluding a person using a mobility device from a post explicitly tagged for accessibility, the visual representation implies that the primary beneficiaries of this infrastructure remain persons without disabilities.

### Figure 6

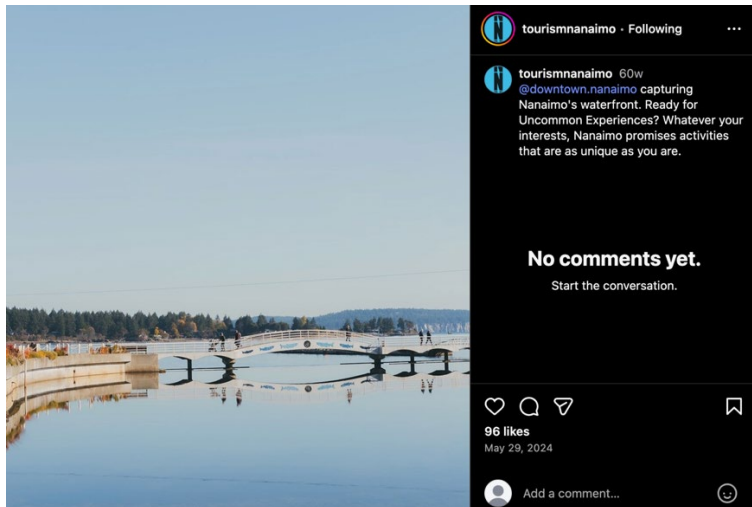
*Accessible Door at Grizzli Winery, Instagram: Tourism Kelowna; May 8, 2024*



This pattern was not limited to Tourism Kelowna. Tourism Nanaimo had two posts, identified in this study as accessibility-related, both of which showed accessible spaces without showing persons with disabilities using them. One Instagram post featured a wide, sloped bridge at Nanaimo waterfront (Figure 8) being crossed by a person pushing a stroller, visually indicating that the smooth pathway supports wheeled mobility. Yet the caption remains broad, focusing generically on “Nanaimo’s waterfront” and “uncommon experiences” without directly acknowledging persons with disabilities as potential visitors. This represents a missed opportunity: while the image implicitly signals that the space is physically accessible to people with mobility devices, the DMO failed to intentionally frame it as an inclusive destination for people who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices, leaving the accessibility message vague and indirect. Instead of welcoming persons with disabilities directly, the image of the stroller frames the spot as “family-friendly,” leaving people who use wheelchairs invisible and uninvited. Notably, on another Tourism Nanaimo Facebook post (May 14, 2024), a follower directly requested a dedicated accessibility page, to which the DMO replied that this was ‘a work in progress’, indicating some awareness of the gap, though this exchange falls outside the scope of the present study.

**Figure 7**

*A Wide Sloped Bridge at Nanaimo Waterfront, Instagram: Tourism Nanaimo, May 29, 2024*



In another example, Tourism Kelowna’s carousel post (May 7, 2024) promotes “5 accessible pathways perfect to explore on a spring afternoon,” using the hashtag #accessible travel. The image shows a family cycling along a boardwalk, with one bike attached to a child trailer, which reflects the Universal Design principle that accessible infrastructure benefits a broad range of users, including families with young children. However, while the caption frames the destination as accessible, persons with visible disabilities are neither shown nor mentioned. Accessible infrastructure, when depicted without all of the people it is designed to serve, tells only part of the story. Accessible infrastructure, when depicted without all the people it is designed to serve, tells only part of the story. The following theme moves from access features to human presence, focusing on the limited posts that portray persons with visible disabilities and on how their participation is framed.

#### ***4.2.3 Theme 3: Selective Visibility: Representing Persons with Disabilities***

The findings revealed that persons with visible disabilities rarely appear in the visual content of the DMOs’ social media posts, suggesting that their representation remains limited to how these destinations portray the tourism experiences. In total, only seven posts in the dataset included persons with visible disabilities, and these depicted them as participants in the

destination experiences, such as engaging with attractions and activities. This theme, therefore, examines how accessibility, inclusion, and visible disability are represented in these posts, distinguishing instances where persons with disabilities are placed at the centre from those that focus primarily on accessible spaces and highlighting examples where persons with visible disabilities are shown as participants rather than as an afterthought.

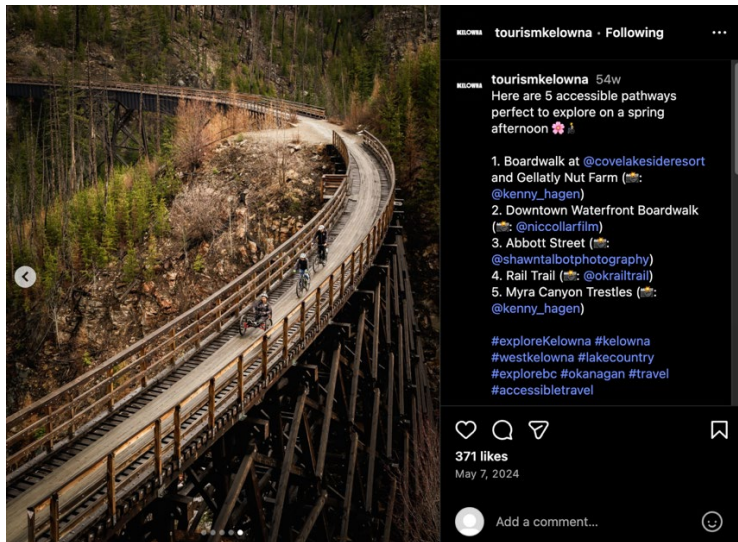
In the dataset, all five DMOs varied considerably in how they represented persons with visible disabilities in their social media content. Tourism Kelowna stood out as the only DMO to feature such representation across multiple posts and activity types. Destination Vancouver included a single post featuring a person using a wheelchair, while Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, and Tourism Tofino had no posts featuring persons with visible disabilities.

In posts featuring persons with visible disabilities, Tourism Kelowna centred them within destination experiences rather than treating them as a secondary presence. One carousel post (Figure 9) frames a person using an adapted mobility device as the central figure of active leisure, biking along the Myra Canyon Trail, with two others on standard bikes following. By highlighting active leisure, rather than simply stating “we have a flat trail,” the post positions the destination as a place for adventure and exploration and the caption, “accessible pathways perfect to explore on a spring afternoon,” emphasizes autonomy leisure experiences. Another Instagram video from Tourism Kelowna (May 22, 2024) shows a person using a wheelchair and a companion being served wine at a local winery. Both individuals are positioned as participants at an elevated viewpoint even though the caption focuses entirely on the winery’s agricultural history and its self-guided farm tour, uses only #explorekelowna, with no accessibility-specific tags. This means the opportunity to explicitly mention the accessible space is missed, as the representation rests entirely on the visual.

In a Facebook video (May 30, 2024) and an Instagram video (May 9, 2024), this framing is extended by promoting Kelowna as a year-round destination through seasonal experiences such as spring hiking and water activities, summer beach days, fall orchard harvests, and winter skiing and snowshoeing. In one scene (Figure 10), a person using a wheelchair samples drinks at a brewery, while another scene depicts a person using a motorized wheelchair in an orchard during a guided tour. Two additional Instagram posts from Tourism Kelowna (May 7, 2024) show persons using wheelchairs outdoors along accessible pathways near a waterbody and on trail, accompanied by companions without disabilities and tagged with phrases such as “5 accessible pathways perfect to explore on a spring afternoon” and hashtags like #accessibletravel and #exploreBC. Taken together, these posts distinguish Tourism Kelowna from the other DMOs by portraying persons with disabilities as co-participants in destination life. However, this representation remains limited to a small number of carefully selected moments, rather than showing persons with disabilities as a routine and integrated part of everyday destination imagery.

### **Figure 8**

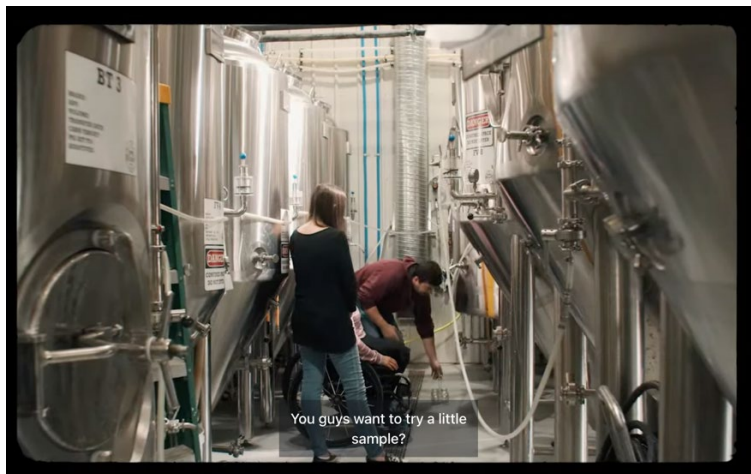
*Representation of a Person Using an Adapted Bike on Myra Canyon Trestle, Instagram: Tourism Kelowna; May 7, 2024*



**Figure 9**

*Representation of a Person Using a Wheelchair at a Kelowna Brewery Facebook: Tourism*

*Kelowna; May 30, 2024*



Across these posts, persons with visible disabilities are consistently shown using mobility devices such as manual wheelchairs, motorized wheelchairs, and adaptive bikes taking part in activities like trail riding, wine tasting, and strolling along boardwalks. Although captions often use accessibility language such as “accessible pathways” and “Experience Kelowna in All Seasons,” they rarely mention persons with disabilities directly, so representation relies mainly

on visual cues. Tourism Kelowna accounts for most of the accessibility-related posts in the dataset (nine posts), this still represents a small proportion of its overall social media content, underscoring that even the most proactive DMO offers limited visibility for persons with visible disabilities.

In contrast to Tourism Kelowna's limited representation, Destination Vancouver had a single post featuring a person with a visible disability. A Facebook post (May 14, 2024) shows a person using a wheelchair navigating a crowd at a local food market. While the image reflects the diverse mix of visitors, the person using a wheelchair is neither the focal point nor mentioned in the caption. Instead, the caption highlights the "lively atmosphere, great food, and artisan goods," framing the market experience without any reference to accessibility, so a follower with a disability who reads only the caption would find no indication that the space is designed for them. Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo and Tourism Tofino had no posts in the dataset that featured persons with visible disabilities in images or videos, and persons with disabilities were not referenced in any of their captions, despite these three destinations together accounting for a significant share of the total posts analyzed. The limited and uneven visibility of persons with disabilities across these five DMOs is not the only dimension of diversity at stake, but it reflects a broader pattern of underrepresentation across multiple dimensions of diversity, which the following theme examines further.

#### ***4.2.4 Theme 4: Lack of Diverse Representation***

In addition to disability, other marginalized identities are also largely absent from the DMOs' social media content. A critical analysis of the dataset reveals pervasive homogeneity among the individuals selected to represent the "ideal" visitor. Across all five destinations, the people featured in imagery reflect a narrow demographic profile that privileges white-presenting,

young, people without visible disabilities and heterosexual visitors. This theme is organized into three sub-sections: Racialized Representation, Age Representation, and 2SLGBTQ+ Representation and focuses on how individuals are visually presented in marketing materials, acknowledging that visual markers do not always align with self-identified race, gender, or sexual orientation. However, in the context of marketing, it is the visible representation that signals to potential visitors who belongs in these spaces.

**Racialized Representation.** The analysis shows a consistent imbalance in racial representation across all five destinations, with white-presenting individuals prominently featured and racialized groups significantly underrepresented. Of the 226 posts analyzed, 88 featured people, most of whom were white presenting, while racialized individuals appeared far less frequently. Tourism Kelowna accounts for 24 of 48 posts featuring white-presenting people (50%), Destination Greater Victoria accounts for 5 of 16 posts (31%), Tourism Nanaimo accounts for 6 of 9 posts (67%), Destination Vancouver accounts for 5 of 11 posts (36%), and Tourism Tofino accounts for 1 of 4 posts (25%). By comparison, racialized individuals appear in a minority of people-focused posts in Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, and Destination Vancouver, with Tourism Tofino showing the highest proportional racialized representation in the dataset.

These numbers position white-presenting people as the default “tourist.” Across Tourism Kelowna, Destination Greater Victoria, and Tourism Nanaimo, white-presenting individuals repeatedly appear as the central subjects of leisure and lifestyle experiences, such as a scenic viewpoint (Tourism Kelowna Facebook, May 16, 2024), winery dining (Tourism Kelowna, Instagram, May 17, 2024), luxury city shopping (Destination Greater Victoria, Instagram, May 28, 2024), or local skateboarding (Tourism Nanaimo, Instagram, May 13, 2024). Across these

destinations, racialized individuals are largely absent from everyday leisure and lifestyle contexts, reinforcing white-presenting visitors as the norm. .

When racialized individuals do appear, they are often limited to posts connected with culture or occasion-specific contexts rather than everyday leisure. For example, a Tourism Nanaimo Instagram post (May 13, 2024) shows a person dining at Nori Japanese Restaurant, linking racialized presence to a culturally specific dining experience, while a Destination Vancouver Facebook post situates racialized people as part of a diverse crowd at a vibrant local market without centring them as the subjects of the destination experience. Tourism Tofino’s marketing, though grounded in respect for Indigenous culture, similarly separates Indigenous presence from the “surfer/hiker” aesthetic. The “exploration” posts predominantly feature white-presenting adults surfing on Long Beach, while Indigenous representation is concentrated in posts about cultural history or Tla-o-qui-aht events. While this recognizes the local First Nation, the Indigenous people are represented through their cultural contributions rather than as participants in the destination’s contemporary leisure spaces.

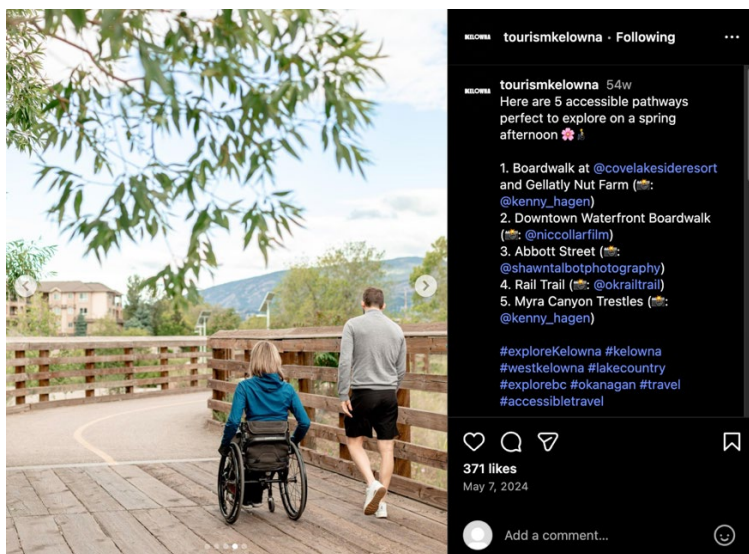
This pattern of racially normative leisure extends to the limited representation of persons with visible disabilities, where intersectionality further constrains representation. Across the entire dataset, only seven posts visually featured persons with visible disabilities, and six of them depicted white-presenting individuals, all from Tourism Kelowna (May 7 – three posts, May 9, May 22, May 30, 2024). For example, an Instagram post (Figure 11) from Tourism Kelowna features a white-presenting woman using their wheelchair on the rail trail alongside a white-presenting man in a leisure setting, while another (May 7, 2024) shows a white-presenting individual with a mobility aid on a paved lakeside path. Disability is made visible here, but remains framed within a racially normative representation of leisure and belonging. The

remaining post, from Destination Vancouver (Facebook blog post, May 14, 2024), features a racialized person using a wheelchair at a lively food market, visible in the crowd, but not centred as the primary subject of the leisure experience.

## Figure 10

*Representation of a White-Presenting Person with a Disability on a Rail Trail, Instagram:*

*Tourism Kelowna; May 7, 2024*



**Age Representation.** The ideal tourist in these posts is also narrowly defined by age. The overwhelming majority of visual content features adults (appearing young to middle adulthood) engaging in high-energy activities, aimed at working-age travellers, but leaving older adults rarely visible. When older adults do appear, they are typically shown in passive roles, such as seated at wineries or restaurants, in contrast to the “active exploration” marketed to younger visitors. Tourism Kelowna’s outdoor exploration posts, for example, almost exclusively feature fit adults mountain biking, hiking, or participating in water activities, while older adults are associated with slower-paced experiences.

Children appear only in a limited number of posts and are typically framed within idealized, family narratives rather than as independent explorers. Across the dataset, Tourism Kelowna is the only DMO that includes six posts featuring children, and none of which depicts children with visible disabilities. This pattern highlights the absence of children with support needs from these family-centric narratives, while creating a narrow picture of who is imagined within family experiences in these destination posts.

**2SLGBTQ+ Representation.** Finally, there is a clear lack of 2SLGBTQ+ representation in these destinations' marketing images or captions. Although Vancouver and Victoria have reputations as welcoming and queer-friendly cities, that inclusiveness does not clearly appear in the 'everyday' tourism posts analyzed in this study. Instead, the imagery remains overwhelmingly heteronormative, featuring almost exclusively man-woman couples enjoying sunsets, dinners, or hikes, suggesting that heterosexual couples are the standard for romance. Of the 88 posts featuring people, only three explicitly depict 2SLGBTQ+ representation defined here as content that clearly shows 2SLGBTQ+ people through Pride flags, same-sex affection, or Pride-themed captions and hashtags: One by Tourism Kelowna (e.g., Figure 12) and two by Tourism Nanaimo. Notably, the Tourism Kelowna post is directly linked to a Pride event, featuring people celebrating with a rainbow icon. In contrast, Destination Greater Victoria, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino show zero explicit 2SLGBTQ+ representation in the analyzed posts. This limited representation suggests that 2SLGBTQ+ people are featured primarily during special events such as Pride, rather than in everyday activities about the destination. Because this analysis includes posts published in May 2024, the low number of Pride-related posts may partly reflect the timing of local Pride programming (e.g., Nanaimo Pride week begins in early June).

## Figure 11

*Representation of People from 2SLGBTQ+ Community, Facebook: Tourism Kelowna; May 27, 2024*



Compounding these patterns is the prevalence of visual ambiguity, where subjects are photographed from behind, at a distance, or with their faces obscured. Although using anonymous or faceless figures is common in travel photography, it further reduces the visibility of persons with diverse identities. This analysis found this to be a significant trend: Destination Greater Victoria had the highest proportion of such imagery (6 of 16 posts, 38%), followed by Destination Vancouver (3 of 11, 27%) and Tourism Kelowna (8 of 48, 17%). While this aesthetic may be intended to allow any viewer to “picture themselves” in the scene, it often functions as another layer of erasure, prioritizing scenic backdrops over the destination's social reality. For example, distant figures in Tourism Kelowna and Destination Greater Victoria posts showcasing lakes and beaches become a passive background feature rather than identifiable participants. So,

a person using a mobility aid, photographed from a distance, disappears into the landscape, making it difficult to assess whether the “welcome” extends beyond the normative ideal.

Across the five DMOs, these patterns show young, white, persons without disabilities, and heterosexual visitors, but the degree of exclusion differs: Tourism Kelowna offers a small amount of Pride-related and limited racialized and disability representation, whereas Destination Greater Victoria, Destination Vancouver, Tourism Nanaimo and Tourism Tofino almost never show 2SLGBTQ+ visitors and only rarely depict disability. By consistently focusing on young, white-presenting, persons without disabilities and heterosexual couples, these DMOs sell more than just a destination; they sell a perception of who belongs there. The patterns identified in this chapter show who is most represented and who is absent from these DMOs’ social media posts. The following chapter will provide a more in-depth discussion of these findings, highlighting their connections to existing research and exploring their practical implications.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Persons with disabilities represent a significant and growing consumer group in the tourism industry (Destination Canada, 2019). Although inclusive tourism has received increasing policy attention in Canada through frameworks and strategies such as the Accessible Canada Act and Destination BC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility, the visual representation of persons with disabilities within DMOs' social media content remains largely unexplored in the Canadian context. This study addresses that gap by examining how persons with disabilities are represented in Instagram and Facebook content of five DMOs in British Columbia (Tourism Kelowna, Destination Victoria, Tourism Nanaimo, Destination Vancouver, and Tourism Tofino) over a 30-day period in May 2024, including the use of disability-related language in captions. By analyzing 226 social media posts using a reflexive thematic approach, the study highlights that tourism marketing still leaves many persons with disabilities invisible and unwelcome, despite stated commitments to inclusion and accessibility.

This fifth chapter outlines the themes identified in the findings presented in Chapter 4. It examines how these findings align with or differ from previous studies and how they relate to the accessibility and inclusion commitments articulated in Destination BC's DEIA strategy and in these selected DMOs' own initiatives, such as accessibility guides and inclusion accreditation programs. This chapter concludes by outlining the limitations of this study, areas for future research, highlighting the academic and practical contributions and presenting an overall conclusion.

### **5.2 Discussion of Key Findings**

### ***5.2.1 Who Gets to Be an Explorer?***

Across all five DMOs, exploration is framed through scenic viewpoints, outdoor activities, cultural events and food experiences, yet the explorer is almost always portrayed as a person without visible disabilities who can access these spaces. This pattern supports Benjamin et al.'s (2021) finding that destination marketing tends to centre persons without disabilities as the default tourist, with persons with disabilities either absent or pushed to the margins of promotional materials. From a social model perspective, the issue is not only who is physically able to travel, but who is recognized as belonging in everyday social life; when certain bodies are never shown, their lived experiences are effectively erased from the imagined visitor community (Cloquet et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2017).

Cloquet et al. (2018) described this pattern as “quasi-invisibility,” where disability appears in the background of tourism imagery or not at all, rather than being centred as a part of the visitor experience. In this study, most exploration-themed posts align with that description: destination pictures highlight vistas, trails, waterfronts, and events, but rarely picture persons with visible disabilities as the ones exploring or enjoying them. In other words, the landscapes are open, but the range of bodies imagined within those landscapes is narrow which contributes what Benjamin et al. (2021) identified as a representational gap in tourism promotion.

This quasi-invisibility is intensified by the ambiguity of many posts. Images often show people from a distance, partially obscured, or in ways that make it impossible to know whether any of them are persons with visible disabilities or belong to other marginalized groups. On one hand, this ambiguity might appear neutral. On the other, as Cloquet et al. (2018) argued, when the default tourist has historically been young, white, and without disability, ambiguous images tend to be read through that normative lens, further erasing diverse identities that are already underrepresented. In this dataset, that effect is visible in the way older adults, racialized visitors,

queer couples, and persons with visible disabilities appear rarely or not at all in exploration posts, even though the invitation to “explore” these destinations appears open to everyone in language, but visually erases many potential explorers from the story.

Francesconi's (2011) reminds us that tourism images not only depict places but also invite viewers to imagine themselves experiencing them. When exploration imagery almost exclusively features persons without disabilities or leaves identity so vague that marginalized groups cannot easily see themselves there, the invitation remains selective, even if the caption appears inclusive. Benjamin et al.'s (2021) argued that representation shapes whether people feel that a place is “for them,” and the patterns in this study suggest that many potential explorers are left out of the representation, not because they do not travel, but because they are not pictured as travellers.

When these patterns are interpreted through the social model of disability, scholarship on tourism representation and inclusive tourism, the lack of visible diversity functions as a form of erasure rather than simple omission (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). It narrows who is imagined as an explorer, whose leisure experiences are recognized as worth promoting, and who can realistically identify with the destination. From a constraints perspective, this representational gap adds another layer to the path-to-purchase: even before encountering structural or informational barriers, prospective visitors who do not see themselves or those they travel with in exploration imagery may question whether these experiences are truly meant for them (Benjamin et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1987). This connection between erasure, ambiguity, and belonging leads to the next section, which examines how “access” is framed in DMO content and why accessible infrastructure alone does not guarantee meaningful inclusion.

### ***5.2.2 Accessible Doesn't Mean Inclusive***

This study highlights an important distinction between accessibility and inclusion. In the findings, accessibility referred to physical and infrastructural features such as ramps, paved pathways, and accessible entrances, whereas inclusion refers to persons with visible disabilities being shown as active, valued participants in leisure and tourism activities. This distinction reflects the social model of disability, which shifts attention from individual limitations to the social and representational arrangements that either invite or exclude people from leisure (Darcy et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Scholars have noted that tourism marketing often centres people without disabilities and overlooks others (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2025; Rita & António, 2020). The visual patterns across the dataset show that while some destinations highlight accessible infrastructure, they rarely depict persons with visible disabilities using and enjoying these spaces. This aligns with Benjamin et al.'s (2021) critique that tourism marketing often relies on institutional standards and regulatory frameworks, emphasizing compliance and physical features rather than meaningful social inclusion.

Extending Cloquet et al.'s (2018) idea of “quasi-invisibility,” this study’s sample shows disability acknowledged mainly through accessible features, while travellers with disabilities are still not shown as part of the experience. In this study, several posts from Tourism Kelowna and Tourism Nanaimo explicitly mention accessibility features such as automatic doors, wheelchair-friendly paved routes, and accessible infrastructure, yet depict only cyclists, stroller users, or persons without disabilities. These posts communicate that spaces are technically accessible, but they do not show travellers with disabilities engaging with those spaces, thereby framing disability narrowly in terms of “access needs” rather than as a dimension of identity and participation (Cloquet et al., 2018). As Benjamin et al. (2021) argued, such approaches can

reassure organizations that they are “doing enough” by meeting accessibility standards, while leaving representational practices largely unchanged.

In this dataset, only 12 out of 226 posts engaged with accessibility or disability in any way, and just six of these depicted persons with visible disabilities. Even within these few posts, persons with disabilities were most often shown as white-presenting adults with mobility impairments, and rarely in scenes suggesting everyday, casual participation in leisure. This representation echoes a wider pattern in tourism marketing. Benjamin et al. (2021) identified only 12 images of persons with disabilities among approximately 9,427 images of people in American Southeast tourism brochures, while Cloquet et al. (2018) documented no persons with disabilities in printed brochures and just six images across 175 UK visitor attraction websites. Rydzik et al. (2021) reported that persons with visible disabilities were entirely absent from wedding brochures of a UK tour operator, and Halpern et al. (2025) identified persons with disabilities in only 426 items out of 8839 total audio/visual items across adventure tourism activity provider websites. These studies collectively show that persons with disabilities appear rarely and in narrow ways in tourism marketing, reinforcing the idea that persons with disabilities are exceptional in leisure participation. In this study, disability representation is not only limited but also uneven across destinations, with most depictions of persons with visible disabilities concentrated in Tourism Kelowna and almost none in other DMOs, suggesting that organization priorities and staff expertise shape whether disability is represented at all (Benjamin et al., 2021).

As Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) noted, inclusive tourism requires more than adding marginalized groups to existing structures; it involves reimagining who is seen as a participant and on what terms. True inclusion occurs when strategies support active participation,

representing persons with disabilities as fully engaged in leisure rather than passive recipients of care. However, when persons with disabilities are largely absent from destination marketing or appear only in a few exceptional posts, it becomes difficult for them to see themselves in the destination narratives being told. The recurring pattern of accessible infrastructure without the beneficiaries in this dataset, where posts highlight accessible paths or entrances while showing only persons without disabilities, suggests that depicting infrastructure and depicting persons without disabilities remain two separate choices for DMOs. Several examples in this study illustrate “access without presence.” These representations communicate physical accessibility while failing to convey social inclusion and suggest that depicting accessible infrastructure and depicting persons with disabilities using it remain two separate choices for DMOs. From a leisure constraints perspective, this separation means that even when some structural barriers appear reduced, intrapersonal doubts about safety, welcome, and belonging may still discourage trip planning (Crawford et al., 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

From a constraints perspective, DMOs can play an active role in removing barriers for travellers with disabilities. They can do this by sharing clear, detailed accessibility information and by showing persons with disabilities participating in everyday leisure activities, rather than relying solely on accessibility symbols or brief mentions (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Because social media is now central in the dreaming and planning stages of travel, it is a key place where DMOs can either reinforce barriers or help to break them down. By including accessibility details in regular posts and regularly showing persons with disabilities enjoying a range of experiences, DMOs can help make destinations feel more welcoming (Destination BC, 2021; Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2013).

For many prospective visitors, DMO websites and social media content are their first contact with a destination, influencing how they move from dreaming to the planning and booking phases of their travel path to purchase (Destination BC, 2021). For travellers with disabilities, this phase requires careful planning to ensure accessibility and social comfort (Cloquet et al., 2018). Seeing oneself in destination marketing is also important because tourism images shape what Francesconi, (2011) calls the “leisure imagination” of who feels they belong in these spaces specifically as travellers with access needs. Benjamin et al. (2021) found that many destination marketing materials rely on legal language such as “ADA accessible” or “ADA compliant” without explaining what visitors with disabilities can do at the destination, framing disability as a compliance requirement rather than a valued market segment. While ADA compliance refers to meeting minimum standards for meeting physical and digital access in the United States, this example illustrates a broader tendency to emphasize legal or technical compliance over detailed, experience-oriented accessibility information. This distinction is crucial in this study, because DMOs that only signal accessibility, without describing activities or showing persons with disabilities, risk sending the message that meeting minimum standards is enough, even when inclusion in everyday tourism life remains limited. This pattern not only affects persons with disabilities, but also intersects with the underrepresentation of racialized people, older adults and 2SLGBTQ+ communities discussed in the next section.

Taken together, these findings suggest that inclusion in tourism marketing cannot be reduced to accessible infrastructure or occasional posts about disability. Instead, inclusion requires that persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, are visibly present and meaningfully represented in the everyday activities that DMOs promote. Halpern et al. (2025) emphasize that inclusive communication is about fostering a sense of belonging, not just meeting

accessibility standards, and this study highlights how limited representation can make it harder for persons with disabilities to see themselves in destination narratives, even when accessibility is nominally addressed. In line with inclusive tourism, this means shifting from simply highlighting compliant infrastructure to using social media to co-create destination marketing in which persons with disabilities are visible, expected participants, thereby supporting both social inclusion and reduced inequalities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; United Nations, n.d.) The next section builds on this point by examining how intersectionality offers a useful frame for understanding why representation needs to engage not only with disability but also with race, age and sexuality in integrated ways.

### ***5.2.3 Intersectionality in DMOs' Representation***

Building on the previous sections, this part of the discussion applies an intersectional lens to examine how disability, race, age, and sexuality are represented together in DMOs' marketing. DMOs promote experiences in ways that tend to privilege young people and persons without disabilities, yet disability is only one dimension of inclusion. Intersectionality extends this discussion by examining how other identities, such as race, age, and sexuality, are represented and what these patterns suggest about the imagined "ideal" visitor. Rather than treating disability, race, age, and 2SLGBTQ+ identities as separate categories, an intersectional lens foregrounds how power and privilege shape experiences where these identities overlap and how limited portrayals can exclude those who do not fit the dominant tourist image (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Combined with the social model of disability, this perspective highlights how overlapping systems of power, rather than individual characteristics alone, influence who is visible, welcome and marketable in destination marketing.

In this dataset, intersectional representation of disability was largely absent during the one-month observation period. Of the 12 accessibility-related posts, seven depicted persons with visible disabilities, and all seven showed adults with mobility devices such as wheelchairs or adapted bikes. Six of these figures appeared white-presenting and heterosexual, while white-presenting adults dominate the overall sample, reflecting earlier critiques that destination marketing privileges whiteness and persons without disabilities as the norm (Benjamin et al., 2021; Buzinde et al., 2006; Rita & António, 2020; Rydzik et al., 2021). Across the dataset, the ideal visitor is repeatedly portrayed through as white-presenting, young, heterosexual and without disabilities, while racialized visitors, persons with disabilities, older adults and 2SLGBTQ+ communities appear occasionally or not at all. These patterns suggest that even when persons with disabilities are visible, they rarely appear at the intersections of race, age, or sexuality, reinforcing a narrow, tokenistic approach to inclusion.

These patterns become clearer when disability is considered alongside other aspects of representation presented in Chapter 4. When racialized individuals appear, they may be visible, but rarely depicted in central roles (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). For example, in this dataset, racialized visitors are frequently clustered in specific contexts such as food markets (e.g., Destination Vancouver's local market), multicultural festivals (Destination Vancouver) or Indigenous cultural events (Tourism Tofino's naa?uu feast), rather than as central figures in scenic or exploration imagery. 2SLGBTQ+ representation is largely confined to Pride-related posts, with everyday romantic imagery defaulting to heterosexual couples. This pattern aligns with Benjamin et al.'s (2021) observation that destination marketing often defines a "neutral" tourist who is implicitly white and non-disabled, while people of colour and other marginalized groups are framed as "special interest" tourist groups.

This “special interest” framing is also evident in how DMOs cluster racialized representation within specific cultural events. DMOs acknowledge diversity without fully integrating racialized people into broader leisure promotion, reinforcing a hierarchy in which whiteness remains the default standard (Buzinde et al., 2006; Cloquet et al., 2018). As a result, racialized visitors may recognize themselves in festival crowds or cultural performances but not as central participants in everyday leisure marketing, which may limit both their sense of belonging and the DMOs’ ability to appeal to racially diverse markets. This pattern reflects symbolic marginalization by erasing racialized bodies from leisure promotion and can be understood as structural constraints on leisure, positioning cultural events as the primary “acceptable” spaces for visibility while leaving everyday pursuits underrepresented (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

Age representation further narrows who is imagined as participating in tourism. Posts predominantly focus on adults aged approximately 25 to 55 (Rydzik et al., 2021), constructing a limited view of who leisure is for. When older adults appear, they are typically depicted as observers rather than actively participating in activities, Children appear infrequently, and when they do, they are white-presenting, without visible disabilities, and portrayed within idealized family scenes. This absence of children with visible support needs from family-centred marketing narrows how family with children with a disability are imagined and may signal that such families are not expected or envisioned as visitors. From a social model and critical disability perspective, these age and family patterns intersect with ableism by limiting visual evidence that older adults, intergenerational groups and families with disabled children can actively participate in tourism, constraining the sector’s capacity to imagine and promote multigenerational, accessible travel. This lack of representation creates a barrier, making it

harder for older adults and families with children with disabilities to see travel as something possible for them (Benjamin et al., 2021).

The absence of children with disabilities from family-centric marketing has implications for how families with children with disabilities understand which destinations are suitable for them. When destinations consistently feature only children without disabilities, families who require mobility devices, sensory supports or other accommodations may struggle to picture themselves visiting these places together. This raises ethical questions about the role of DMOs in showing not only idealized family outings but also what are realistically possible and safe options for families with diverse access needs. Within the BC DMOs' social media content, disability, race, and sexuality often remain disconnected, with few examples where these identities appear together. In this respect, the findings echo broader literature on intersectionality in tourism, which argues that focusing on one dimension of identity at a time can obscure how multiple forms of marginalization operate simultaneously (Buzinde et al., 2006; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

2SLGBTQ+ communities face similar forms of limited visibility. The findings reveal only minimal explicit 2SLGBTQ+ representation, concentrated in Pride-specific posts from two destinations. Rydzik et al.'s (2021) found that same-sex couples represented just 1.64% of tourism imagery, suggesting that queer relationships are often positioned at the margins of tourism promotion. In this study, everyday romantic marketing defaults to heterosexual couples, treating heterosexual relationships as typical while making queer ones appear exceptional. As Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) noted, this kind of tokenistic visibility, such as featuring marginalized groups only during designated events or in isolated contexts, can create an impression of inclusion without substantive change. This pattern reinforces what Benjamin et al.

(2021) describe as the normalization of certain bodies and relationships while positioning others as exceptional or unseen.

This disconnect becomes particularly striking when compared to stated commitments. Destination BC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) strategy (2022) explicitly directs tourism partners to authentically reflect the diversity of British Columbia's population and to include equity-deserving groups, including persons with disabilities and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, in marketing (Destination BC, 2022). This directive gains urgency when considering that 1.3 million Canadians, or 4.4% of the population aged 15 and older, identify as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community (Women and Gender Equality, Canada, 2024). Yet the visual content analyzed here tells a different story. Major destinations, especially those positioned as inclusive hubs (Nanaimo, Vancouver), continue to centre heterosexual couples in their everyday storytelling, limiting queer representation to special occasions. This gap between what DMOs claim to value and what their marketing shows reveals how far the industry still needs to go in moving from compliance-based diversity efforts toward genuine, integrated inclusion.

Moving from representation to genuine inclusion requires DMOs to re-imagine who is visible within their marketing. For example, Destination Canada's Tourism 2030: A World of Opportunity strategy emphasizes regenerative tourism, with guiding principles that include supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Destination Canada, n.d.). Similarly, all five DMOs in this study have achieved Rainbow Registered accreditation from Canada's 2SLGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, signifying a commitment to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion through policies, training, and practices (Destination Greater Victoria, 2024; Tourism Kelowna, 2024; Tourism Nanaimo, n.d.-b; Tourism Tofino, n.d.). However, these commitments have not yet been fully

reflected in consistent visual representation across social media content, indicating that this remains a work in progress rather than an achieved outcome.

Taken together, these findings indicate that DMOs' approaches to inclusion remain fragmented and unevenly applied. Intersectional gaps show how constraints are socially produced through imagery, reinforcing a social model view that tourism environments and marketing can either challenge or reproduce exclusion (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018). While some destinations acknowledge accessibility through infrastructure or implement diversity initiatives, these efforts operate in isolation, such as infrastructure without representation, diversity without integration, and inclusive language disconnected from visual practice. This fragmentation reflects what Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) describe as a gap between inclusive tourism narratives and transformative practice. It is also a missed opportunity to recognize that persons with disabilities may simultaneously be racialized, older adults, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, or members of various socioeconomic groups.

Rather than creating separate marketing campaigns for each group, DMOs can work toward intersectional representation where multiple identities are visible together (Ryzik et al., 2021). When campaigns celebrate racialized communities or 2SLGBTQ travellers, including persons with disabilities from these communities can help move from tokenistic inclusion toward portrayals that better reflect the realities of intersecting identities. These findings point toward the need for genuinely intersectional inclusion, which the following section outlines academic and practical contributions that can support a shift from fragmented approaches toward more integrated, intersectional inclusion in destination marketing.

### **5.3 Research Contributions**

Understanding that persons with visible disabilities are largely absent from DMO social media content, and that accessibility is framed primarily as infrastructure rather than participation, is only a first step. As Richards et al. (2010) emphasized, examining disability in tourism and leisure research is important to drive social change and equity. This section outlines the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions this study makes to leisure and tourism literature, followed by practical recommendations for the DMOs whose practices were examined here.

### ***5.3.1 Academic Contributions***

This study contributes to leisure and tourism literature by extending disability-focused research into the underexamined area of DMO social media, moving beyond the brochures, printed materials, and static websites examined in earlier studies (Benjamin et al., 2021; Cloquet et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2025). While earlier research has highlighted an almost complete absence of persons with disabilities in print tourism materials, this study shows that a similar pattern persists on Instagram and Facebook, the primary social media platforms through which the DMOs market their destination image and reach prospective visitors. In doing so, the study strengthens theoretical arguments that representation is not neutral and that digital channels can reproduce, rather than disrupt, ableist norms in tourism promotion.

Theoretically, the research advances the application of the social model of disability and critical disability perspectives within destination marketing by foregrounding the distinction between “accessibility as infrastructure” and “inclusion as visible participation”. The pattern of “accessible infrastructure without the presence of persons with disabilities” is highlighted in images or captions without showing persons with disabilities using these spaces which provides a conceptual lens that future scholars can use to interrogate how tourism marketing may

symbolically comply with accessibility expectations while still marginalizing them. This lens connects debates on symbolic inclusion with broader discussions of structural constraints on leisure and contributes to call for more critical examinations of power within tourism representation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of combining reflexive thematic analysis with a focused visual analysis of DMO social media. By systematically coding both imagery and accompanying captions, hashtags, and accessibility-related references across 226 posts, the research shows how qualitative visual analysis can reveal patterns of absence, tokenism, and narrow diversity that might be overlooked in text-only studies. The approach also illustrates how an explicitly intersectional analytical frame that, attending to disability alongside race, age, and sexuality can be operationalized within a social media dataset, responding to calls for more intersectional methodologies in tourism research (Buzinde et al., 2006; Rydzik et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Empirically, this study addresses a gap in the tourism and destination marketing literature by providing one of the few Canadian regional analyses of disability representation on DMO social media, in a field still dominated by American and UK studies. By bringing an intersectional lens to this context, the research shows how existing insights about the underrepresentation is patterned, highlighting the dominance of white-presenting adults with mobility impairments as the default disability image. In doing so, the study extends earlier work by Rydzik et al. (2021) and Buzinde et al. (2006) by showing that marginalization they identify also characterizes Canadian DMO social media, and by specifying the particular disability and identity profiles that are centred and omitted in this context.

Finally, the study shows that even within a single regional context, representational practices vary considerably across DMOs, suggesting that organizational priorities, staff capacity, and market positioning shape inclusion outcomes as much as industry-wide norms. For example, Tourism Kelowna's limited but intentional representation of persons with disabilities illustrates how different organizational choices can lead to more inclusive visual marketing. This intra-regional variation contributes to the literature by highlighting the need to examine DMOs not as uniform entities but as diverse organizations whose practices can either reproduce or challenge exclusionary imagery.

### ***5.3.2 Practical Contributions***

This study also offers practical contributions to DMOs on how to strengthen inclusion in their social media marketing through more meaningful representation of persons with disabilities and clearer, more consistent accessibility information. Substantive inclusion is characterized by the regular, non-tokenistic presence of persons with disabilities across diverse content types, which requires that DMOs feature persons with visible disabilities as participants in routine leisure activities, such as cultural events, outdoor adventures, and community gatherings, rather than in specialized or tokenistic content (Cloquet et al., 2018; Rydzik et al., 2021). This aligns with arguments that challenging exclusionary imagery in tourism marketing is a core organizational responsibility rather than an optional enhancement. Integration must be deliberate: when accessibility features are depicted, persons with disabilities should be shown using them, transforming infrastructure from a regulatory requirement into evidence of genuine participation (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Practically, the findings highlight the need for DMOs to develop their own internal guidelines for social media teams that set expectations to feature persons with disabilities, use

inclusive language, and integrate representation into planning rather than leaving it to individual discretion. Tourism Nanaimo's 2SLGBTQ+ Inclusion Impact Report (2023) suggests that such structured frameworks are already emerging for some identity groups (Tourism Nanaimo, n.d.-a); this study points to the value of extending similar processes to disability representation. These guidelines should be grounded in the social model of disability, which recognizes disability as a product of social and structural barriers rather than individual impairments (Terzi, 2004). Existing accessibility resources such as Tourism Kelowna's accessibility guide and inclusive travel pages from Destination Greater Victoria and Destination Vancouver could be more effectively leveraged by linking them to regular social media content that visibly features the spaces, activities, and supports they describe.

The findings have implications for Destination BC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategy, which calls on tourism partners to authentically reflect the diversity of British Columbia's population and to include equity-deserving groups, including persons with disabilities, in marketing (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility - Destination BC, 2022). In this context, the documented gaps between these stated commitments and current visual practices, such as limited intersectional representation and a focus on infrastructure over participation, this study provides evidence that can inform the refinement of these strategies, monitoring processes, and support tools for DMOs. Similarly, the fact that all five DMOs in this study have achieved Rainbow Registered accreditation underscores the potential to build on existing training and certification frameworks by more explicitly centring disability from a social perspective and positioning persons with disabilities as valued, everyday visitors rather than special guests.

Beyond individual DMO practice, the findings suggest opportunities for sector-level interventions. Governments and tourism bodies can fund participatory research and co-design projects that involve travellers with disabilities working directly with DMOs to shape marketing campaigns and destination narratives. Regular audits of DMO marketing materials that assess both accessibility information and inclusion of persons with disabilities and other marginalized communities can help identify gaps and inform improvements (Buzinde et al., 2006; Halpern et al., 2024), particularly when funding or certification is linked to demonstrated progress in disability and diversity representation. Sharing best practices across the sector accelerates change (Halpern et al., 2024); for instance, Tourism Kelowna's posts that show persons with disabilities participating in activities could serve as a reference point for other DMOs, and drawing on international examples of inclusive marketing can support a collective move from fragmented efforts toward more integrated, intersectional inclusion in destination marketing.

## **5.4 Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

### ***5.4.1 Study Limitations***

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis examined one month of data (May 2024), capturing the summer tourism planning season, but not seasonal variation or changes in DMO practices. As a result, the findings offer a detailed snapshot rather than a longitudinal picture of representation, and patterns may differ during other seasons or in response to emerging accessibility and inclusion initiatives. This time related constraint may limit the generalizability of the findings across different time periods. it included only five DMOs in British Columbia.

Second, the study focused on five DMOs in British Columbia. While these destinations are popular within the province and nationally, the findings are context-specific and should not

be generalized to other British Columbia cities or to Canadian provinces or regions with different tourism priorities, demographics, or markets. Instead, the results provide analytic insights that may be transferable to similar contexts but must be interpreted with caution when applied beyond the study setting. This is particularly important given the variation in policy environments, accessibility standards, and destination marketing strategies across regions.

Third, since the study focused on visible disabilities, it excluded persons with non-visible disabilities, such as mental health conditions, chronic illnesses, and cognitive or sensory disabilities that are not visible in images. Since Instagram and Facebook rely heavily on photographs and videos, visual representation is limited to what can be seen. Finally, this study did not include the voices of persons with disabilities. Without interviews or consultations, the analysis relied entirely on the researcher's interpretation of visual and textual content and cannot speak to how persons with disabilities experience this representation or how they perceive inclusivity or how marketing influences their travel decisions. Collectively, these limitations indicate the need for further research examining DMO marketing across different temporal and geographic contexts and actively including perspectives of persons with disabilities to deepen understanding of inclusive tourism marketing.

#### ***5.4.2 Recommendations for Future Research***

Future research should address the study's limitations and deepen the understanding of inclusive tourism marketing. Expanding the geographic scope of this study to examine DMO social media across other Canadian provinces would help determine whether patterns identified here reflect broader trends or are specific to British Columbia. Including a wider range of digital media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Website content analysis would provide greater insights into this underexplored research topic. A multi-season or multi-

year analysis could show whether representation changes between peak and off-season periods and whether DMOs' practices shift over time in response to growing awareness of inclusive tourism. Most importantly, future research should center the voices and lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Studies that explore how persons with disabilities perceive tourism marketing, including whether representation influences destination choices and what imagery and language convey a sense of welcome, would complement this study. Research that takes an explicit intersectional lens examining how overlapping identities, such as disability, race, age, gender, and sexuality, shape responses to tourism marketing and could further highlight how invisibility or narrow representation influences people's interests in travelling and their decisions.

Additionally, research examining how non-visible disabilities, accessibility information, and universal design principles are communicated through written captions, hashtags, and alt text would expand understanding beyond visual representation alone. Such research could assess whether DMO social media content is accessible to people with different access needs. For example, by examining the quality of image descriptions, the availability of captions for video content, and the extent to which hashtags and written descriptions provide concrete, specific information required to plan accessible visits.

Longitudinal studies tracking DMO social media content over several years would help assess whether increased awareness and advocacy lead to sustained shifts toward more inclusive marketing (Rydzik et al., 2021), particularly regarding the visibility of persons with disabilities, racialized communities, older adults, and 2SLGBTQ individuals. Finally, research that combines the perspectives of DMO staff, travellers with disabilities, disability advocates, and accessibility

professionals could help identify both the barriers that limit authentic representation and the practical strategies needed to support more inclusive destination marketing.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This study examined how persons with disabilities are represented in the social media content of five DMOs in British Columbia. Through a reflexive thematic analysis of 226 Instagram and Facebook posts, the research revealed a persistent gap between inclusive language, such as “come as you are,” “welcoming to all,” and the virtual absence of persons with disabilities in imagery, where they remain largely invisible as valued, central participants in leisure and tourism experiences. A critical finding of this research is the distinction between accessibility and inclusion. While DMOs sometimes highlight accessible infrastructure, they rarely depict persons with disabilities. As Cloquet et al. (2018) argued, true inclusion requires visibility in everyday social life, a distinction largely unaddressed in Canadian DMO marketing. This study further identified a pattern of narrow diversity, in which the idealized tourist is consistently portrayed as white-presenting, young, non-disabled, and heterosexual.

These findings underscore that inclusive representation is both an equity and sustainability imperative. When marginalized communities are systematically excluded from marketing narratives, destinations limit their reach and reinforce exclusionary participation norms that diminish community well-being. Tourism Kelowna’s more frequent representation of persons with disabilities demonstrates that change is possible when DMOs move toward deliberate messaging that centers marginalized visitors as valued participants.

Overall, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship demonstrating that inclusive tourism marketing aligns with both social justice and sustainable tourism goals. Future research should center the perspectives of persons with disabilities and further examine how

sustainable tourism frameworks can be applied through intentional, intersectional representation. Only then can destination marketing genuinely reflect the diverse communities and support inclusive leisure experiences for all.

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