Accessibility and Culture: Drivers of Social Cohesion and Well-being

IOANNA MANIOU[1], PINELOPI SORITOPOULOU[2], MARIA MANOLA[3], FOTINI MANIOU[4], KLIMIS NTALIANIS[5], DIMITRIOS NENTAS[5], MARIA KIOUMOURTZI[5]

[1] Medical School
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Zografou Park Campus, GR 157 84
GREECE

[2] School of Public Health, University of West Attica
Egaleo Park Campus, 28 Ag. Spiridonos str., GR-12243 Egaleo, Athens
GREECE

[3] Department of Tourism Management
University of West Attica
Egaleo Park Campus, 28 Ag. Spiridonos str., GR-12243 Egaleo, Athens
GREECE

[4] Sustainable Urban and Regional Development Department
Harokopio University
70 El. Venizelou str., GR-17676 Athens,
GREECE

[5] Department of Business Administration
University of West Attica
Ancient Olive Groves Campus, 250 Thivon str., GR-12242 Egaleo, Athens
GREECE

Abstract: This research investigates accessibility in touristic and cultural areas in Thira (Santorini), focusing on perceptions and attitudes of professionals working in tourist industries. Research is based on mixed methods, analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, in relevance to the Social Model of Disability and the Push-Pull Framework. Findings highlight limitations in transportation, infrastructure barriers, and a lack of adequate training for personnel working in this area. On the other hand, personnel are willing to adjust to more inclusive approaches, a matter that requires special training, and will result in broader improvement of the services provided.

Key-Words: - Accessibility, Inclusive tourism, Social Model of Disability, Push–Pull Framework, Mobility barriers, Thira

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1 Introduction

The tourism industry has a crucial role in the global economy, offering cultural, social, and economic advantages, [1]. According to Article 30 of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, all individuals must have equal access to tourism opportunities, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, [2]. Although access to tourism has been established as a fundamental human right, obtaining access to tourism opportunities continues to be a significant challenge for people with disabilities, [3].

Accessible tourism is not only a matter of social equality but also an important economic opportunity. Research shows that enhancing accessibility can provide substantial economic benefits, such as increased demand in the tourism sector, improved

visitor satisfaction, and job creation, [4]. Beyond economic benefits, promoting an inclusive environment enhances a destination's reputation, encourages tourist visits, and aligns with broader goals of social responsibility, [5].

Earlier research primarily focused on overcoming obstacles that excluded people with disabilities from tourism, [6], with inclusion being a new topic of research, [7]. At the same time, ensuring accessibility should be integrated into the core policies and operational frameworks of tourism providers, [8].

On the other hand, significant research gaps refer to local tourist entrepreneurs and their understanding of including people with disabilities, [9], especially in hot-spot touristic destinations, such as the Greek islands, [10].

Our previous works focused on various strongly related issues of accessibility, innovation, and the dynamic interaction between technology and public engagement. In particular, GLaM-Sign is introduced, the first large-scale Greek multimodal corpus integrating Greek Sign Language, lip-reading videos, speech audio, and subtitles to promote inclusivity for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing individuals, primarily within tourism education and beyond, [11]. Together, these studies emphasize the value of inclusive, data-driven innovation and real-time analytics as foundational elements for fostering transparency, engagement, and societal inclusion, [12], [13], [14].

This study aims to investigate the accessibility of cultural and tourist sites in Thira, examining tourism professionals' perceptions, and assessing the extent to which existing infrastructure and services meet the needs of people with disabilities.

2 Problem Formulation

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability is one of the most impactful theories in studies referring to disability and political interventions towards the rights of people with disabilities, as well as their equal inclusion in modern society, [15], [16]. It is historically forged through the disabled's movement (basically started in Great Britain in the '70s), as a criticism towards the main medical and social theories, which interpret disability as a status demanding therapy or adjustment, which is a personal problem for those living in such a status, [17], [18]. On the contrary, the social model transforms this burden from the person subjected to it to the broader social ecosystem. This theory suggests that disability is not just subject to the physical or mental status of a person, but beyond that, a person subjected to certain limitations, becomes disabled by certain social, infrastructural, cultural, or institutional burdens, [19], [20].

The basic function in this theory is the distinction between operational impairment and disability. Operational impairment refers to some physical or mental malfunction, while disability is a result of the way buildings and cities are designed and setting rules and practices. that limit activities and social interactions. Thus, a different architectural infrastructure, the absence of specific sharing of information, discrimination in work, or even rigid educational evaluation, are mechanisms producing inequalities. In this way, the Social Model interprets disability as a broad matter of social rights that concerns the whole society, claiming reforms in institutional and political perspectives, [20], [21], [22].

In this way, the 'solution' is not addressed to those subjected to physical or mental challenges, but it addresses the broader society that should better adjust to a more inclusive way of living, [23], [24].

2.1.2 Push-Pull Framework

The Push-Pull Framework tries to analyze why people are moving to a new place, destination, or institution. The main idea is that such decisions are formed based on two pillar factors, the push and pull factors. Puch factors describe stress, lacks, obstacles, and limitations, such as unemployment, low wages, social exclusion, and environmental degradation, that drive people away. On the other hand, pull factors refer to advantages attracting people, such as infrastructural facilities, cultural opportunities, environmental and economic provisions, [25], [26].

The Push-Pull theory was initially formed in relevance to migration, but was soon extended to other topics. It is a broader theory explaining why people choose differently in the labor market, tourism, entrepreneurship, or even studies, [27], [28], [29], [30], [31].

2.2 Methodology

This study combines both quantitative and qualitative data collected in Thira to better understand and analyze the context under investigation. The Social Model of Disability requires understanding how systemic structures and social attitudes manifest in practice. Simultaneously, the Push-Pull Framework benefits from quantitative data that helps identify trends in tourist motivations and service provision, [32], [33].

Despite the sample being quite small to further extend results, the added value of this article is the

qualitative data coming from the open-ended questions. In this way, the voice of the local entrepreneurs and professionals may be heard, and significant outcomes are also produced.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to tourism professionals working in Thira. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended questions designed to assess participants' experiences and perceptions regarding accessibility within the tourism sector.

A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the participation of individuals from various tourism-related professions. Participants were initially identified through professional networks and the author's contacts, while snowball efforts were also conducted, also to include participants from different professions and positions, ensuring a diversity of opinions within the tourism sector, [34].

The sample was finally based on the two main areas on the island: the Caldera and the inland. Caldera is the highly developed area of Thira, where luxury hotels and other tourist businesses are located, and attracts thousands of tourists each year. The inland area is less developed, with smaller villages, agricultural landscapes, and less luxurious facilities.

Eligibility criteria for the participants, were also set. Participants should had been at least 20 years old, possess an active employment status, have at least one year of experience working on the island, and have direct interaction with tourists.

Another key factor was that data collection took place during the tourist season, ensuring that participants had recent and active interactions with tourists, including those with disabilities.

SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data, calculating general descriptive statistics. Data were analyzed separately for Caldera and the inland area, and comparisons between data collected in these areas were useful to further explore potential differences.

For qualitative data, inductive thematic analysis was employed, aiming to identify patterns and themes within the open-ended responses. The analysis followed the six-phase process adapted to the context of this study, [35].

3 Problem Solution

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

For this study, 40 questionnaires were collected, equally distributed between the two areas.

Gender equality. 55% of the participants were men, and 45% women.

Experience in the tourism industry. 65% of the respondents had more than 5 years' experience in the tourism industry, and 30% for more than 10 years.

Role in business. 70% of respondents are employees, and 30% held managerial positions.

Frequency of visits. When asked about the frequency of visits by people with disabilities, 40% of respondents stated 'rarely', 35% 'sometimes', and only 5% replied to frequent visits.

Intensity. 85% of respondents estimated that people with disabilities make up less than 50% of their annual visitors, reinforcing the view that accessible tourism is still a limited market segment.

Trends. 60% of respondents reported a slight increase in the number of visitors with disabilities in the last decade, while 25% reported a more significant increase. This suggests a gradual but unstable increase in demand for accessible tourism, which may indicate a growing awareness of accessibility issues.

3.2 Thematic Analysis of Open-ended Responses

The responses to the open-ended questions provided an abundance of information regarding the barriers to accessible tourism for people with disabilities on the island. Thematic analysis of these qualitative responses revealed three main concerns: limited mobility, lack of accessibility of infrastructure in all areas, and lack of specialized staff training.

3.2.1 Limited Mobility

The significant difficulty that disabled visitors face in getting around the island was repeatedly recorded. Many disabled tourists are unable to enjoy the attractions of Thira due to limited transportation options. Several participants stated that, even when hotels provide accessible rooms and public areas, the wider environment presents challenges. One participant explained: "*Disabled visitors often prefer to stay in the hotel because getting around is difficult.*" Another stated: "*Roads, transportation, and even some attractions are not totally accessible*", a statement that indicates that external barriers, especially in infrastructure, discourage visitors from further exploring and broaden their tourism experience.

Another topic is barriers and lacks in special infrastructure required for people with hearing and mental disabilities. It is an observation referring to hotels, but also to tourist areas, especially the most crowded ones, where visitors with disabilities reported difficulties navigating. For example, one

participant stated: "*We often have guests with hearing impairments who have difficulty understanding directions because there are no visual signs or written instructions. When we are busy, it is almost impossible to provide them with the individual support they need*."

Several participants reported their experiences with visually impaired guests. They reported that many of them were unable to complete even simple daily activities in hotels without the help of an attendant. The lack of physical aids in the area significantly limited their ability to have a complete tourist experience. One respondent stated: "*I have seen visually impaired guests struggle even to find their room. I think tactile signals or audio announcements for guidance would be very helpful*."

3.2.2 Infrastructural Barriers

The second issue that emerged was the lack of consistent accessibility infrastructure in different areas of Thira. Participants pointed out that even businesses that provide some accessible infrastructure often do so gradually, rather than offering comprehensive solutions. This suggests that accessibility improvements should not be limited to individual businesses, but should also extend to public spaces, transport, and major attractions. Accessible facilities are presented in Figure 1, while the distribution of primary barriers to accessibility is provided in Figure 2.

Another important issue raised in this context was public transportation. Several participants stated that most buses and taxis lack accessible equipment, making it difficult for disabled visitors to move from one part of the island to another, meaning that broader infrastructure improvements are needed.

Beyond hotels and accommodation, several participants highlighted that cultural and tourist sites, such as beaches and archaeological sites, lack basic accessible infrastructure. They highlight that many of these sites were not designed with accessibility in mind, making it difficult or even impossible for people with disabilities to visit and participate. As a result, many disabled tourists are confined to their hotel rooms, unable to fully enjoy the island's attractions.

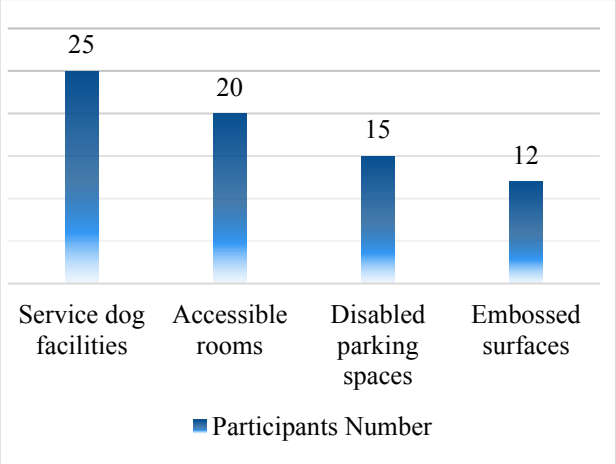

Fig. 1:. Accessibility Infrastructures (more than one reply per person who replied to the questionnaire).
Source: Created by the authors

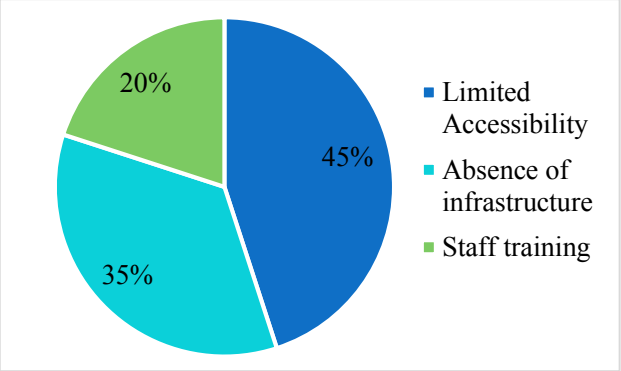

Fig. 2: Distribution of Primary Barriers to Accessibility (Total Sample)
Source: Created by the authors

3.2.3 Lack of Staff Training

The third pillar issue that came out of the analysis is the lack of staff training in how to support and assist people with disabilities. Despite the many businesses declaring their goodwill to properly serve guests with disabilities, many participants stated that they do not feel comfortable enough to provide the services required for such an occasion. This observation also indicates that the quality of services may improve a lot, following targeted training programs.

In this context, one participant stated that "*we don't always know the right way to help*," and a second one, "*more training would definitely improve the experience of our guests*". Both statements build on the results described above, while at the same time stress that employees in the tourism industry would positively respond, having the proper training and guidance, first.

Training should include both ways of supporting people with mobility, visual, or hearing impairments,

and ways of reaching people with intellectual or cognitive difficulties, who may require a different approach. Services of better quality to people with disabilities will also have a positive impact on all the visitors and contribute to improving the tourism industry. In this direction, one participant stated: "*It's not just about disabled tourists. Better training helps us understand the needs of all our customers, making us more flexible and attentive.*"

In conclusion, the lack of staff training on accessibility issues is a key point to include visitors with physical or mental disabilities, but it also extends beyond that. Staff trained to respond in such occasions are also able to provide broader, high-quality services in a more human-centric approach.

3.3 Accessibility Comparison between the Caldera and the Inland Areas

Both the Caldera and the inland areas presented significant deficiencies, with only minor differences in some aspects. Participants from both areas acknowledged the lack of sufficiently developed accessibility infrastructure and pointed out the inconsistency of the measures implemented. Approximately 65% of businesses stated that they offer some accessibility benefits; however, very few of them had a complete and integrated set of solutions. This inconsistency was one of the most frequent factors recorded during the questionnaire.

In the Caldera area, businesses were slightly more likely to have accessible paths, ramps, and adapted hotel rooms, mainly in newer or more luxurious accommodations. However, the natural landscape and architectural configuration of the area pose serious barriers, making full accessibility particularly difficult for guests with mobility or visual impairments. As one participant noted: "*Even when businesses try to improve accessibility, the steep paths, cobblestone streets, and stairs of the Caldera make access almost impossible for people with mobility impairments.*"

Inland businesses, by contrast, did not face the same degree of geomorphological constraints, as there were no cliffs, but they still struggled with hills and uneven roads. While some of these had wider spaces that made movement easier, they often lacked specialized features such as raised surfaces, audio guidance, or adapted toilets.

It is also mentioned that accessibility measures are often not a priority due to lower tourist arrivals and limited financial incentives, which highlights that accessibility improvements are often driven by financial considerations rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion.

Participants also mentioned the limited availability of accessible transport between the two regions. Many noted that while there are a few accessible taxis and rental vehicles, their availability is low, and the costs are high.

When asked whether the island offers adequate accessibility infrastructure and services, 75% responded that there are only limited facilities. Although 65% of businesses reported providing some accessibility features, their distribution varied. The Caldera had more adapted rooms and ramps, mainly in luxury accommodations, while inland businesses often lacked basic features such as raised floors and adequate parking. There were also slight differences in visitor patterns, with businesses in the Caldera reporting a gradual increase in disabled tourists over the past decade. Despite these differences, accessibility issues remained significant in both areas, highlighting the need for overall improvements throughout the entire island, both in infrastructure and in awareness and commitment to promoting inclusion. Figure 3 summarizes the core accessibility infrastructure, comparing Caldera with the inland.

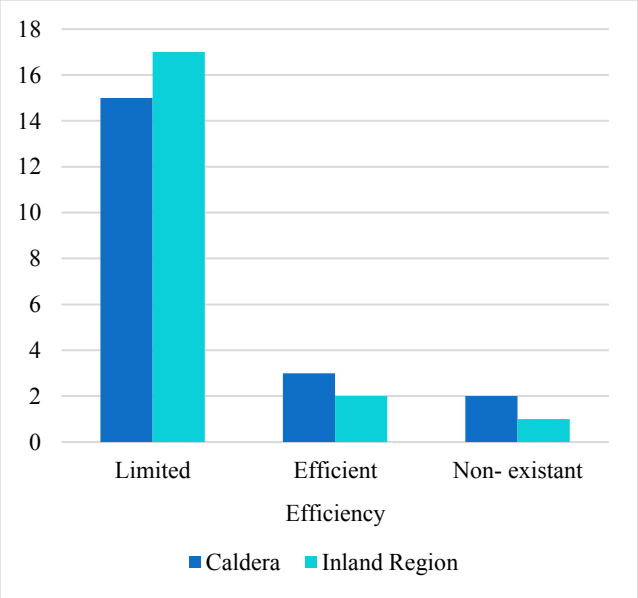

Fig. 3: Core Accessibility Infrastructure by Region. *Source: Created by the authors*

3.4 Findings Insights

Analysis of accessibility features reveals that provisions are generally constrained across both regions, though the Caldera area exhibits marginally better initial investment, likely driven by its higher concentration of commercial activity and higher-end establishments.

- Infrastructure Presence: Businesses in the Caldera reported a 20% point higher presence of some accessible infrastructure (60% vs. 40% in the Inland region).
- Specialized Facilities: The availability of comprehensive, enabling features remains critically low island-wide: only 5% of Caldera businesses and 0% of Inland businesses reported having Accessible Rooms.
- Mobility Features: The Caldera shows a slight advantage in the perceived availability of Accessible Transportation (55% vs. 40%) and Accessible Parking Spaces (20% vs. 5%). The particularly low rate of accessible parking in the Inland region (5%) highlights a foundational gap in supporting mobility outside the main tourist hub.

To assess if professional tenure influences the critical appraisal of the inclusive tourism status, a cross-tabulation was performed between Years of Experience and the perceived Sufficiency of Island Accessibility. The overall consensus (N=40) is that accessibility is either Limited (60%) or Minimal (37.5%). The results indicate a maturation in critical perspective with increased tenure, as shown in Table 1 (Appendix) and Figure 4 (Appendix).

Professionals with 5 or more years of experience are overwhelmingly more likely to categorize the island's accessibility as Limited (peaking at 83.3% for the 11-20 years group). This suggests that long-term participants have witnessed some progress or patchy provision, classifying the status as Limited (a moderate but insufficient state). Conversely, less experienced professionals (1-4 years) were the most likely to categorize it as Minimal (72.7%), potentially reflecting a perception that the existing efforts are so inadequate they approach a near non-existent state. Notably, the only respondent who perceived accessibility as Sufficient belongs to the group with only one year of experience. Consistent with the overall low quantitative scores, the most frequently cited Need for Improvement across the entire sample (N=40) was the overall Limited Accessibility (45%), followed by the lack of Staff Training (27.5%), and the outright Absence of Infrastructure (20%). This demonstrates a consensus that the challenge is systemic, spanning both physical infrastructure and human resources.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

Studies have highlighted the structural challenges of integrating accessibility in heritage destinations and coastal areas, which are often characterized by rugged terrain, historic architecture, and limited space for modifications, [36], [37], [38], [39]. The findings of this study confirm these difficulties in Thira, despite the fact that some businesses in the Caldera have made some efforts to integrate accessibility elements. However, the natural and built environment remains a significant barrier. This is consistent with previous research showing that while some businesses try to offer accessibility solutions, these efforts are often fragmented and fail to shape a fully inclusive tourism experience, [40]. One of the important findings that connects this study to the literature is the limited awareness and training of tourism professionals, who feel unprepared to provide appropriate services, which also stresses the need for structured training courses, specifically for tourism professionals. Previous studies have shown that accessibility improvements tend to be concentrated in areas with high tourism traffic, often driven by market demand rather than holistic accessibility planning, [41]. The findings of the present study show a similar pattern, where the Caldera region, despite its challenges, has somewhat better accessibility infrastructure compared to inland areas, where financial constraints and lower tourism traffic have hindered investment in related improvements. This reinforces the view that economic incentives play a key role in motivating businesses to implement accessibility measures, as has been argued in previous research, [41], [42].

The Social Model of Disability also highlights that infrastructural barriers are not just linked to the geomorphology of the place studied, but it is a deeper social issue, as local society fails to adequately adjust, [43]. At the same time, the Pull-Push Framework shows how the lack of accessibility not only discourages visiting but also actively excludes people from participation, limiting Thira's potential to develop into a truly inclusive destination, [44]. This study highlighted that the challenges faced by disabled travelers are embedded in the cultural, regulatory, and operational structures of tourism, [45].

Tourism professionals have recognized that, while Santorini's global reputation as a luxury destination is a strong pull factor, the lack of accessible transportation, accommodations, and cultural venues significantly reduces the willingness of people with disabilities to visit the island. The results confirm previous research, according to which

accessibility can be a deal-breaker for tourists with disabilities, [46], [47].

One of the most important findings is the gap between accessibility policies at the European level and their implementation in practice. Tools such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the European Accessibility Act (EAA) offer a strong policy framework, [48], [49], [50]. However, their implementation remains inconsistent in regional and island contexts, such as that of Thira. Both policy and practice need to evolve, [46], [51]. Investments in accessible transportation, accommodation, and tourist attractions would significantly improve the experience of travelers with disabilities. Standardizing and enforcing regulations, along with providing financial incentives to businesses that promote inclusion, could radically change industry practices, [52], [53].

One of the main limitations is the relatively small sample size. Future research may focus on a bigger number of responses, also extended to other Aegean islands and other tourist destinations in Greece. Such an approach will also broaden the findings, while at the same time providing important results for tourism in destinations with different characteristics.

Future research could also focus on visitors' perspectives, including those with physical or mental disabilities, which will be of high value to a deeper understanding of challenges, barriers, and also solutions.

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Conflicts of Interest

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Years of Experience vs Perceived Sufficiency of Island Accessibility

Years of Experience	Limited	Minimal	Sufficient
1 Year (n=4)	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
1-4 Years (n=11)	27.3%	**72.7%**	0.0%
5-10 Years (n=10)	70.0%	30.0%	0.0%
11-20 Years (n=12)	**83.3%**	16.7%	0.0%
20+ Years (n=3)	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%

Source: Created by the authors

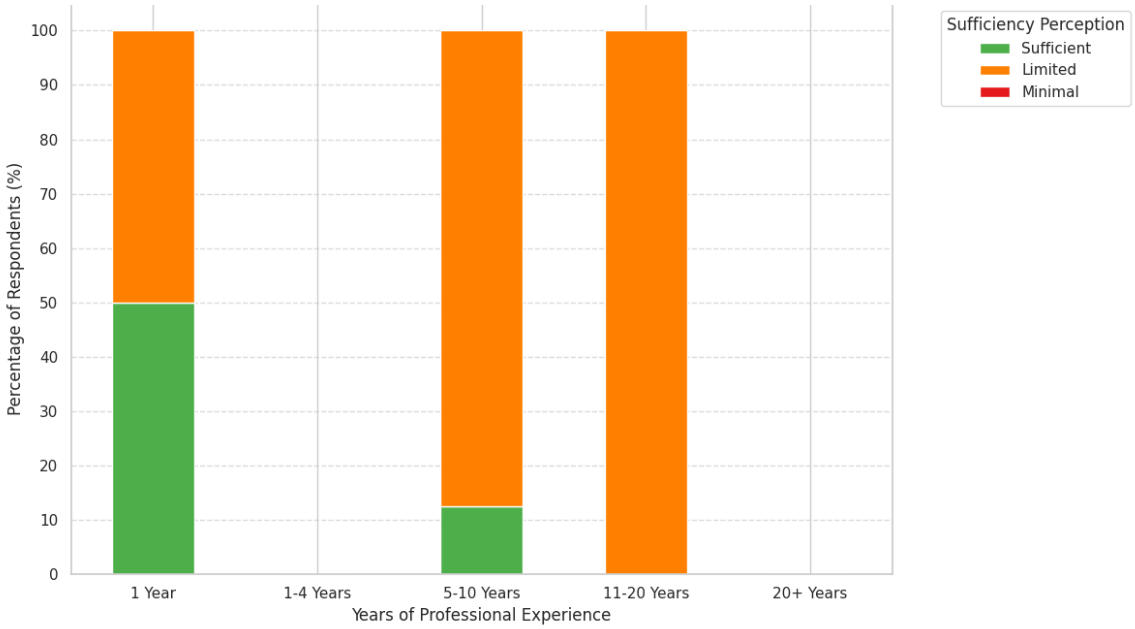

Fig. 4: Perceived Accessibility Sufficiency by Professional Experience.

Source: Created by the authors