



# Disability and marketing: a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review

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Received: 13 September 2023 / Accepted: 3 June 2024 / Published online: 11 July 2024  
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## Abstract

The needs of people with disabilities have been largely overlooked in the marketplace and in the development and promotion of products and services. As the marketing system has the potential to drive changes in the education system, industry, market, and society, a more grounded and comprehensive understanding of the scholarly debate on disability is essential for advancing academic knowledge and marketing practice. Therefore, this paper provides a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review on disability and marketing, based on 68 articles published between 1985 and 2022. After identifying the most prominent journals, authors, countries, and research methods employed, a qualitative content analysis is used to thematically map this domain of research. Descriptive data provide evidence of a recent surge in marketing studies addressing disability, which has received increased attention since 2020. Existing research has been primarily driven by studies on tourism, services, and social marketing, while other fields remain largely unexplored. In recent years, there has been growing scholarly interest in marketing communications and the representation of disability; however, the focus on barriers and accessibility has hindered the advancement of the knowledge base regarding the social inclusion of people with disabilities from a marketing perspective. Based on its main results, the paper identifies possible avenues for further research, which may also offer valuable insights for policymakers and marketing practitioners interested in the inclusion of people with disabilities in society and the market.

**Keywords** Disability · Marketing · Bibliometric analysis · Systematic literature review

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## 1 Introduction and background

According to the latest estimates by the World Health Organization (2022), 1.3 billion people, around 16% of the global population, experience some form of significant disability. It is known that these figures are destined to grow, not only because of increased life expectancy but also due to the rise in non-communicable diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, which shortly will more frequently cause disability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) defines them as people “with long-lasting physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. The aforementioned Convention affirms the right of People with Disabilities (PwD) to access buildings, the physical environment, and transport, as well as information and communication services, to ensure their meaningful participation in society. Yet, even today, PwD do not have the same life chances as others and face daily problems in accessing schools, workplaces, infrastructures, products, services, and information (WHO, 2022). Additionally, despite many studies highlighting the potential of the market segment represented by PwD (Vila et al., 2019), their needs continue to be overlooked in the marketplace and in the development and promotion of products and services. In the field of marketing, scholars and practitioners have paid growing attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion, in line with a consolidated interest in vulnerable consumers (Baker et al., 2001). However, current vulnerability models do not adequately address situations of vulnerability determined by physical, cognitive, and behavioral impairment (Makris et al., 2021). As a result, limited efforts have been made to describe and understand the person with a disability as a consumer, and research dealing with the issue of disability from a marketing perspective is still scant, confirming the difficulty of addressing such a sensitive topic without risking “do it wrong” (Vogel, 2006). It must be noted that the inclusion of PwD has received growing attention in the tourism research context (Huh & Singh, 2007), as evidenced by the development of accessible tourism as a specific area of academic study and industry practice (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). Notwithstanding these research efforts, the focus on barriers and accessibility has prevented the advancement of the knowledge base regarding the social inclusion of PwD from a marketing perspective (Cloquet et al., 2018). Surprisingly, relatively limited implementation concerning PwD has been observed in the specific context of social marketing (Moone & Lightfoot, 2009), where the development of interventions that are responsive to vulnerable consumers’ needs is imperative for reaching the crucial goal of benefiting individuals and communities for the greater social good (Makris et al., 2021). In recent years, the topic of marketing as a source of positive change for the world and society has gained increasing importance (Rashkova & Moi, 2023) following the emergence of a theoretical conversation about positive marketing, defined as “any marketing activity creating value for the firm, its customers, and society at large” (Gopaldas, 2015, p. 2446). Indeed, the request addressed to marketers to deliver societal value

aligns with the social model of disability that developed in reaction to the medical model of disability and gradually established itself as the dominant discourse in disability research. The medical model conceives disability as a disease and a deviation from what is “normal” (Goodley, 2001), whereas the social model does not consider disability as an attribute of an individual but rather as a complex collection of conditions, many of which are determined by the social environment (Oliver, 2013). In the social model’s perspective, disability is separate from impairment, and the causes of exclusion of PwD mainly lie within society. Therefore, the model focuses on identifying the barriers that may cause disability (not only physical barriers but also attitudinal, informational, and communication ones) and finding ways to reduce and possibly eliminate them (Randle & Zainuddin, 2022). Understanding the role of marketing in applying the social model of disability is of central importance and represents a possible avenue to inform interventions aimed at increasing inclusiveness (Makris et al., 2021). Indeed, marketing holds the means for analysing, understanding, and even changing the challenging experience of disability, considered both in its social and individual dimensions. The growing body of research investigating disability within the marketplace has only recently evolved towards personal understandings and lived realities of PwD, highlighting how they can be internally oppressed and psycho-emotionally “disabled” as consumers beyond the context of impairment (Higgins, 2020). Despite the efforts put in this direction, critical and emancipatory approaches to disability research are still required in the marketing field in order to promote the full participation of persons with a disability in all aspects of societal life, including their roles as tourists and consumers (Richards et al., 2010). As the marketing system as a whole has the potential to promote changes in the education system, industry, market, and society, a more grounded and comprehensive understanding of the scholarly debate on disability is clearly needed in the interests of academic knowledge and marketing practice. To the best of our knowledge, there have not been earlier attempts to systematically review the extant marketing literature on disability, except for reviews with a narrow focus, such as customers’ perceptions of employees with a disability (Essa, 2023) or tourism and disability (Singh et al., 2021). Furthermore, scholarly debate on disability is mainly based on studies from different fields, particularly medicine, health, and public policy (Hernandez et al., 2005), while more efforts are required to carve out a role for marketing in overcoming all types of barriers, improving the well-being of PwD, and facilitating the process of their inclusion. Therefore, the present study proposes a systematic literature review, coupled with a bibliometric analysis, aimed at providing quantitative and qualitative knowledge on disability issues through a marketing lens. Thus, our main objectives are to identify the most prominent journals, authors, countries, and research methods employed and to thematically map the domain of marketing research dealing with disability to outline research themes of relevance. In doing so, various knowledge gaps are identified, and avenues for future scholarly research are proposed that also represent strategic insight on how marketers can address disability while avoiding segregation and stigmatization for PwD. By systematically synthesizing current marketing literature on disability, we seek to

provide an integrative analysis of this rather disjointed body of knowledge that needs some structure to advance its theoretical development. This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we describe the methodology adopted for conducting the study. Then, we detail the main results of the descriptive analysis of the field, followed by the content analysis findings. Afterward, we discuss our findings, highlighting the study's implications and suggesting directions for future research. Finally, we outline the main limitations of the review.

## 2 Methodology

A systematic literature review has proved to be a particularly effective method for mapping existing literature on a research topic and thoroughly understanding the current state of studies. This approach allows researchers to identify potential areas of research that need further investigation while also helping to identify emerging topics (Tranfield et al., 2003). Compared to narrative reviews, a systematic review adopts a replicable, scientific, and transparent process aimed at minimizing bias and systematically evaluating the contribution of a certain body of literature (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Often coupled with a systematic literature review, bibliometric analysis has gained immense popularity in recent years, and this can be attributed to the advancement, availability, and accessibility of both bibliometric software and scientific databases (Donthu et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023). Based on statistical techniques, bibliometric analysis can be used for a variety of reasons, such as identifying emerging trends, patterns, and constituents of research collaboration, and exploring the intellectual structure of a specific domain in the existing literature (Verma & Gustafsson, 2020; Donthu et al., 2021; Trunfio et al., 2021). Well-crafted bibliometric studies can build a solid foundation for advancing a field in new and meaningful ways; specifically, they allow scholars to: (1) obtain a unique overview, (2) identify knowledge gaps, (3) derive new ideas for investigation, and (4) position their contributions to the field. In order to make qualitative assertions about bibliometric observations, scholars can supplement them with content analysis to summarize and synthesize the findings of existing literature on a research topic or field (Donthu et al., 2021). Following this suggestion, we coupled our bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review that relied on qualitative content analysis. Regarding the latter, which is presented in more detail below, once the selection of papers was confirmed, a research protocol was designed to classify them (see par. 2.2). Each contributing author was given approximately 13 articles to categorize by the research protocol. After individually reflecting on a tentative identification of organizing codes, content evaluations were discussed during various meetings and any discrepancies were further explored in detail and clarified. As with all qualitative content analysis used to conduct systematic reviews, interpretations across studies aimed at identifying themes of relevance were developed through a process of reflection, memoing, and diagramming (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014).

## 2.1 Selection criteria

In our attempt to analyse the development of research on marketing and disability, we first focused on Elsevier Publishing’s Scopus database, as it represents the broadest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature (Cioppi et al., 2023). For the choice of keywords, we adopted the following string: [“marketing” AND “disabilit\*”], as our aim was to identify all the contributions simultaneously focused on these two topics. By using a predefined selection algorithm and specific inclusion/exclusion criteria, we removed the subjectivity of data collection that characterizes non-systematic approaches to literature review (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). The systematic review protocol (Fig. 1) was performed in January 2023 and included studies published between January 1, 1985 and December 31, 2022. The broad time frame was set to capture the earlier studies on the topic, published when interest in this field of research began to rise, and more importantly, to assess its evolution over time. The initial search yielded 857 documents; subsequently, we applied the following criteria for inclusion of papers in the final sample: (1) only papers written in English and published in peer-reviewed academic journals were retained; (2) papers were filtered by subject area type (“business, management, and accounting”) (Fig. 1).

Following these criteria, we found 151 potentially relevant articles. Next, their relevance was evaluated by checking all titles and abstracts to exclude all those papers that were not focused explicitly on marketing and disability. Conversely, we excluded papers that just mentioned marketing in general terms but were focused on health, medicine, or psychology, as well as papers that just mentioned disability but were specifically aimed at analysing other dimensions of vulnerability, such as gender, race, or ethnicity. When reviewing the abstracts, if there

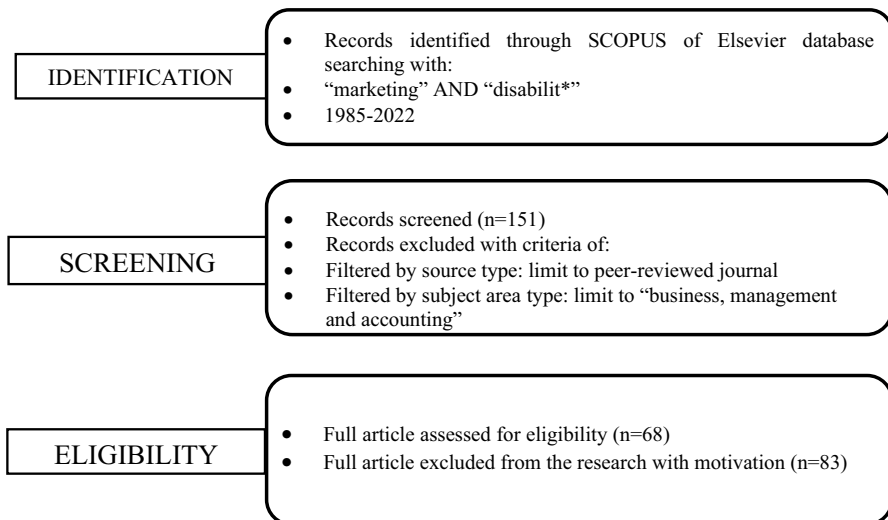


Fig. 1 The bibliometric analysis review protocol

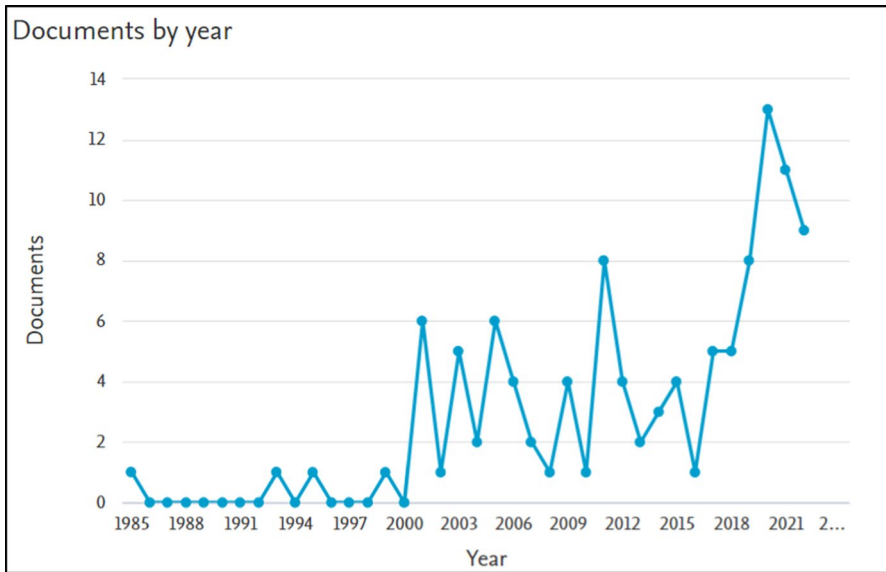
was a doubt about their relevance, it was deemed best to read the documents in their entirety. Finally, out of 151 papers, 68 were determined to be within the scope of this literature review. The decision to exclude 83 papers was primarily based on their predominant focus on medical aspects (consider, for example, McCarthy et al.'s (2013) study on disability as a consequence of obesity; or Taylor and Walter's (2003) analysis of job possibilities for people affected by dyslexia), thereby deviating from our research's intended emphasis on marketing strategies, consumer behavior, and inclusive practices within the business context. The exclusion of these papers was a critical step in ensuring the precision and coherence of our analysis, allowing us to concentrate on scholarly contributions directly aligned with the convergence of disability and marketing.

## 2.2 Analysis tools

The bibliometric analysis was carried out using Bibliometrix, a tool designed and operated in the R programming language to facilitate a more comprehensive bibliometric and scientometric quantitative research (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This phase allowed us to perform a descriptive analysis of the field (Tranfield et al., 2003), aimed at identifying the temporal variation of publication activity, the most influential journals, and the most published and cited authors. Next, we turned our attention to a content analysis, aimed at scrutinizing individual papers to understand the extent to which consensus is shared across various themes, as well as to identify key emerging themes and research questions (Tranfield et al., 2003). Following Donthu et al. (2021), we considered our dataset manageable enough to manually review its content and consequently perform a qualitative analysis. To this aim and following the procedure of earlier systematic reviews (Riviezzo et al., 2015), we constructed a coding scheme consisting of the following elements: unit of analysis (individual, firm, industry, cross-industry); context (local, national, international); marketing subject focus; theoretical background; key findings; type of paper and research strategy (conceptual, qualitative, quantitative); data collection tool and analytical approach. The table in the Web Appendix serves as a synthesis of the primary findings of the content analysis, adhering to a subset of the coding scheme. Due to space constraints, not all the elements in the scheme have been included, but it was deemed appropriate to include the macro-themes and sub-themes assigned to each article through the content analysis, as detailed below.

## 3 Findings

Through the bibliometric analysis, it was possible to analyse the final sample made up of 68 articles and highlight the main information and the relevance of the topic. Subsequently, a content analysis made it possible to focus on the main topics and their trends in the marketing-disability literature.



**Fig. 2** The timespan of the studies and the growth trend (January 1985–December 2022)

### 3.1 Bibliometric analysis

#### 3.1.1 Publication trend

As highlighted in Fig. 2, the number of publications shows a strong growth trend over the years, which intensified in the early 2000s. Considering that our time span started in 1985, it is worth noting that around half of the articles were published during the last five-year period (2018–2022), which indicates the recent surge of marketing studies focused on disability. However, the avoidance of disability studies that has long characterized academia reflects the imbalance not yet resolved in relation to the inclusion of PwD in the marketing system, historically geared towards a consumer portrayed as a healthy and fit person. As the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognized access to consumer goods and services in the private market as essential for full participation in society, disability studies increasingly captured scholarly interest for their vital contribution to understanding this group as a segment that should be given attention in marketing.

#### 3.1.2 Most influential journals

Looking at the sources, the analysis revealed around 20 journals covering different fields, with a focus on marketing, tourism, and hospitality. There are eight journals with two or more publications. In particular, the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* is the most prominent journal, with 5 articles specifically pertaining to marketing and disability, followed by the *Journal of Services Marketing and Health*

Marketing Quarterly, both with 3 articles published. The prevalence of studies on marketing and disabilities reflects the way scholarly interest has spread over time and is in line with the robust history of social marketing in the promotion of public health and social change, which brought it closer to the social model of disability more easily. It should also be noted that service marketing journals have increasingly welcomed studies on accessible tourism, confirming the intertwining of the two research areas that have so far guided the development of a marketing perspective in disability studies.

### 3.1.3 Most globally cited documents

The number of citations received by an article and the references cited in an article are two of the most widely used bibliometric indicators to determine the popularity of a publication. The results confirm the narrow focus of the scholarly community towards tourism and disability subjects, as attested by the most globally cited papers: Ray and Ryder (2003), 353 citations; Buhalis and Michopoulou (2011), 264 citations; Darcy and Pegg (2011), with 206 citations. As for the older papers, citation analysis showed that the articles were mainly published in service or tourism journals. This finding should not be surprising given the underlying connection between service and well-being and also considering the pressures experienced in the last few years by the tourism industry to develop inclusive facilities and embrace the social model of disability (Awan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, an expansion to other research areas is required to reflect more critically on a wider spectrum of consumption experiences of PwD, as well as to pay attention to disability in new product development, advertising, and various aspects of marketing management.

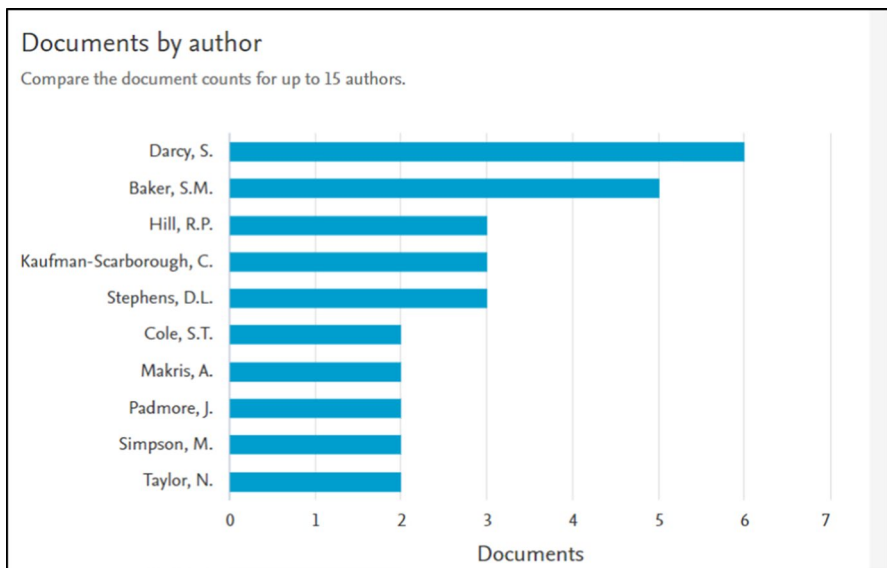


Fig. 3 The most prolific authors



### 3.1.4 Documents by authors

The analysis shows the number of papers published per author concerning the search query and highlights that only 10 authors have published more than two papers (Fig. 3). Specifically, Darcy S. published 6 papers in our sample, Baker S.M. published 5 papers, Hill R.P., Kaufman-Scarborough, C., and Stephens, D.L published 3 papers, while the other authors published 2 papers.

### 3.1.5 Documents by country and research setting

Regarding the most prominent countries, the first positions in our sample were held by the USA (with 19 studies), Australia (5), and the UK (4). Most papers (around 63%) investigated marketing and disability in a national context, while only a small percentage of studies (less than 12%) addressed the topic by focusing on a local level, and the remaining were based on an international setting. The primacy of the USA can be attributed to several factors, including the vivid scholarly debate developed since the early 2000s around the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the increased efforts devoted to exploring its concrete implementation and assessing its contribution to providing wider accessibility to public facilities (Baker & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). Interestingly, in recent years a growing number of scholars have considered Europe as a unified research setting, involving in their projects representatives from European disability organizations as part of a single system informed by European legislation and political agenda regarding disability. Furthermore, out of the few publications focused on Asian countries (8), almost all were published between 2020 and 2022, with only two published respectively in 2014 and 2017, testifying to a recent scholarly interest in this topic. Furthermore, we observed a prevalence of industry analysis and a lack of cross-country analysis or studies carried out on single firms.

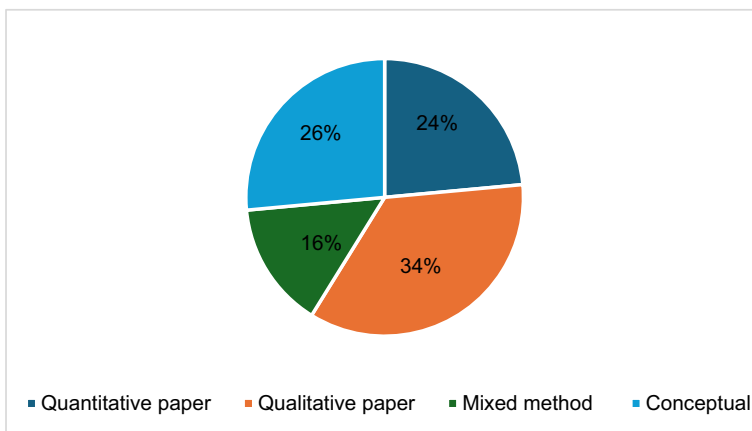


Fig. 4 Articles per research strategy applied

### 3.1.6 Documents by research strategy

Regarding research strategy, most papers in our dataset are empirical, while 26% are conceptual studies (Fig. 4). More specifically, we observed a prevalence of qualitative studies (34%), while fewer works employed quantitative methods (26%) or mixed methods (16%). Among the most usual analytical approaches (experiments and ANOVA for quantitative analysis; case studies and focus groups for qualitative analysis), we found a growing, though still limited use, of netnographic research and analytical tools for content and thematic analysis. The lack of longitudinal studies suggests the need to track consumption experiences and needs of PwD at different points in time as well as, for example, to trace the different phases that the relationships between disability operators and audiences go through over long periods. Furthermore, in order to get more nuanced insights and generalizations, scholars are encouraged to conduct more mixed-method studies, which are a minority to date.

## 3.2 Content analysis

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the investigated research area, our systematic literature review complemented the bibliometric observations with content analysis (Gaur & Kumar, 2018). Despite the significant diversity in the studies analyzed, some relevant themes clearly emerged, allowing us to classify existing literature on marketing and disability and summarize the main research streams and findings (Donthu et al., 2021).

By employing manual content analysis, we identified the following macro-themes, understood as marketing areas that have addressed disability. For each macro-theme, we identified sub-themes resulting from the integration of specific topics, theoretical domains, and fields of application:

- (a) Accessible tourism.
- (b) Inclusive service marketing.
- (c) Social marketing.
- (d) Marketing communications and disability representation.

As one might expect, some papers address more than one theme simultaneously. Therefore, we assigned them to the theme that best reflects their core content. For instance, this is the case for papers that develop models of inclusive services for PwD in the context of the tourism industry or investigate non-accessible marketing communications as a barrier that hinders tourists' choices and motivation to travel.

### 3.2.1 Accessible tourism

The first prominent macro-theme in our sample is accessible tourism (34% of studies), which broadly refers to a growing body of work that has, in recent years, investigated the processes required to incorporate disability within tourism planning,

development, and marketing (Darcy, 2011). Even though the importance of the PwD market to the travel and tourism industry is widely recognized, the lack of PwD-ready facilities and services continues to be a central issue in most tourist destinations, which goes far beyond the presence of physical barriers. Numerous contributions under this theme underline the importance of the disability market for the tourism industry, along with the challenges destinations and tourism practitioners face in capturing this market successfully. When traveling, PwD often experience barriers that undermine their sense of freedom and personal control, preventing them from fully exercising their active role as tourists.

Based on our content analysis, the macro-theme of accessible tourism was split into the following sub-themes: barriers to participation; access to information and technology; tourist behavior and motivation to travel.

*Barriers to participation* Far from embracing disability and access, there are still several omissions that maintain a disabling accommodation environment. Few contributions have investigated the perceptions of accommodation managers toward service provision for PwD (Darcy & Pegg, 2011). In the hospitality industry, barrier-free accommodation is of great importance in the travel experience of PwD, for instance, when they use a wheelchair (Tantawi et al., 2005). Some external contingencies, such as legal environment and regulation, influence how tourism operators interpret and apply laws designed to make tourist destinations, particularly hotels, more accessible to PwD (Morris & Kazi, 2014; Fernández Alles, 2011). Along with accessibility barriers, attitudinal barriers emerged as some of the most limiting. These include negative attitudes that limit the full participation of PwD in travel, such as derogatory labeling, avoidance of people with disabilities, paternalistic behavior towards them, and apathetic behavior in which people behave as if individuals with disabilities do not exist. Integrating the perspectives of travel providers and travelers, Card et al. (2006) compared barriers encountered by the former while providing package tours to people who have difficulty walking with barriers encountered by the latter, who used mobility devices.

*Access to information and technology* Regardless of the context of analysis, accurate and accessible tourism information emerges as a critical element in the decision-making process and the overall travel experience of PwD (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011). Recent literature on this sub-theme highlights some overlap across different barrier categories relying on the social model of disability, since physical barriers that pose accessibility challenges are often exacerbated by informational barriers. This occurs when building features are not communicated clearly. As suggested by some authors, this lack of clear communication often depends on attitudinal barriers, such as the host being unaware of the needs of PwD (Darcy, 2011). The issue of access to information is at the core of several studies in our sample, and its recent development has been connected with the advancement of technology, becoming even more important in light of the pervasive presence of the internet in the tourism sector. Surprisingly, countries with strong disability rules and regulations obtained very poor results in terms of online accessibility (Vila et al., 2019). According to Buhalis and Michopoulou (2011), “destinations should not only have ‘barrier-free’ facilities but also develop mechanisms to widely disseminate information about accessibility. Destination management organisations (DMOs) therefore

need to gather, manage, and disseminate reliable and accurate information on accessibility” (p. 146). Recent studies highlight that the availability and quality of online information for accessibility to tourist attractions can be influenced by the presence of information and specialist assistance devoted to PwD as well as by the institutional environment. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of public museums (Mangani & Bassi, 2019). Surprisingly, only a few tourist destinations, even those awarded for accessible and sustainable tourism, exceeded the minimum standard level of Web Content Accessibility set by the World Wide Web Consortium (Pintori et al., 2021). Moreover, some scholars have highlighted that tourism marketing fails to address the broader aim of inclusion, focusing on access and reducing people with disabilities to their impairments rather than considering their needs for social interactions as individuals and members of social groups, including families (Cloquet et al., 2018).

*Tourist behaviour and motivation to travel* As regards the needs and behaviour of tourists with disabilities, a growing interest has emerged in the special interests they pursue while vacationing and the way they plan their travel, even if the excessive attention on accessibility problems has long made this market segment less visible (Ray & Ryder, 2003). Recent contributions highlighted the need to empower PwD psychologically by cultivating superior motivations in travel-facilitating effectiveness and challenge resistance (Zhang et al., 2019), while specific research attention has been paid to understand how tourists with disabilities respond to service failure (Lee et al., 2021). Considering the importance of advertising for enabling and empowering PwD’s interests and motivation, some scholars explored how tourists with physical disabilities are represented in promotional materials, showcasing that PwD are almost absent in the definitions of diversity used by tourism operators (Benjamin et al., 2021). Recent attempts to develop a measurement scale for inclusion in the tourism and hospitality industry were informed by transformative service research (Awan et al., 2022). Interestingly, literature on accessible tourism dealing with motivations and attitudes has widely overlooked the supply-side perspective. In one of the few attempts to examine tourism operators’ attitudes and experiences towards PwD, Patterson et al. (2012) found that emotional and personal factors represent a common motivation for improvements in accessibility.

### 3.2.2 Inclusive service marketing

The boundary between tourism marketing literature and service marketing literature is very blurred, especially when it comes to disability, given that the tourist offer is mainly made up of services and, as mentioned above, their accessibility for PwD is a central issue for all those involved in tourism. Nevertheless, services represent a specific field of study in which marketing and disability meet, and this has led us to consider the theme of inclusive service marketing separately, dividing the albeit low number of contributions identified in our sample (11% of the studies) into two sub-themes: the first and more numerous mainly related to inclusion through retail servicescape, the second including the few studies on other service experiences and consumer behaviour.

*Inclusion through retail servicescape* Since the early 2000s, marketing scholars interested in disability have suggested an extension of Bitner's (1992) servicescape to understand how PwD perceive inclusion (or exclusion) in a service environment, focusing almost exclusively on retail. Through shopping, individuals with disabilities may redefine their identities in the marketplace and reinforce their consumer roles. Since the physical dimension of servicescapes often disables impaired consumers, its inclusive design has been signaled as an essential element for a desirable retail experience for PwD (Lin et al., 2017). However, servicescape literature broadly discusses several dimensions that may influence service experience, including service staff's qualities. In this line of thought, Baker et al. (2002) examined visually impaired people's perceptions of retail accessibility and defined guidelines for salespeople and service personnel. Other studies shed light on marketplace experiences as important contexts for achieving and maintaining a balance between dependence and independence, where service marketers may act as facilitators or hindrances (Baker et al., 2001).

*Service experiences and consumer behaviour* As highlighted by the paucity of research efforts in areas other than tourism and retail, more inclusive thinking is required to generate service marketing theories adaptable to non-traditional customers, such as people with physical, cognitive, or intellectual disabilities. In recent years, the rationale of studies dealing with this topic has been increasingly explained by transformative service research focused on improving consumer and societal welfare through service (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). This perspective was in some cases even expanded to reach a broader understanding of consumer behaviour, as a base for a favourable customer experience for all (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020). Among the first to apply marketing techniques to human services, Randle and Zainuddin (2022) examined the impact of "marketisation" on the value delivered to consumers with disabilities. Adopting a psycho-emotional model of disability, Higgins (2020) extended consumer research on this topic and highlighted marketplace practices, interactions and services that internally oppress consumers living with any form of disability.

### 3.2.3 Social marketing

As emerged from our review, another relevant research area in which marketing scholars have investigated disability over the years is represented by social marketing (constituting almost 34% of the papers in our dataset). As stated by the International Social Marketing Association (2013), social marketing adopts methods proven in commercial marketing in order to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good. Social support, which is at the heart of many social marketing activities, has been identified as a key factor in changing vulnerable people's behaviour and, in turn, it is likely to help in increasing their independence. Nevertheless, a relatively limited implementation of social marketing has been found with reference to PwD compared to other vulnerable groups (Makris et al., 2021). Our findings reveal a growing attention paid by social marketers to the social model of disability, according to which the construction of solutions for the inclusion of PwD should be directed at society rather than at the individual. Based

on our content analysis, we split the macro-theme social marketing into the following sub-themes: health care and well-being improvement; support for independence and participation in society; education and training.

*Health care and well-being improvement* As emerged from our dataset, in the last decades a growing number of contributions – but still few—have investigated social marketing as a tool to improve the health and well-being of PwD. In a recent conceptual paper, Makris and Kapetanaki (2022) pointed out the need to overcome the narrow focus on the individual to focus on organized human activities, i.e. practices, instead of people’s behaviours. Focusing on people with intellectual disabilities living in group homes, the authors argued that social practice theory can guide social marketing programme development and implementation. The application of the Americans with Disabilities Act, signed into law with the clear goal of eliminating discrimination against persons with disabilities, was the focus of attention in a number of social marketing studies published in the early 2000s. For example, Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough (2001) proposed a conceptual paper on marketing and public accommodation, reminding the promises that the ADA had made regarding PwD’s well-being and independence and highlighting that there was still much work to do in that direction. Among the first contributions dealing with disability and marketing, the study by Imbrogno (1985) addressed the complex problem of maintaining individuals with a chronic mental disability in the community after a long-term hospitalization.

In relation to the psychological well-being of patients, social marketing scholars have also addressed the need to market specific programs for people with induced disabilities within health organizations (Howell-Newman and Goldman, 1994). In a similar vein, the sport for development sector has emerged in recent years for the ability to get PwD involved, pushing many corporations to build partnerships with organizations operating in the field. The conceptual model proposed by Webb and Orr (2021) crystallized how corporate partners are activated by the multi-stakeholder partner and how these connections can contribute to creating greater brand value. Other scholars focused on the contribution that social marketing may offer to the disability sector in the prevention of health problems, considered as possible causes of induced disabilities (Elimimiam et al.; 1999; Andrews et al., 2015). From a different perspective, social marketing has been considered as an enabler of successful government strategies aimed at increasing carers’ capabilities and mitigating vulnerability (Small et al., 2020).

*Support for independence and participation in society* As the full participation of PwD in society is recognized as an essential human right, their individual and collective empowerment has gradually emerged as a focal point of critical disability research. Therefore, social marketers have paid growing attention to all forms of support for independence and participation in society of people experiencing any kind of disability (Cruz-Morato et al., 2021). Focusing on the identity community of people with severe mental health conditions, Mandiberg and Warner (2012) proposed a methodology for designing business development projects within that community. Analyzing enterprises that hire workers with disabilities, some scholars identified possible solutions to overcome the stigmatization of the employees as well as the products that they make (Chang & Kim, 2022). Finally, other investigations

were aimed at testing the effectiveness of social marketing for older PwD who live in centers for independent living (Moone & Lightfoot, 2009).

*Education and training* Despite its key role in protecting and including disadvantaged groups, social marketing has not yet been fully recognized as a social tool by disability professionals. Moving in this direction, some scholars examined how social marketing could be used in the disability field and assessed the specific training needs on social marketing of disability organizations (Gil Guzman et al., 2021). In a similar vein, a growing number of contributions has been aimed at investigating disability and inclusion in the context of education. Some scholars, for instance, adopted the lens of the capabilities approach to explore issues concerning students' access to higher education (Mahlangu, 2020); in other cases, inclusive marketing seminars were designed to propose PwD as role models for young students (Rivera et al., 2020). In the context of heterogeneous educational organizations, pedagogical experiments were used to explore marketing-related activities aimed at creating the conditions for the provision of "education for all", regardless of one's physical and cognitive capacities (Pevzer et al. (2017).

### 3.2.4 Marketing communications and disability representation

Successful marketing communications, in all its various forms, must attract attention, be understandable and memorable. Nowadays, corporations make considerable efforts to design appealing communication messages and tools to meet their target consumers' needs and preferences. Nevertheless, PwD still face difficulties caused by non-accessible marketing communications since they are often not considered to be mainstream consumers in research aimed at designing businesses' marketing mix. Despite the relevance of this issue, as emerged also from our dataset, a still limited number of studies on marketing communications have dealt with information-processing for PwD; in parallel, the issue of disability representation in marketing communications has attracted relatively scant attention, compared to other forms of vulnerability. Therefore, we split the publications addressing this macro-theme (21% of our sample) into the following sub-themes: accessible communication and disability destigmatization.

*Accessible communication* In line with the growing pervasiveness of technology, scholars have started to call attention to the design and implementation of digital systems and communications that meet all users' needs. Among the studies that we analyzed, for instance, Peters and Bradbard (2007) conceptually introduced marketers to Web accessibility and highlighted its potential as an effective corporate social responsibility tool. In a similar direction, Kaufman-Scarborough and Childers (2009) focused on the online shopping experience of people with visual impairments in the USA, highlighting how they may experience a state of powerlessness, exacerbated by the lack of clear accessibility guidelines for online marketplaces. Recent contributions explored how PwD use technology to gain access to, use and contribute to online content and services (Gauvreau, 2020), but also how virtual communities of PwD and digital communication channels may be used to provide assistance to peers and share their life experiences (Annett-Hitchcock & Xu, 2015). More specifically, some

authors recognized the role of artificial intelligence in providing solutions able to facilitate the lives of PwD (Ramadan et al., 2021). Going beyond Web accessibility, other scholars investigated the availability and advertisements of specialized products/services, along with the country of origin effect (Aichner & Shaltoni, 2018). As emerged in the few contributions on the topic, considering that in many cases consumers with disabilities are not able or not interested in using the Internet for information search, traditional advertisement still matters and should be used and adapted to communicate with this target group. In this line of thought, for instance, some authors paid attention to the advertisement of healthcare products, highlighting the role of doctors and erudite professionals who are in personal contact with PwD and may therefore represent a trusted recommending authority (Gajanova et al., 2021). Moreover, medicare beneficiaries and their informal family caregivers were investigated with the aim of identifying different themes to be used to promote medicare information sources to different audiences (Williams & Koepke, 2006).

*Disability destigmatization* As emerged from our dataset, some recent contributions highlighted the need for advertisers and those responsible for marketing communication to outline more complex ways of representing the lives of PwD. As a matter of fact, they are often included in brand narratives to evoke feelings of pity or portrayed as inspiring solely based on their disability. Using a netnographic approach, Södergren and Vallström (2022) identified and described some self-presentation strategies employed by influencers with disabilities to generate affective responses beyond pity and “inspiration porn”. Other studies marked the emergence of a new kind of stigma management that must not be restricted to the normalization of disabled bodies. In this regard, Low (2020) proposed to focus on the “celebration of diversity”, analyzing media images of disabled bodies in fashion shows and marketing campaigns to highlight this possible change in stigma management. In some cases, content analysis of print advertisements was performed to verify whether and why PwD are under-represented and explore how advertisers should integrate them into their communication, not just as a marketing strategy for targeted markets but as individuals in a diversified community (Mogaji, 2015). Content analysis was used also to measure disability organizations’ communicated values and explore how their discourse may position disability issues in the minds of the public (Lellis, 2012). Cause identity, that is a collection of values centered around a strong commitment to a movement, such as the disability communities, may spread beneficial awareness and interest about their needs and problems, contributing to public support. Moreover, in recent years, sport has also been increasingly used as a vehicle to empower PwD through promoting athletes with disabilities as life role models, thus challenging people’s perceptions of normality and ability. In this context, marketing scholars and professionals have started to recognize the commercial interest of disability sport contexts. In their analysis of disability sport sponsorship relationships, for example, Macdougall et al. (2014) highlighted the key importance of congruence elements for sponsors.



## 4 Discussion and conclusions

The bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review on marketing and disability provided an overall view of the intellectual structure characterizing extant research and its various facets. Following previous research (Clark et al., 2014), we differentiated between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the analysis to both measure and explain how scholarly interest in the topic has evolved over time.

Descriptive data evidenced a growing interest among marketing scholars in disability, particularly after 2017. Notably, only three out of the 68 papers in our sample were published before 2000, while over half were published in the last five years of the considered time span. Interestingly, the only three papers from before 2000 in our dataset were published in *Health Marketing Quarterly*, reflecting the initial emphasis on using marketing to promote and enhance health services for PwD. Overall, the outlet of the publications in our literature review highlights the areas of greatest interest to marketing scholars who have dealt with the topic of disability: tourism, services, social marketing, and communication.

As revealed by our analysis, the increased attention given to disability in marketing over recent decades coincided with changes and developments in the conception of disability, the nature and scope of research dealing with it, and the methods and approaches adopted. Thus, the evolution in publication patterns and topics has paralleled the shift from the medical model to the social model, the two paradigms representing the ontological underpinnings of disability (Oliver, 2013).

The distinction between the functional limitation linked to an impairment, central to the medical model, and the socially imposed restriction that determines disability was crucial for the affirmation of the social model of disability, advanced by political agendas and legislation worldwide (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011). In this perspective, it became incumbent upon both public policy and marketing practitioners to ensure that people with any kind of impairment are not disabled by the social system, which may prevent any individual from having an active role to play. Consequently, the broad field of marketing has started to recognize the importance of providing PwD with the rights afforded to all other consumers (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020), including the right to access the marketplace and other services, not just health-related ones.

Despite this paradigm shift, our literature analysis suggests that PwD continue to be overlooked compared to other vulnerable groups (Makris et al., 2021), and several areas of investigation still require increased research to develop a truly inclusive theoretical framework. As detailed below, the focus on barriers has long influenced tourism and service marketing literature on disability, as well as contributions linking marketing and public policy, largely focused on the issue of accessibility to public facilities. Therefore, this topic was central to studies published in the most preferred source for marketing and disability-related publications, the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*. Notably, the two most cited papers in our sample were published in *Tourism Management* and *Current Issues*

in *Tourism*, underscoring the increased importance of the disability community for marketers in the tourism industry. However, a relatively low number of authors have played a significant role in marketing and disability research, with a focus on those countries where political agendas and legislative systems have prompted firms and society to bring PwD into the mainstream economy (Baker & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001).

Based on our findings, we propose the following theoretical implications and future research directions.

#### 4.1 Theoretical implications and avenues for future research

From a theoretical standpoint, this is the first study that offers a systematic and thematic review of the existing literature on marketing and disability. Previous reviews in the marketing field have adopted a very narrow perspective. Essa (2023), for example, examined the relevant literature on customers' perceptions of employees with disabilities, while Singh et al. (2021) conducted a bibliometric analysis of tourism and disability. Our review, instead, addresses the disability-marketing binomial from a broader and more comprehensive perspective, encompassing all prior research dealing with this issue in the marketing area. By doing so, this review highlights some relevant research gaps on which future studies might focus, along with methodological criticisms that need further exploration. Table 1 summarizes possible avenues for further research for each of the identified macro-themes, which may also provide insights for policymakers and marketing practitioners interested in the inclusion of PwD in society and the market.

As mentioned before, our content analysis revealed several overlaps among the main research areas that have dealt with disability in the broad marketing field. For example, the rationale of many studies focused on accessible tourism was found in the broader literature on service marketing and consumer behaviour. Similarly, communication often served as the lens to address the nexus between marketing and public policy. Therefore, the analysis of the resources retrieved revealed some cross-topic research gaps concerning the different areas of investigation and opened the horizon to emerging issues and fields of application, analytical perspectives to be prioritized, and methodological approaches to be explored.

##### 4.1.1 Emerging issues and fields of application

Overall, as highlighted above, the literature analysis suggests that existing research has been principally guided by studies on tourism and services, while other fields of application remain largely unexplored. More specifically, the most investigated sub-field in tourism-disability research is represented by hotels (see, for instance, Atef, 2011; Darcy & Pegg, 2011; Morris & Kazi, 2014), while retail has been at the core of most studies focused on the service-disability binomial (e.g. Baker et al., 2001, 2002; Lin et al., 2017). Other sub-fields, including museums, transportation, and libraries, have only received sporadic attention, while

**Table 1** A summary of future research directions

Macro-theme	Avenues for future research
Accessible tourism	<p>Consider disability as a segmentable market</p> <p>Expand the realm of inquiry to different disabilities (not only physical ones)</p> <p>Explore the service eco-system of tourists with disabilities</p> <p>Include families and caregivers when analysing consumer behavior and motivation to travel of PwD</p> <p>Expand the realm of inquiry to less investigated sub-sectors (e.g. airlines, events, museums)</p> <p>Switch emphasis from mere accessibility to accessible destination experience</p> <p>Give more attention to how information shapes overall tourism experience of PwD</p> <p>Conduct more supply-side investigations to explore experiences and attitudes of tourism operators towards PwD</p> <p>Conduct more cross-countries studies to compare barriers experienced by tourists with disabilities in different national contexts</p> <p>Further elaborate on the relationship between accessible tourism and sustainable development paradigm</p>
Inclusive service marketing	<p>Develop the concept of service inclusion in various service settings</p> <p>Compare causes of service exclusion of PwD in a variety of servicescape scenarios, including wellness services, financial services, public transportation</p> <p>Adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective to investigate dynamics of value co-creation within inclusive service systems</p> <p>Conduct more studies on marketing personnel's role in service inclusion of PwD</p> <p>Use more sophisticated experimental apparatus to assess conditions of inclusion/exclusion of PwD in service contexts</p> <p>Test scales for service inclusion with disabilities other than physical ones, that is focusing on invisibly challenged consumers with mental disabilities or speech limitations</p> <p>Focus on the role of multichannel for service experience of PwD, particularly mobile retailing and other devices able to enhance the overall experience</p> <p>Conduct more cross-disciplinary studies to assess and refine elements of service inclusion (specifically architecture and design scholars)</p>
Social marketing	<p>Adopt a critical analysis approach to examine how power and conflicts among stakeholders may impact on social change interventions aimed at the inclusion of PwD</p> <p>Intensify research on marketing of educational services as a tool for supporting coping strategies necessary to family members of PwD</p> <p>Further elaborate on the incorporation of the social model of disability into the social marketing framework for a better understanding of the difference between impairment and disability</p> <p>Investigate the disability professionals' attitudes towards marketing in order to understand how social marketing strategies and tools can benefit the sector</p> <p>Remove the focus from the individual to identify collective practices that have the potential to foster social change for PwD</p>

**Table 1** (continued)

Macro-theme	Avenues for future research
Marketing communications and disability representation	<p>Investigate communication firstly as a pre-condition for participation of PwD in the consumption process</p> <p>Consider various types of disabilities when analysing marketing communications as a factor shaping vulnerability</p> <p>Conduct more critical discourse analysis to better explore how language can stigmatize PwD</p> <p>Explore disability using a dynamic perspective, in order to highlight how PwD can build competencies and manage their representation in the society as well as their connections with the environment</p> <p>Conduct cross-country studies to examine how the concept of disability varies in terms of communication and representation, according to country and society</p> <p>Adopt narrative approaches to favor PwD sharing of exclusion experiences and feelings of stigma</p> <p>Further explore the role of digital transformation and new technologies for providing solutions that facilitate communication to PwD while contributing to destigmatization</p>

PwD remain invisible to most consumer goods producers, who urgently need to become aware of the needs and expectations of this growing market.

Focusing on the most investigated fields of tourism and services, especially for studies from the early 2000s, it is hard to find any research going beyond physical barriers and accessibility (Baker & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). In more recent studies, we noticed increased attention towards accessible consumer information, regarded by a growing number of scholars as an enabler of market relations and participation for PwD (Vila et al., 2019; Gauvreau, 2020). Despite efforts to investigate accessibility in the broader context of Web and technology solutions, further research is needed to break down barriers affecting the human dimension of accessibility.

It is noteworthy that as the goal of marketing is to add value and create satisfaction in customers' lives, it is fundamental for marketers to ensure that the needs and expectations of PwD are met and that they feel welcomed by frontline employees. Therefore, more attention should be paid by scholars and practitioners to the education and training of marketing personnel involved both in the design and provision of products and services, to ensure that they are made truly accessible (also from the human perspective) to all customers, including PwD. Importantly, our literature review highlighted the strong need to pay more attention to the motivation and needs of PwD, and to consider them as a heterogeneous market comprising several segments, which can be identified by considering the nature of disability as a variable (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011).

Few studies have considered that the diverse forms of disability influence the perceived constraints and correspond to different ways of participating in tourism and services (or the market in general). Therefore, future studies should put more emphasis on the importance of understanding the specific challenges faced by

each disability community, recognizing that not all PwD are alike and developing a deeper comprehension of their behaviors as consumers.

At the same time, and not in contrast with the need to recognize disability as a segmented market, our analysis revealed the need for more theoretical and practical efforts aimed at minimizing instead of accentuating the differences between products and services specifically targeted to PwD and those available for customers without disabilities. In the under-researched area of product development, for instance, instead of focusing solely on the functional needs of PwD, marketing scholars and practitioners should emphasize needs that are similar for both guests with disabilities and guests without disabilities, thus avoiding the segregation effect of many disability products.

In this context, the growing domain of transformative service research emphasizes the role of service design for achieving well-being outcomes (Awan et al., 2022), welcoming the concept of inclusive design, well-rooted in the architecture and design fields, which implies that products, services, spaces, and experiences are made accessible to people with the widest range of abilities (Patrick & Hollenbeck, 2021). Importantly, more research efforts must be devoted to integrating inclusive design and marketing for providing customers with fair access to services and all kinds of market experiences.

Regarding the nature of disability, the analysis of the empirical studies in our dataset also highlights that, when not referring to disability in general, scholars mostly focus on the most widespread and visible forms of disability, such as mobility (Card et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2019) or visual impairments (Baker et al., 2001). However, scant attention has been paid in disability and marketing studies to some underrepresented segments of consumers, such as persons on the autism spectrum (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2020). Similarly, we found a paucity of contributions on families with children with developmental disorders, mainly limited to research on accessibility in hotels and family tourism (Tecău et al., 2019). Hence, future research efforts should include these underrepresented groups and their specific needs in customer experience models, to make them generalizable in the fullest sense.

#### 4.1.2 Analytical perspectives

Regarding the perspective of analysis, our study highlighted that literature on disability and marketing has generally adopted the perspective of consumers or, as an alternative, the perspective of industry or disability organizations' representatives, depending on the field of investigation. Less frequently, both perspectives have been adopted to capture the needs, views and interests of the different stakeholders involved (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Low, 2020; Randle & Zainuddin, 2022). Nevertheless, the widely embraced social dimension of disability requires closer attention to the dynamics of value co-creation among the heterogeneous stakeholders (PwD, their families and caregivers, firms, disability organizations, etc.) that need to be taken into consideration. This heterogeneity holds particular relevance in the context of social marketing, where the focus of attention has gradually shifted from governmental policies and customer welfare to socially transformative

innovations, which guarantee more systemic change and active participation of PwD in society (Makris & Kapetanaki, 2022).

In this context, more scholarly attention should be paid to the activation and management of multi-stakeholder partnerships aimed at co-creating value, while balancing the dimensions of value sought by the different parts that, in some cases, may be conflicting. Even in research areas beyond social marketing, future scholarly efforts must consider that PwD are consumers embedded within social units, particularly families, which are influenced in various ways by their condition of vulnerability and often experience a sort of secondary vulnerability (Huh & Singh, 2007). Therefore, future studies should enlarge the perspective of analysis to the entire ecosystem and its actors, who play different roles in building a social support network for PwD.

Furthermore, to advance research on marketing and disability beyond its current state, it is timely to consider ability and disability as dynamic rather than static processes. In other words, ability is a condition that may change due to age or other accidental causes, and disability can change as PwD develop new competencies and redefine their connections with the external environment. In this dynamic perspective, marketing scholars and practitioners should focus more on expanding knowledge of the consumer with a disability as a person, who engages in market and consumption activities to reconstruct their identity and personal experiences.

#### 4.1.3 Methodological challenges

Methodological approaches adopted in the studies reviewed mainly reflect the stages of development of disability studies in the four macro-themes identified. In particular, most conceptual studies characterized the emergence of academic interest in the bond between social marketing and disability, aiming to define a role for social marketers in the application of the social model of disability and mostly focusing on the public policy implications of legislative interventions for the inclusion of PwD (Baker & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). The adoption of qualitative approaches, equally characterizing the studies addressing the macro-themes of accessible tourism and inclusive marketing services, aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and needs of PwD (Ray & Ryder, 2003) and explore their interactions with service providers (Baker et al., 2001), thus advancing knowledge in a still under-researched area. Conversely, the less numerous quantitative studies enabled scholars to test theories and scales (Awan et al., 2022), in search of elements determining inclusion/exclusion dynamics in service systems.

In recent years, quantitative studies have also been conducted in the social marketing field to examine various linkages among the causes of exclusion of PwD and the results of social inclusion initiatives (Gil Guzman et al., 2021; Rivera et al., 2020), while qualitative studies based on in-depth interviews explored social marketing as an enabler of successful public strategies for the inclusion of PwD (Small et al., 2020). Apart from a few exceptions, the macro-theme of marketing communications and disability representation has been studied mainly through qualitative methods; alongside case studies and focus groups, netnography has been used to analyze complex models of disability representation online (Södergren & Vallström, 2022). Common across all macro-themes is the poor use of mixed-method research,

highlighting the need for more nuanced insights on emerging phenomena and generalizations of theories to be extended to contexts and types of disabilities beyond those most analyzed.

Importantly, only a handful of the studies reviewed look at disability and marketing from a cross-country perspective (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011), missing the opportunity to compare barriers to social participation of PwD in different national marketplaces and to reflect on how the concept and consequences of disability vary by country and social system. Furthermore, even considering the recent efforts to give voice to disability stories in the marketing field, research methods aimed at including PwD as co-researchers and capturing the uniqueness of their experiences through empathetic interviewing and narrative approaches are strictly needed, as well as a closer dialogue with medical researchers, disability scholars, and professionals.

Likewise, possible avenues for future research include cross-field collaborations with architecture and design scholars, to incorporate theoretical backgrounds and methodological approaches (such as universal design or ergonomics), which may help fill the gap of commercially available products in the mainstream market. Finally, despite the low number of publications retrieved in our dataset, communication emerges as a promising area of investigation, offering several opportunities both for the representation of disability in commercial marketing and brand narratives and for helping the disability sector enhance the image of disability. In this direction, particular attention should be paid by marketing scholars and practitioners to craft a proper disability discourse and language, aiming to avoid stigmatization and reduce the sense of otherness that often characterizes the experiences and life stories of PwD and their families.

## 4.2 Limitations

Despite the adoption of a rigorous methodological approach in conducting the review, our study has some limitations that need to be taken into consideration. First, in line with other literature reviews, we based our research on a single database, i.e. Scopus, excluding other relevant resources that could be useful for our analysis. Therefore, future studies should consider the adoption of other valuable databases to update and integrate the current review. Second, while we used bibliometric analysis to identify the most influential work and delineate the intellectual structure of the field, considering the manageable final dataset, we opted for a manual content analysis to summarize the findings of previous literature and present the main themes addressed. Even though the analysis was conducted by multiple knowledgeable researchers to provide convergence and minimize interpretation bias, an automated method represents a possible avenue for further research.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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