

Devrim Zerengök¹

INCLUSIVE LEISURE: ACCESSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC SPACES

Review

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the role of leisure in promoting physical, psychological, and social well-being, while addressing barriers to inclusive leisure for marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and ethnic minorities. Inclusive leisure is increasingly recognized as essential for social inclusion and equity, with global organizations like the United Nations advocating for equitable access in their Sustainable Development Goals. However, many barriers, such as inaccessible infrastructure, social exclusion, and financial constraints, continue to limit participation.

The review employs a narrative approach, synthesizing literature on inclusive leisure and accessibility in public spaces. A systematic search of academic databases identified studies focused on barriers and facilitators for marginalized groups, with attention to global and Turkish contexts.

In Turkey, initiatives like the Accessible Cities Project have aimed to improve public spaces, but challenges persist, especially in rural and underserved areas. The review emphasizes the need for continued efforts to promote inclusive leisure environments, ensuring equitable access to leisure for all individuals

Keywords: Inclusive leisure, Accessibility, Participation**INTRODUCTION**

Leisure is widely recognized as a crucial component of physical, psychological, and social well-being. However, access to leisure opportunities is unequally distributed across various societal groups, often reinforcing existing social inequalities. For marginalized populations, including individuals with disabilities, the elderly, low-income communities, and ethnic minorities, barriers to leisure participation—whether physical, attitudinal, or socio-economic—remain significant (Darcy & Dickson, 2009, p. 35). From a social justice perspective, the ability to participate in leisure activities transcends mere recreation; it is a key dimension of social inclusion and equality (Schleien et al., 2003, p. 24).

The theoretical rationale for inclusive leisure can be drawn from several foundational frameworks, including social role valorization theory and the capability approach. Social role valorization emphasizes the importance of providing equitable opportunities for marginalized groups to occupy valued roles

in society, including access to leisure (Wolfensberger, 1983). Similarly, Sen's capability approach (1999) highlights the role of institutions in enabling individuals to lead lives they have reason to value, which includes leisure as a vital component of well-being. By addressing the barriers to leisure participation, society moves toward more equitable access to opportunities that promote individual and collective well-being.

Public leisure spaces, such as parks, sports facilities, and community centers, play an essential role in fostering social inclusion. However, these spaces must actively eliminate both physical and attitudinal barriers to ensure they are welcoming to all, regardless of ability or socio-economic status (Devine, 2011, p. 18). In this sense, inclusive leisure becomes not only a question of access but also of creating environments where diverse populations can fully engage and benefit from these activities. Globally, there is an increasing

recognition that equitable access to leisure is fundamental to achieving broader goals of social justice and human development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3, emphasize health and well-being, including the promotion of inclusive and accessible leisure opportunities as integral to improving quality of life and reducing social inequalities (UN, 2015). This global perspective underlines the need for inclusive leisure policies and practices that reflect diverse cultural contexts while promoting universal principles of equity and access.

In Turkey, leisure access is similarly shaped by socio-economic factors, regional disparities, and social norms. Despite significant progress in expanding public leisure spaces and programs, marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities and low-income populations, continue to face obstacles in accessing these resources. Studies have shown that urban areas tend to offer greater opportunities for leisure participation, while rural and economically disadvantaged regions lack sufficient infrastructure and facilities. Cultural factors, such as traditional family roles and expectations, particularly restrict the leisure opportunities available to women and the elderly (Ötürk and Koca, 2019). Addressing these barriers is essential for fostering social inclusion and ensuring that the health, psychological, and social benefits of leisure are available to all members of society.

The importance of inclusive leisure programs is well-documented, especially concerning individuals with disabilities. Inclusive leisure is increasingly recognized as a vital component of social inclusion, promoting well-being and addressing societal inequalities. However, much of the existing research often lacks a critical examination of the effectiveness of these programs across different contexts, and there remains an ongoing debate about the extent to which these initiatives genuinely foster long-term social change.

Global Perspective

Internationally, accessible leisure programs have been highlighted for their potential to enhance the quality of life for marginalized groups. Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) recognize that equal access to leisure is not merely a privilege but a fundamental right (WHO, 2011; UN, 2015). However, while these bodies set out broad principles, there is limited evidence on how effectively these ideals are being translated into practice in different socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Recent studies, such as Darcy et al. (2020), have explored how inclusive leisure opportunities can foster social participation and psychological well-being for individuals with disabilities, especially in tourism. However, these studies often focus on developed countries, with limited attention paid to how these programs are implemented in developing regions.

Similarly, Schleien et al. (2003) argue for inclusive leisure services that accommodate diverse needs, but their work primarily reflects early 2000s trends and requires further exploration of current challenges, especially in light of growing awareness about intersectionality within disability studies (Goethals et al., 2015).

Hemingway's (2007) work on inclusive policies in the UK is significant, yet recent evaluations suggest that many public spaces, while theoretically inclusive, remain inaccessible in practice due to underfunding and inadequate implementation strategies (Edwards&Imrie, 2003). Similarly, Tuntland et al. (2020) review how Scandinavian countries integrate inclusive leisure into their welfare policies but note the need for more individualized approaches that consider the diverse needs within marginalized populations.

Case in Turkey

In Turkey, inclusive leisure environments have garnered increased attention, but the country faces unique challenges due to its socio-economic and geographical diversity. Earlier studies by Aslan and Köse (2014) and Demirci and Yıldırım (2017) emphasize the role of local governments in improving access, particularly for individuals with disabilities. However, the pace of infrastructure improvements has been slow, and recent studies indicate that many public leisure spaces remain largely inaccessible (Çolakkadioğlu, Kahveci, & Savran, 2017).

More recent research, such as Özcan, Güçhan Topcu, & Arasli, (2021), highlights gaps in accessible tourism and recreation services, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure is less developed. This highlights a need for a more critical evaluation of government policies, as existing legislative frameworks such as the Law on Persons with Disabilities (2005) are not always adequately enforced.

Studies by Yılmaz and Koçak (2013) and Küçük (2015) focused on accessibility in urban parks but did not fully consider the nuanced experiences of individuals across different disability types. More recent studies (Arslan, 2021) argue that a one-size-fits-all approach to urban design is insufficient, stressing the need for participatory design processes that involve disabled individuals in the planning of recreational spaces.

Sports and leisure participation as a means of fostering social inclusion has been examined by Aydoğan and Bozkurt (2018) and Çakmak and Akın (2020), but recent research suggests that the focus on competitive sports may exclude those who prefer non-competitive or non-structured leisure activities. More inclusive approaches to recreational programming are needed, especially for older adults and individuals with cognitive disabilities, who may not be able to participate in traditional sports activities (Çalhan, 2023).

Turgut and Koyuncu's (2019) work on architectural barriers in public spaces remains relevant, but recent findings by Evcil (2018) indicate that despite improvements in physical infrastructure, attitudinal barriers persist, preventing true inclusivity in leisure environments.

While there is substantial literature highlighting the importance of inclusive leisure, much of the current research is concentrated in Western countries, with fewer studies examining how these principles are applied in diverse global contexts, particularly in developing nations like Turkey. Additionally, there is a growing need for more inter-sectional approaches that consider the multiple layers of marginalization experienced by individuals based on race, gender, and disability. More critical, updated research is required to understand how inclusive leisure programs can be adapted to meet these complex needs and how they can be sustainably implemented to promote long-term social change.

METHODS

This review adopts a narrative approach to synthesize existing literature on inclusive leisure, focusing on accessibility and participation in public spaces, with a particular emphasis on Turkey. The methodology involved a comprehensive review of scholarly articles, policy documents, and case studies related to inclusive leisure, accessibility, and public space design.

To gather relevant literature, a systematic search was conducted across several academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, and JSTOR. Keywords both in English and Turkish used for the search included "inclusive leisure," "accessibility in public spaces," "universal design," "leisure participation," and "Turkey." The search covered a wide range of studies published between 2000 and 2023 to ensure the inclusion of both foundational and recent developments in the field.

The selection criteria focused on studies that:

- Explored the barriers and facilitators of inclusive leisure participation for marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, and low-income populations.
- Discussed the design and accessibility of public spaces, including parks, sports facilities, and community centers.
- Provided global perspectives on inclusive leisure, including comparisons between Turkey and other countries.
- Included case studies, particularly those focusing on the Turkish context.

The review also incorporated governmental reports, such as the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's Accessible Cities Project (2021), and international guidelines from the United Nations (2015) and World

Health Organization (2011) on leisure accessibility and social inclusion.

Data from the selected studies were organized into thematic categories, such as physical, social, and financial barriers, as well as facilitators like universal design principles and community-based programs. A qualitative synthesis was conducted to identify common themes, challenges, and opportunities for improving inclusive leisure in public spaces.

The review provides a critical analysis of both global and Turkish contexts, highlighting key findings, gaps in the literature, and recommendations for future research and policy development.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

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CONCLUSION

Inclusive leisure participation is vital for promoting social well-being and reducing inequalities. By removing barriers and fostering accessible environments, public spaces can become places where all individuals, regardless of their physical or social limitations, can enjoy leisure activities. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive leisure by emphasizing the importance of equitable access to leisure activities for marginalized groups, particularly individuals with disabilities, in Turkey. Building on frameworks like social role valorization (Wolfensberger, 1983) and the capability approach (Sen, 1999), this study highlights the role of inclusive leisure in fostering social participation and well-being. It expands on the capability approach by demonstrating how public leisure spaces can function as enablers of well-being when designed and managed inclusively, offering a nuanced understanding of leisure as a tool for enhancing individual capabilities and social inclusion.

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of inclusive leisure within broader social justice frameworks, particularly in contexts where socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers limit access to leisure. The findings extend previous research by situating inclusive leisure in the Turkish context, contributing to both leisure studies and social inclusion theory. The removal of barriers to participation, as Karaküçük (2008) points out, remains a significant challenge, and public awareness of inclusive leisure is still limited. This paper argues that addressing these issues is crucial for achieving social well-being and equality.

Managerial Implications

For policymakers and managers of public leisure spaces, this study provides actionable insights. First, the importance of a participatory approach in the design of inclusive leisure environments cannot be overstated. Engaging marginalized communities in planning and implementation is key to ensuring spaces meet diverse needs. The findings suggest that local governments and municipal authorities should focus on both physical infrastructure and fostering inclusive

attitudes among service providers. Research by Demirci and Yıldırım (2017) underscores the need for more comprehensive policies and community-driven initiatives to ensure that public spaces truly serve the needs of all citizens. Initiatives like Turkey's Accessible Cities Project are promising but require further development to fully address the needs of diverse populations.

Limitations

This study, while offering important insights, has limitations. Its focus on Turkey may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different socio-economic or cultural contexts. Additionally, the study primarily relied on observational and self-reported data, which may introduce bias or limit the depth of the findings. Future studies should consider more longitudinal approaches or experimental designs to capture the long-term impact of inclusive leisure programs.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the long-term outcomes of inclusive leisure programs, particularly how they contribute to community cohesion and overall health. In Turkey, as in many other countries, the challenges of implementing truly inclusive leisure environments persist. Future efforts should focus on fostering greater collaboration between government, civil society, and urban planners to create more inclusive public spaces. Additionally, research should examine how inter-sectional factors such as gender, age, disability, and socio-economic status impact participation in leisure activities. Further studies are needed to investigate how inclusive leisure can address not only physical accessibility but also broader issues of social justice and community integration.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose. All co-authors have reviewed and concurred with the manuscript's content, and no financial interests need to be reported.