

Theoretical and Practical Research in Economic Fields

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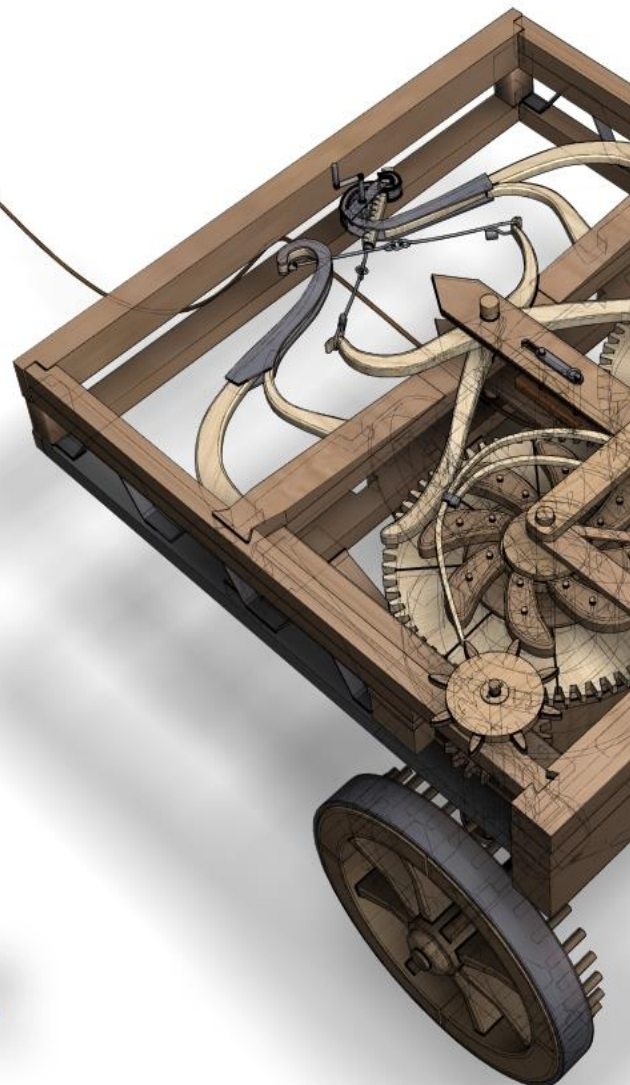
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Many economists today are concerned by the proliferation of journals and the concomitant labyrinth of research to be conquered in order to reach the specific information they require. To combat this tendency, **Theoretical and Practical Research in Economic Fields** has been conceived and designed outside the realm of the traditional economics journal. It consists of concise communications that provide a means of rapid and efficient dissemination of new results, models, and methods in all fields of economic research.

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This Special Issue was created at the request of a group of researchers from Ukraine. It is a response to the challenging situation of Ukrainian scholars due to the Russian invasion as well as the growing demand for knowledge on Ukrainian issues.

We would like to express our endless thank to our colleagues, scholars from Ukraine who are working amid the war on topics that are important for all. Also, we thank all our international authors for their valuable contributions to this Issue.

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Socio-Economic Aspects of Accessibility to Museums and Galleries in Europe by Removing Barriers

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Abstract: The paper deals with the theoretical and empirical investigation of socio-economic aspects of accessibility to museums and galleries by removing various barriers. While there are certain costs associated with barrier removal, making museum and galleries accessible also leads to an increase in visitor numbers, resulting in higher incomes. Thus, accessibility in turn, impacts both economy and society. The aim is to examine and identify the socio-economic aspects associated with making museums and galleries accessible to all and to compare the approach to this process in Slovakia and abroad. The study analyses primary data collected through a combination of questionnaire survey and interviews. The research sample consists of Slovak museums and galleries (n=52) and associations from 6 European countries. Results reveal that the main problem lies in the elimination of architectural barriers, which is caused by the historical nature of buildings and the financial difficulty associated with technical modifications. The lack of financial resources is as well considered to be a fundamental hindrance to the process of removing barriers. However, making culture accessible to people with disabilities is not driven by internal motivation, but rather by an obligation arising from the law. The findings also underscore that representatives from museums, galleries, and associations acknowledge that while the immediate economic benefits may not be readily apparent, the long-term impact on the institution's attractiveness and visitor experience and happiness is profound. Moreover, implemented modifications are beneficial to a significantly broader audience, which expands the potential target group and may contribute to employment.

Keywords: socio-economic aspects; accessibility; disability; museums and galleries.

JEL Classification: O12; N44; L83; Z32.

Introduction

Tourism sector plays a crucial role in the financial development and economic growth of numerous countries, consistently ranking among the most prosperous industries globally. Additionally, the positive effects of tourism reverberate throughout the community, amplifying benefits across both the economy and society (Mohanty and Samal 2023; Mishra *et al.* 2023).

Despite globalization and technical progress, for disabled people, participating in tourism can be still difficult and challenging, mainly due to barriers resulting from inappropriate environmental solutions (Smith 1987; Darcy

and Buhalis 2010; Agovino *et al.* 2017, Linderová 2018; Reyes-García *et al.* 2021) inappropriate communication and behaviour of staff (Darcy and Buhalis 2010; Linderová 2018), lack of financial resources (Agovino *et al.* 2017; Linderová 2018) or lack of relevant information about accessibility (Darcy and Buhalis 2010; Agovino *et al.* 2017). The partial or complete removal of such obstacles would represent the full integration of this minority group of population into society. Making tourism attractions accessible to everyone also means an increase in the number of visitors to tourism attractions and facilities (Agovino *et al.* 2017).

Currently, within the European Union, approximately 87 million people have some form of disability (European Council, 2022). Disability concerns not only people with long-term or temporary physical, mental or sensory disabilities, but also persons of short or tall stature in interaction with various barriers (UNWTO, 2013). Buhalis, Darcy and Ambrose (2012) add that the aging population, which is willing and able to travel, will soon make up more than 25% of the total European population. This statement is consistent with data from Eurostat (2023), which shows an increasing tendency in the percentage of the aging population. In 2022, people over 65 years of age accounted for 21.1% of the total European population.

We consider this issue to be topical and its solution is gaining importance in the development of tourism industry due to the growing number of people with disabilities (WHO, 2023) and population ageing (Buhalis, Darcy and Ambrose 2012) as an irreversible global trend. Even with the growing recognition of the importance of removing barriers in recent years, little attention is given to understanding the process. While existing literature acknowledges the socio-economic significance of accessibility in tourism (Agovino *et al.* 2017; Chikuta, Du Plessis and Saayman 2018; Cavapozzi and Zantomio 2020; Reyes-García *et al.* 2021; Rubio-Escuderos *et al.* 2021; Moura, Eusébio and Devile 2022; Załuska, Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Grześkowiak 2022; Gonda 2023), there remains a notable gap in examining this phenomenon within specific cultural attractions, which may highly impact both society and economic growth. Bridging this gap is crucial for developing targeted strategies that effectively promote accessibility while also addressing the diverse needs and interests of stakeholders involved in the management and utilization of cultural attraction such as museums and galleries. Therefore, the paper deals with the theoretical and empirical investigation of socio-economic aspects of accessibility to museums and galleries by removing various barriers. The aim is to examine and identify the socio-economic aspects associated with making museums and galleries accessible to all and to compare the approach to this process in Slovakia and abroad

1. Literature Review

1.1. Accessibility to Museums and Galleries as Tourist Attractions for Disabled Visitors

Barriers limiting participation in tourism can be understood as factors that can inhibit or influence motivation, needs and overall satisfaction with traveling, leading disabled people to be more selective (Melian, Prats and Coromina 2018; Perangin-Angin, Tavakoli and Kusumo 2023). While Reyes-García *et al.* (2021) focused on physical, sensory, and cognitive barriers resulting from various types of disabilities and their needs, Linderová (2018) classifies barriers mainly on the supply side including architectural, social, and economic constraints. This categorization aligns with the framework proposed by Darcy and Buhalis (2010), where instead of economic barriers, the authors identified information barriers, arising from a lack of information, as well as the inaccessibility of information. On the other hand, Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) demonstrated a hierarchical structure of constraints consisting of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural barriers. Additionally, other authors such as Eusébio *et al.* (2023) and Hefny (2024) also lean to this categorization.

Fuchs (2024) asserts, that the removal of these barriers in the tourism industry is related mostly to the airport facilities, accommodation services, transportation and infrastructure, recreational activities, health, and wellness. As Mastrogiuseppe, Span and Bortolotti (2021) state cultural heritage as well as museums and galleries are increasingly interested in adopting strategies to improve accessibility. Similarly, Hannko (2015) and Kovačić *et al.* (2024) argue, that museums and galleries face evolving global trends and emergent challenges to keep up with a dynamic time, necessitating greater emphasis on meeting the requirements of a highly diverse audience to enhanced social inclusivity. Improving the accessibility of cultural attractions offers the opportunity for disabled people to partake a unique experience (Naniopoulos and Tsalis 2015), and therefore accessibility is the basis for the effective use of tourism resources (Kahtani, Xia and Veenendaal 2011). However, a comprehensive understanding of the preferences and needs of visitors is crucial for the development of an offer that is also adapted to these people (Závodi, Szabó and Alpek 2021).

Similarly, Meskele, Woreta and Weldesenbet (2018) underscore the significance of making attractions accessible, while it mainly requires a holistic (Andani, Rostron and Sertyesilisik 2013; Koustriava and Koutsmani 2023) and systematic approach, as it is a multidimensional phenomenon (Partarakis *et al.* 2016; Leahy and Ferri 2023). Entities responsible for managing and promoting cultural attractions should therefore take all appropriate

measures to ensure that people with disabilities have access to activities and attractions and are able to participate, develop and use their creative, artistic, and intellectual potential not only for their benefit, but also for the enrichment of society (UNWTO, 2013). Naniopoulos and Tsalis (2015) warns that the evaluation of the current state of accessibility of cultural attractions is inevitable for the definition of alternative solutions for improving accessibility, whereas UNWTO (2023) emphasizes the need for adherence to international standards such as ISO Standard 21902 to facilitate accessibility.

According to Andani, Roston and Sertyesilisik (2013) as well as Linderová (2016), challenges frequently emerge in reconciling the concept of accessibility with monument preservation. Koustriava and Koutsmani (2023) state that this may be the reason why buildings of the recent past are more accessible than listed building.

Several other authors point out the necessity of preserving cultural and historical attractions (Naniopoulos and Tsalis, 2015; Lynch and Proverbs 2020).

Facilitating accessibility to cultural attractions also mostly affects the level of development of the country, and therefore, despite the higher prevalence of disabled people in developing countries, the implementation of accessibility is lower (Marsin, Ariffin and Shahminan 2014; Reyes-García *et al.* 2021; Kovačić *et al.* 2024). Another factor is the attendance, and therefore museums with higher number of visitors are achieving better accessibility (Kruczek *et al.* 2024). Moreover, Lynch and Proverbs (2020) identified various challenging factors that can influence barrier removal, including financing, lack of training and motivation, public opinion and last, but not least conflicts between debarrierization efforts and business objectives.

1.2. Socio-Economic Aspects Associated with Making Cultural Facilities Accessible to All by Removing Barriers

Disability is a social phenomenon that no society can avoid. Disadvantages in the field of communication, social relations, and social integration are often associated with any disability (Kollarová and Kollar 2010; Faizefu and Neba 2024). Alongside aspects such as unemployment, poverty, crime, sexual, racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, it is one of the most frequent factors of social exclusion (Koutsogeorgou *et al.* 2014; Gura *et al.* 2020; Haluwalia, Bhat, and Rani 2021; Önal *et al.* 2024). Furthermore, individuals with disabilities and their families incur supplementary expenses beyond typical living costs related to healthcare, assistive devices or personal assistance, transport, specialized diets and more (Mitra *et al.* 2017; Warren *et al.* 2023). This extra disability costs may vary depending on factors such as severity of disability, life cycle or household composition (Mitra *et al.* 2017).

People with disabilities thus face significant barriers in accessing health care, education, employment, or normal leisure activities (European Commission, 2021). For most people, traveling is important. It makes them happier, and, thus, it is an essential factor in the development of the quality of life (Gonda, Nagy and Raffay 2019). Travel can provide an opportunity for personal development through discovering new places, cultures, and civilizations, engaging in physical, artistic, sports, and leisure activities (ISTO, 2011). Among other things, it has been proven that free time and related activities create a sense of freedom. In conjunction with accessible tourism, this can promote social inclusion, develop knowledge, strengthen skills and abilities of disabled people, and help to cope with stress. This positive contribution extends to the mental and physical health and well-being of disabled persons (Kastenholz, Eusébio and Figueiredo 2015; Moura, Kastenholz and Pereira 2017; Cavapozzi and Zantomio 2020).

The search for independence, adventure, and risk are a set of driving forces for people with disabilities, or motivational factors (Shi, Cole and Chancellor 2012; Rubio-Escuderos *et al.* 2021). Other motives for participation in tourism, such as personal satisfaction, socialization, relaxation, discovery, and learning, are mentioned by Linderová (2016) and Eusébio *et al.* (2023). Additionally, by expanding the scope of their basic knowledge, they increase their educational level, which in turn affects a person's social profile (Gúčik 2020).

However, the decision to participate in tourism depends on health status and socioeconomic factors, including age, education, work history, type of accommodation, and frequency of establishing social relationships. Establishing social relationships can help overcome barriers caused by disability (Cavapozzi and Zantomio 2020).

A comprehensive understanding of the preferences and attitudes of visitors is crucial for the development of an offer that is also adapted to people with disabilities (Závodi, Szabó and Alpek 2021). This group of people is becoming an increasingly significant market segment thanks to the trend of the global population aging (Linderová 2016). Gonda (2021, 2023) states that substantial improvement in physical accessibility could result in exponential demand growth, because a differentiated product offer enables participation in tourism even for the socially disadvantaged or disabled population groups.

In the context of benefits, it may represent a business opportunity through the implementation of innovations (Zenko and Sardi 2014), because disabled visitors are considered to be loyal customers who often return to places

with good accessibility, their average length of stay in the destination is longer and they usually do not travel alone, which also results in economic benefits (Domínguez, Fraiz and Alén 2013; Souca 2010; Linderová 2015; Linderová and Janeček 2017). Chikuta, Du Plessis and Saayman (2018) align with this statement, adding that disabled people spend more money per day and usually demand more services.

As articulated by some other authors, the development of a service chain adapted to the requirements and needs of individuals with disabilities may contribute to economic growth, employment, and competitiveness (Agovino *et al.* 2017; Kučera and Gavurová 2020; Santana-Santana, Peña-Alonso and Espino 2020; Liu *et al.* 2023). Linderová (2015) also highlights the opportunities arising from removing barriers, noting that it stimulates local production, and generate employment opportunities in the tourism industry as well as in related and supporting industries, which is one of the direct economic gains. According to Kovačič *et al.* (2024) accessibility furthermore contributes to socially responsible business and improve the image of cultural attractions and as noted by Liu *et al.* (2023), it leads to warmer and more considerate experiences and services being provided. Even, Leiras and Eusébio (2023) identified correlation between accessibility conditions and visitors' satisfaction.

Agovino *et al.* (2017) divide the economic benefits of accessibility into microeconomic and macroeconomic. From a microeconomic point of view, the authors consider the mitigation of seasonal fluctuations and the extension of the tourist season, the possibility of diversifying the offer and improving its quality, and the possibility of higher incomes to be an advantage. From a macroeconomic point of view, these advantages are related to the possibility of developing tourism at the national level, as well as to the strengthening of the sector providing a significant source of jobs and income from abroad. Frye (2015) adds that if tourism destinations were fully accessible, an additional 3.4 million jobs would be created for the European economy. Among other things, demand could increase by 44% per year, leading to an additional €142 million of GDP. Moreover, certain European Union countries observe a significant and positive impact on economic indicators due to the development of barrier-free tourism facilities, potentially up to a 20% increase. This implies that making these facilities accessible is not just a cost but an investment that leads to better economic outcomes in terms of income (Kučera and Gavurová 2020).

Although barrier removal primarily focuses on disabled people, according to Marčeková and Šebová (2020), it does not negatively impact the majority group of the population; rather, it enhances their safety and the overall attractiveness of the environment. Therefore, the accessibility is a condition for the full inclusion of people with disabilities or other special needs in society and simultaneously offers significant economic opportunities (Agovino *et al.* 2017).

Based on the above, we conclude that the socio-economic aspects of removing barriers can be understood as a set of interrelated social and economic factors. Understanding these aspects is crucial when designing and implementing effective measures to support inclusivity and equality, ensuring equal opportunities for all target groups to participate in tourism.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of the paper is to examine and identify the socio-economic aspects associated with making museums and galleries accessible to all and to compare the approach to this process in Slovakia and abroad.

The collection of primary data was carried out through structured questionnaire disseminated electronically to representatives of Slovak museums and galleries. The investigation seeks insights into their perspectives on adapting facilities to all visitors as a possible business opportunity and the costs and revenues associated with the process. An overview of registered museums and galleries in Slovakia are maintained by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic in the Register of Museums and Galleries. Only those facilities that meet the conditions for performance of basic professional activities are entered in the register. As of the latest update on April 14, 2022, the Slovak Republic records a total of 94 museums and 25 galleries. Since two museums (Slovak National Museum and Slovak Technical Museum) and one gallery (Slovak National Gallery) have other organizational units, or displaced workplaces, which are also recorded in the register, our basic research sample consists of a total of 153 subjects.

The questionnaire garnered a response rate of 34%, indicating the participation of approximately one-third of the sampled subjects (n=52). In the realm of participation, museums accounted for the predominant share at 78.8%, with galleries contributing to 21.2% in our survey. The representativeness of the examined sample categorized by the type of facility, *i.e.* museum or gallery, was verified using the Chi-square goodness-of-fit test at the $\alpha=0.05$ significance level and we can conclude that the sample is representative ($p\text{-value} = 0.692 > 0.05$). For data processing and analysis, we utilized the MS Office Excel program and the SPSS statistical software.

In addition to the questionnaire, for better understanding of this process, we conducted structured interviews with representatives of museum associations in Slovakia and selected foreign countries who have expressed their

willingness to partake in our study, aiming to obtain the necessary information. In our survey participated representatives of Czech Republic (Association of Museums and Galleries), Poland (Narodowy Instytut Muzeów), Austria (Museumsbund Österreich), Germany (Deutscher Museumsbund), and Netherlands (Museum4all). The interviews took place from September 2023 to January 2024 and were designed to assess and draw comparisons regarding the barrier removal in museum and galleries within both domestic and international contexts. The interview questions are oriented to the process of making museums and galleries accessible which is certainly associated with some obligations, obstacles, and social and economic benefits. The atlas.ti software was used for visual processing of the data.

3. Research Results

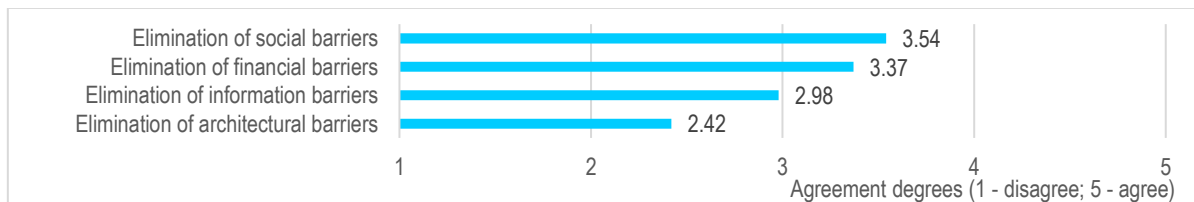
3.1. Attitudes Towards Debarierization among Representatives of Slovakian Museums and Galleries

A substantial majority of the surveyed museums and galleries employ 10-49 employees (73.1%). Based on the age of the building, our survey included mainly museums and galleries aged 100-249 years (40.4%). This is followed by the age category of 250-499 years, which makes up a share of 23.1%. Even facilities in the 500-1000 range (21.2%) participated in the survey. Our investigation primarily involved facilities situated in single-story (25%) and two-story (46.2%) buildings, indicating that the issue of barrier removal pertains to a significant majority of these facilities.

Currently, the largest target group of examined museums and galleries are children (36.5%), followed by adults (25%) and students (21.2%). One reason for this could be that museums and galleries focus a significant portion of their activities on educational programs primarily tailored for children. However, survey also indicates that only 32.7% of the participating museums and galleries maintain statistics on visitors with disabilities, while their share is low, and the values range from 0.5% to 50%. It is crucial to note that individuals with disabilities in Slovakia predominantly visit museums and galleries accompanied (96.2%).

Using a scale ranging from 1 (indicating minimal attention) to 5 (reflecting significant attention), we determined the extent to which managers pay attention to the removal of specific barriers that can prevent disabled people from visiting the facility (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elimination of specific barriers



Source: own.

Based on the average values derived from the survey responses, museum and gallery managers pay significant attention to the elimination of social barriers, with an average value of 3.54 and a standard deviation of 1.39. In comparison, relatively less attention is allocated to addressing information barriers (mean value of 2.98), and the lowest emphasis is observed in the removal of architectural barriers (mean value of 2.42).

Considering that removing barriers is a time-consuming and financially difficult process and largely influenced by the legislation of the given state, we were interested in how these restrictions are preventing museums and galleries from initiatives associated with barrier removal (Table 1).

Table 1. Order of factors preventing from removing barriers

Factors	Friedman test (value)	Wilcoxon test	
		Rank	p-value
Financial difficulty	2.47	1.	-
Legislative regulations	1.66	2.	0.000
Time-consuming	1.87	2.	0.213

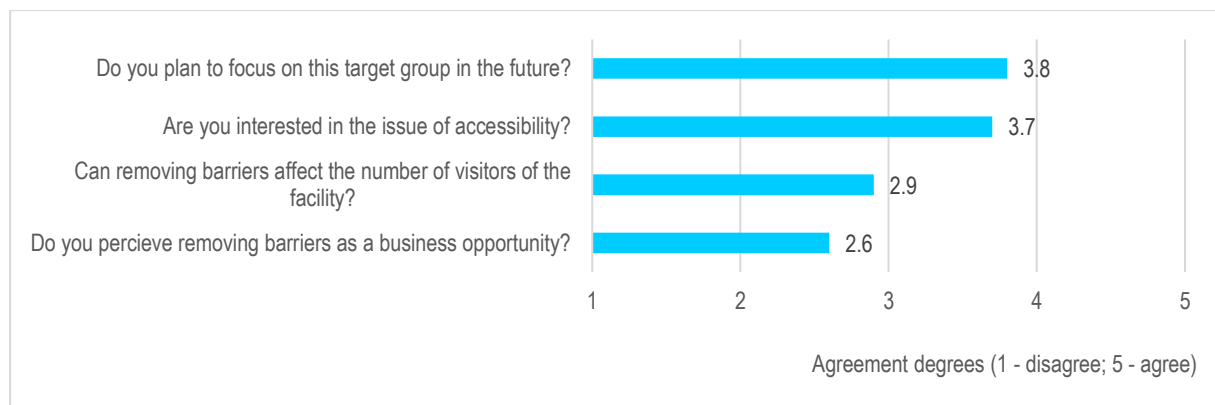
Source: own.

The results of the survey show that the biggest factor hindering from making museums and galleries accessible is the financial difficulty with an average value of 4.2. Friedman's test confirmed that individual factors do not hinder the adaptation of museums and galleries equally (p -value = 0.00). The Wilcoxon test helped us determine the order of these obstacles based on their statistical significance, while we found that financial difficulty really dominates.

We view positively that more than half of the participating facilities express interest in the issue of removing barriers and making culture accessible to people with disabilities (mean value 3.7) (Figure 2). Additionally, most of the respondents expressed empathy and willingness to prioritize this target group in the future, aiming to make their facilities accessible to physically disabled people (mean value 3.8).

Respondents took a neutral to negative attitude on the question regarding barrier removal as a possible business opportunity. We can therefore conclude that managers of museums and galleries do not perceive removing barriers as a possible business opportunity (mean value 2.6) or as a tool for increasing number of visitors (mean value 2.9).

Figure 2. Attitudes to removing barriers as a business opportunity

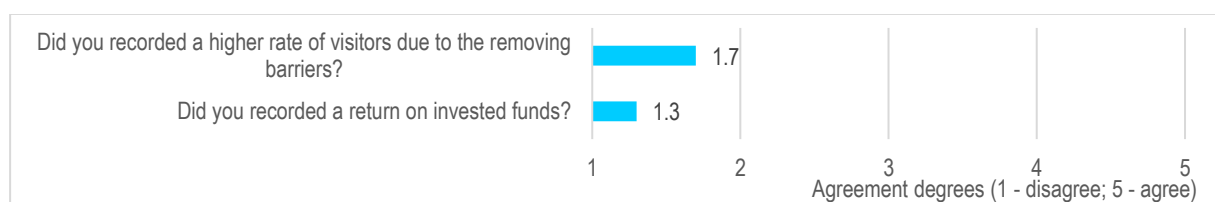


Source: own.

The following questions related to specific data resulting from the process of removing barriers, and therefore only those museums and galleries that in recent years adapted and made their facilities accessible to the needs of the physically disabled visitors answered. Specifically, it concerns 25 (48.1%) of examined facilities in Slovakia. First, we were interested in whether the addressed museums and galleries recorded a higher rate of visitors due to the accessibility, since it benefits not only people with disabilities, but the whole society.

In accordance with the survey outcomes, the accessibility initiatives implemented by museums and galleries exhibit a minimal impact on number of visitors, while according to up to 56% of museums and galleries, number of visitors did not increase at all due to barrier removal (mean value on Likert scale 1.7). An increase in a number of visitors would also mean higher incomes, which would return the funds invested in barrier removal. We therefore asked the managers of museums and galleries to what extent they recorded a return on invested funds, expressing their answers on a scale of 1 (indicating no return) to 5 (indicating a complete return on investment) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Impact of barrier removal on visitor numbers and return on investment



Source: own.

Since process of removing barriers does not result in an increase in number of visitors, the return-on-investment rate is also relatively low, with up to 80% of facilities not yet seeing a return on the financial resources they invested to remove barriers (mean value on Likert scale 1.3). The central issue may be the low entrance fee for disabled visitors, which currently ranges from €0.10 to €8 for visiting a single exposition or exhibition, excluding entities offering free entry for disabled visitors (34.6%).

Additionally, insights into the temporal aspect of return on investment were sought, with responses from 40% of facilities. However, only one gallery provided a specific timeframe, indicating an 8-year span for the return on investment. Notably, half of the surveyed facilities were unable to calculate or specify the exact duration of the return, while two facilities indicated either minimal return or an ongoing process. One of the reasons given was the fact that it is part of state-funded organization, and therefore it is not monitored.

The final open-ended question, answered by 15 respondents, inquired about additional benefits perceived from the process of removing barriers. A substantial proportion, comprising 46.7% of the participants, reported not discerning any notable benefits resulting from the debarrierization efforts.

The responses provided by the participants indicate that the barrier removal in museums and galleries plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusive access to culture, extending beyond visitors to encompass disabled artists who gain opportunities to showcase their art in galleries. Additionally, museums and galleries have reported favourable responses from organizations and educational institutions engaged with these individuals.

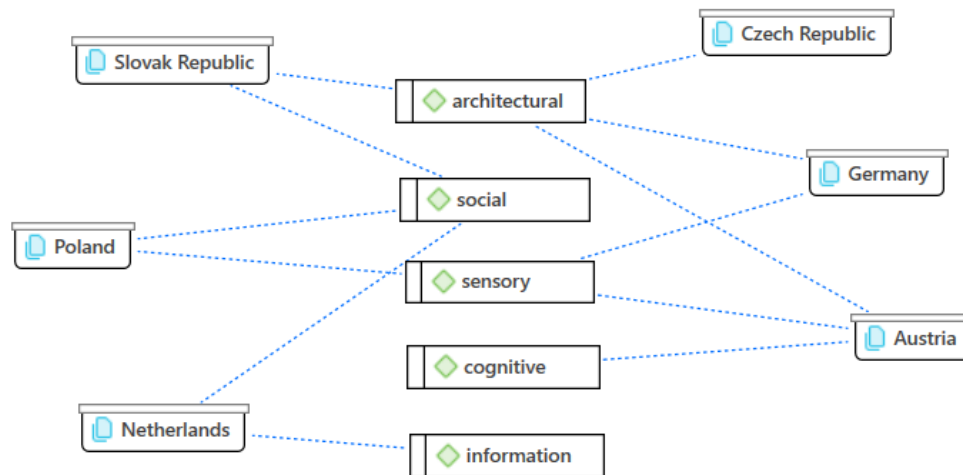
3.2. Improving Accessibility to Museums and Galleries: A Comparison of Slovakia and Selected European Countries in Debarrierization Efforts

To accomplish a comparative analysis of the barrier removal and accessibility improvement to museums and galleries between Slovakia and other countries, we carried out interviews with representatives of associations that cover these cultural facilities in Slovakia and various European countries (Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic).

a) *The current situation and barriers encountered by people with disabilities when visiting museums and galleries*

The responses from individual countries varied (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Barriers encountered by disabled visitors when visiting museums and galleries



Source: own.

In Slovakia, the predominant challenge pertains to architectural barriers, primarily due to the prevalence of museums situated in historical buildings. However, not every museum has trained staff to assist individuals with mental, visual, or hearing disabilities, which can be considered as a more significant barrier. Similarly, in Austria, German, and the Czech Republic, architectural barriers are the predominant issue. Many of these museums are also located in listed buildings, posing challenges for achieving universal accessibility. Despite the dedicated efforts of museum staff, addressing architectural barriers requires extensive technical modifications and equipment, often surpassing the available financial resources for Austrian and German museums. Approximately 800 Austrian museums operate solely on a voluntary basis, making it more difficult to ensure barrier-free access due to the financial situation.

'People with mobility impairments cannot visit all museums without barriers; many museums are in listed buildings that cannot be made accessible to all people. For blind people, people with visual impairments, deaf people, people with hearing impairments and people with learning disabilities, a barrier-free visit to museums often fails due to a lack of resources.' (Representative of Museumsbund Österreich)

In Germany, efforts are being made to mitigate information barriers through enhanced information dissemination on museum websites and improved digital accessibility. At the same time, staff training is becoming standardized, although there is still space for improvement.

The Czech association's website provides information on whether each facility offers barrier-free access for visitors with disabilities, thereby partially eliminating information barriers. Contrary in the Netherlands, individuals

with disabilities encounter information barriers, facing challenges in determining which museums are accessible. Additionally, there is a lack of a comprehensive overview of accessible museums and information is often hidden on websites, making it difficult for potential visitors to find. However, disabled individuals frequently exhibit a lack of interest in museums, due to unawareness of their potential appeal despite their physical limitations.

'First of all, people have a problem finding which museums are accessible to them. The information is often hidden far away on museum websites. And people often don't know where to find an overview of museums that are accessible. But it is also often the case that people are not interested in museums because they do not know that they can also be interesting despite their limitations. Much of the offering consists of special tours, but little has been adjusted in the museums themselves. And if there is a problem, it is not always known to the staff and security what is and is not allowed and what is not possible.' (Representative of Museum4all)

In terms of architecture, information, communication, and digitization, 13.5% of the examined museums in Poland are fully adapted and 56.8% are partially adapted. Recordings in Polish sign language (6.2%), easy-to-read texts (9.8%) and induction loops (10.2%) can be considered the biggest deficiency.

b) Debarrierization efforts aimed at museums and galleries

Other questions were more complex, and it were focused on approach to process of removing barriers. It can be concluded that nowadays museums in Slovakia are willing to make their exhibits accessible even to disabled visitors. The first reason is precisely the fact that culture should be accessible to all groups without distinction. Simultaneously, a higher number of visitors increases the attractiveness of museums. In the pursuit of enhancing culture accessible, museums take different measures depending on which disability they choose to focus on. A big trend is the introduction of haptic elements and accompanying texts in Braille, specifically catering to individuals with visual impairments. Museums are somewhat less devoted to the mentally disabled and deaf, considering their inherent ability to visually perceive the exhibitions.

Currently, removing barriers can be partly supported by the Ministry of Culture's assistance program. Additional financial resources can be secured through diverse project arrangements and an art support fund. For instance, integrating accessibility elements into scientific activities or within the development of new exhibits may offer avenues for obtaining funding.

From interviews it resulted that in Austria, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands, due to legislation, they have no other option than to work on improving accessibility for the disabled visitors. In many cases the impetus for such initiatives arises not from internal motivations but rather from a legal obligation stemming from national laws.

„Because of the legislation, museums have no choice but to work to improve accessibility. So, it is often not an intrinsic motivation but the obligation to do something that gets them started. Now this is often by offering special programming and making the building more accessible. Sometimes it is integrated into the exhibitions and made more accessible.' (Representative of Museum4all)

In the Czech Republic, accessibility of museums and galleries is solved continuously and long-term. Haptic exhibitions and programs for deaf visitors are implemented. Both larger and smaller museums, which also cooperate with local organizations, are dedicated to people with sensory disabilities. A good example is the Technical Museum in Brno, which includes the Typhoid Department. At the same time, conferences are held on this topic and methodological materials are published.

Museums in Austria predominantly focus on addressing the needs of individuals with limited mobility. Specifically, when planning exhibitions or establishing a permanent exhibition, efforts are made to provide barrier-free access to the maximum extent feasible. In that case, the implementation of induction hearing aids, simply written text or an audio guide is also considered. However, the widespread implementation of accessibility measures is hindered by financial constraints, as funding through grants and subsidies is often required. Not all museums have the financial resources to undertake comprehensive accessibility initiatives.

In the Netherlands, the government is making some efforts to enhance financial support for accessibility projects, but these measures are still relatively limited. German museums are equally interested in adapting culture to disabled visitors. As stated, 'Once they put accessibility on the list of priorities, most of them start with one bit and they increase the accessibility step by step'. Funding for these accessibility measures predominantly also comes from public resources and specialized programs. These museums most often deal with architectural and language barriers with particular attention given to obstacles faced by visitors with visual impairments. However,

the special needs of individuals with hearing impairments and those with autism spectrum disorders are often insufficiently understood.

Polish museums and galleries demonstrate a keen interest in enhancing accessibility for individuals with special needs. The association covering museums organized around 35 trainings on museum accessibility for people with special needs with more than 500 participants. Additionally, museum staff receives training from other institutions and non-governmental organizations. Financial support for initiatives aimed at improving collection accessibility for this target group primarily comes from grant programs.

Currently, the examined museums are generally governed by legislation when making premises and services accessible for visitors with disabilities. In addition, there are guidelines in line with the global standard, and certain organizations issue quality marks, though their practical application can prove challenging for many museums. In the case of Slovak Republic, the basic document for museums is primarily the valid Code of Ethics for museums, stating that they should be accessible to the public. Notably, it stands as a moral principle rather than a legal regulation. Legislatively, Slovakia lacks a specific regulation compelling museums to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

In the Czech Republic, in addition to Act no. 122/2000 Coll., on the protection of collections of a museum nature, ordering the removal of architectural and other barriers, they also manage a publication from a national colloquium on the theme 'Museum for All' focused on accessible communication between museums and visitors, which includes theoretical and methodological texts and examples of good practice and serves as a guideline for museums and galleries.

Since the implementation of the Disability Equality Act on January 1, 2006, museums in Austria are obliged to ensure barrier-free access. The representative of the association covering Austrian museums considers this law a foundational document for enhancing accessibility in museums, which museums follow.

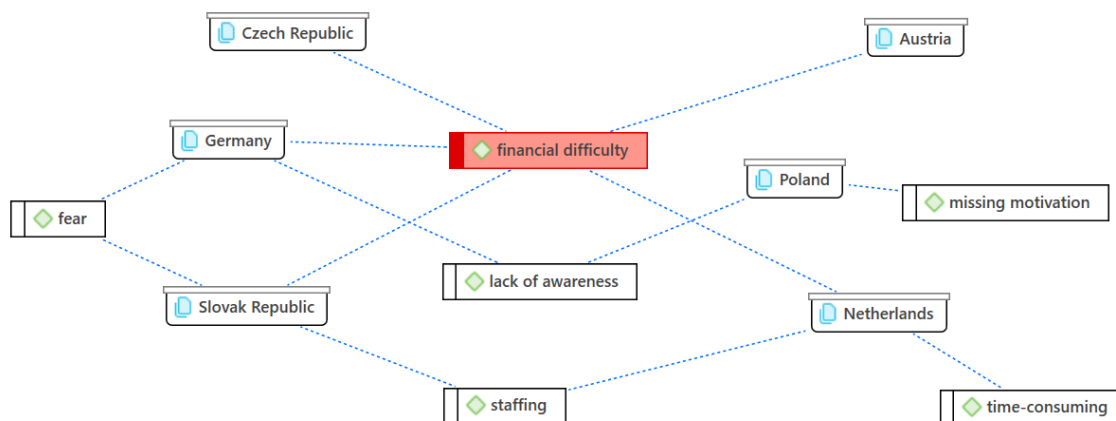
From a legislative point of view, in addition to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in Germany on May 3, 2008, museums also follow the national action plan on the path to an inclusive society (Unser Weg in eine inklusive Gesellschaft). However, Germany has numerous documents addressing inclusion and individuals with disabilities. According to the representative, the guide containing practical measures and recommendations for museums, published by the German Museum Association (Das inklusive Museum – Leitfaden), can be considered the foundational and most crucial document.

In Poland, museums and galleries primarily rely on Building law, law ensuring accessibility for individuals with special needs, regulations of the Ministry of Infrastructure on the technical conditions that buildings and their location must meet, and regulations of the Ministry of Development specifying the detailed scope and form of the building project for architectural accessibility. Regarding digital accessibility, museums are governed by laws on the electrification of activities of entities, the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities, and government regulations on the national interoperability framework, minimum requirements for public registers and exchange of information in electronic form, and minimum requirements for ICT systems.

c) Obstacles and benefits associated with barrier removal

In the case of Slovak museums, the one of significant problems is the financial difficulty, as it often involves costly technical solutions that often may degrade quickly. Another problem is the fear of museum owners, because as stated '*on one hand managers would like to have accessible museum, but there is no one to attend to these visitors*', and thus staffing is another frequent obstacle (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Obstacles related to barrier removal across examined countries



Source: own.

The same obstacles related to barrier removal were identified across the other examined countries. The interviews revealed that the primary obstacle to making museums accessible to the disabled is a lack of financial resources across all countries, apart from Poland. Moreover, in the Netherlands, time is also a significant barrier when adapting museums to the needs of people with disabilities. Not every museum has the staff and resources to deal with this. In addition to the above, fear of change may be considered as an obstacle in Germany.

'The knowledge exists. The reasons to do so are well accepted. The will is there. The habits are strong. Change needs a giving up of habits. This is hard for everyone.' (Representative of Deutscher Museumsbund)

According to the representative of the Polish association, the crucial factor lies in the approach and motivation of museum staff to implement solutions that ensure accessibility *'with sufficient commitment and awareness, museums can achieve good results even with more limited financial resources or technical possibilities'*.

Regarding the benefits arising from the accessibility improvement to museums, the representative of Slovak association pointed out that discussing economic growth or financial profit is challenging, as most museums in Slovakia offer free entry to visitors with disabilities and half-price admission for their companions. Accessible elements benefit not only disabled visitors but also older visitors and mothers with children, so it is more about making the object attractive and fostering a positive experience, which is priceless.

Responses from both Austria and the Netherlands align closely, indicating that museums initiating debarrierization efforts receive positive reactions. Notably, implemented modifications have proven to benefit a broader audience beyond individuals with disabilities. With removing barriers comes the opportunity to offer multi-sensory and better cultural experiences.

'We notice that the museums that do get started receive very positive reactions. They also see that adjustments they have made actually serve a much broader audience, not just people with disabilities. It offers the opportunity to offer multi-sensory and better cultural experiences.' (Representative of Museum4all)

The representative of the Polish association also emphasized that the elimination of barriers in museums leads to the expansion of the potential audience engaging with the content presented by museums and galleries. Increasing interest among people with special needs usually requires time and increased promotion, but from a broader societal integration perspective, it is absolutely worth it.

In the case of the Czech Republic, museums should fulfil an internationally valid definition supported not only by Czech legislation but also endorsed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). According to this definition, museums are expected to be open to the public, accessible, inclusive, and provide diverse stimuli for education, enjoyment, and knowledge-sharing.

Discussions and Conclusion

Considering the increasing number of people with disabilities (WHO, 2023) and the growing tendency of the aging population (Buhalis, Darcy and Ambrose 2012), several authors currently emphasize the need to remove barriers in tourism industry (Zenko and Sardi 2014; Naniopoulos and Tsalis 2015; Linderová 2016; Meskele, Woreta and Weldesenbet 2018; Marčeková and Šebová 2020; Gonda 2021).

Our primary focus was on the examination of socio-economic aspects associated with the barrier removal and making museums and galleries accessible to disadvantaged groups of the population. The selection of museums and galleries as the subjects of investigation was based on the assumption that culture can be considered a pivotal role of economic and social changes in Europe (Pahos, Stamos and Kicosev 2010), and at the same time culture stands out as a principal draw for tourism for domestic as well as foreign visitors, because they express the identity of the place (Dimache, Wondirad and Agyeiwaah 2017).

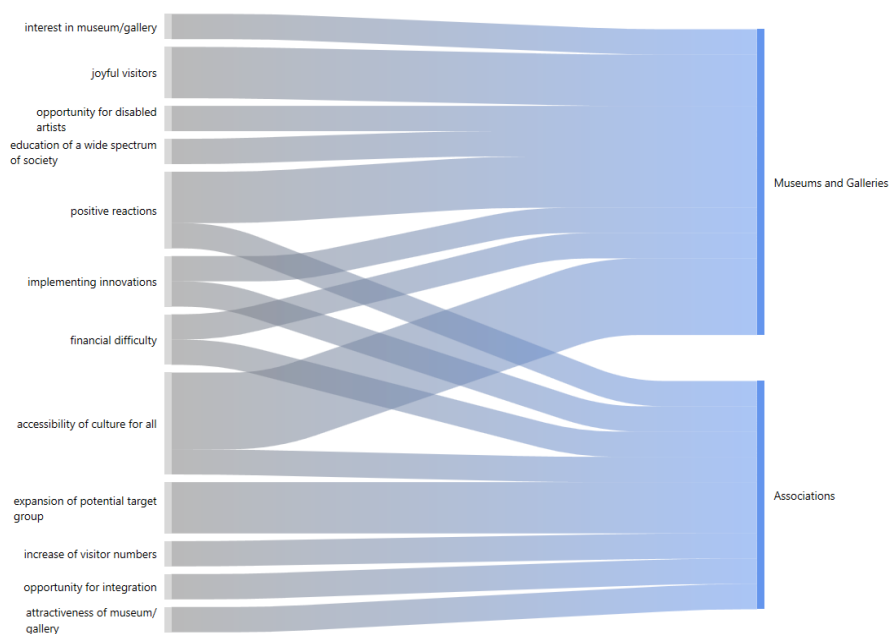
The outcomes of the theoretical exploration and analysis indicate that the integration of accessibility and inclusion should constitute a common standard in museums, accompanied by the education of the staff to effectively meet the needs of a diverse society (Reyes-García *et al.* 2021). The managers of Slovak museums and galleries place the greatest emphasis on the removal of social barriers and the least attention is paid to the elimination of architectural barriers. This trend is observed both in Slovakia and the examined European countries, and it is often attributed to the historical character of these facilities (Andani, Roston and Sertyesilisik 2013; Linderová 2016; Koustriava and Koutsmani 2023).

The results of the survey show that the attention is mainly paid to people with sensory disabilities, and thus we do not agree that the greatest attention should be paid to people with physical disabilities when making museums accessible (Linderová, 2016; Reyes-García *et al.* 2021).

In improving accessibility to museums and galleries, not only in Slovakia, but also in the examined European countries, the lack of financial resources is the biggest obstacle for managers, which is in line with the assertion that adapting museums in historic buildings is often financially and time-consuming (Reyes-García *et al.* 2021), because cultural facilities are not sufficiently financially supported and getting a budget to improve accessibility can be difficult (Leahy and Ferri 2023; Kruczek *et al.* 2024). At the same time, we can agree with Linderová (2016), according to which the adaptation of the building for people with reduced mobility is financially demanding, as it involves significant construction modifications requiring the removal of the threshold, the expansion of door frames, the installation of ramps, elevators, etc.

We rely on the assertion that for cultural facilities, improving accessibility holds the potential to simultaneously serve as a business opportunity (Souca 2010; Agovino *et al.* 2017; Chikuta, Du Plessi and Saayman 2018; Marčeková and Šebová 2020) and a means to gain a competitive advantage (Michopoulou *et al.* 2015; Marčeková and Šebová 2020; Santana-Santana, Peña-Alonso and Espino 2020). Despite the expressed interest of museums and galleries in barrier removal and their intention to focus on this target group in the future, our survey results indicate that they do not perceive this process as a business opportunity. The reason may be the fact that disabled people are not among the most numerous target groups of visitors, and in most cases, they have free or discounted entry, as does the accompanying person. The results of the analysis also confirm that disabled people do not travel alone (Souca 2010), and they most often come to museums and galleries accompanied.

Figure 3. Perceptions of removing barriers by representatives of museums and galleries and associations



Source: own.

Representatives from museums, galleries, and associations acknowledge that while the immediate economic benefits may not be readily apparent, the long-term impact on the institution's attractiveness and visitor experience is profound.

The Sankey diagram (Figure 3) visually illustrates the perceptions of removing barriers by representatives of museums and galleries and associations.

Concurrently, it is affirmed that a systematic barrier removal can contribute to the social integration of the target group into society (Darcy and Dickson 2009; Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen 2011; Pagán 2012; Kastenholz, Eusébio and Figueiredo 2015; Linderová 2015; Agovino *et al.* 2017; Moura, Kastenholz and Pereira 2017; Gonda, Nagy and Raffay 2019; Cavapozzi and Zantomio 2020; Rubio-Escuderos *et al.* 2021), and that the accessible premises and the services provided actually serve a wider audience, thereby expanding potential target group (Darcy and Dickson 2009; Gonda 2021; Reyes-García *et al.* 2021) and improves the cultural experience (Deffner *et al.* 2015; Naniopoulos and Tsalis 2015).

Removing barriers demonstrates its effectiveness in bringing joy and satisfaction to visitors with disabilities, enabling them to fully utilize and enjoy the services and amenities offered by museums and galleries. Thus, we can state that eliminating barriers in museums and galleries primarily contributes to making culture accessible to all without distinction. In consequence, museums, and galleries, as well as associations, meet with positive reactions not only from diverse visitors, but also from organizations working with these people recognizing the value of inclusive cultural experiences.

At the same time, there is a motivation for implementing innovations that improve the cultural experience and increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of museums and galleries. With removing barriers even comes the opportunity to offer multi-sensory and better cultural experiences. Moreover, the implemented modifications and accessibility elements are also used by older visitors or mothers with children, thus expanding the potential target group that receives the content presented by museums and galleries.

Debarierization efforts even broaden the educational reach of cultural institutions, enabling a wider spectrum of society to participate in educational programs and events. Thus, it is indisputable that the effective use of resources of a cultural and historical nature increases the educational level of the population at the same time.

Although increasing interest among people with special needs usually requires time it can be viewed as a unique opportunity for integrating all groups into society, thereby reducing social disparities.

Despite stakeholders indicating that it is a financially demanding process, accessibility may not only influence the number of visitors but also employment opportunities. A barrier-free environment creates favourable conditions for the employment of disabled individuals, including disabled artists, who can exhibit their works in galleries.

Findings of this research indicate that removing barriers enhances the independence of people with disabilities, fosters their participation in social life, and stimulates the demand for cultural experiences. Moreover, it creates opportunities for learning and employment by establishing suitable conditions. This underscores the significance of accessibility by removing barriers as a phenomenon that influences both the social and economic environment, which is line with the Załuska, Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and Grzeškowiak (2022), stating that preparing the tourism industry to provide accessible services to people with special needs, is crucial from both social and economic aspect.

The findings of this study enrich accessibility tourism research, by contributing valuable insights into socio-economic aspects of removing various barriers and making culture accessible to disabled people. The results of the paper create a prerequisite for a deeper investigation of the intersection of the barrier removal and tourism not to limit only on evaluating the current state of accessibility. Due to the limited number of respondents, we cannot generalize the results to all museums and galleries, which we consider to be the biggest limitation.

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Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Lubica Šebová: conceptualization of the project, administered and supervised the project, participated in the subsequent stages of writing, review, editing, and visualization.

Izabela Lazurová: conceptualization of the project, conducted investigations, developed methodologies, administered the project, performed formal analyses, drafted the original manuscript, data curation, validation of findings, participation in review and editing, and visualized the results.

Radka Marčeková: conceptualization of the project, participated in the subsequent stages of writing, review, editing, and visualization, funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

The authors declare that they have not used generative AI and AI-assisted technologies during the preparation of this work.

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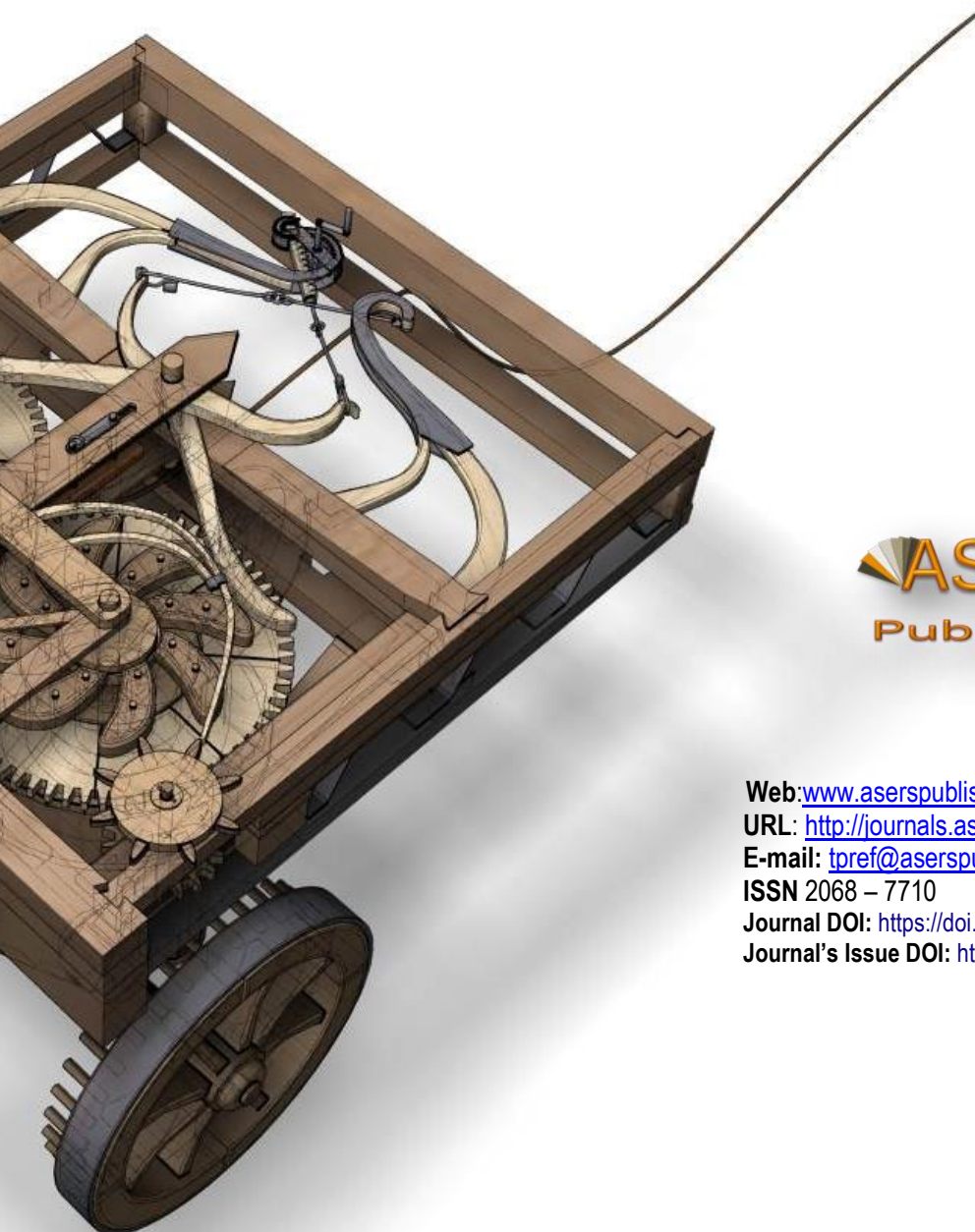
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