BICYCLE TOURING EXPERIENCES AS A SOCIAL-INCLUSION ACTIVITY FOR VISUALLY DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

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Abstract
Purpose - This study is aimed towards examining the experiences of visually impaired people participating in tourism and recreational activities with tandem bicycles and to explain the social integration function of cycling.
Design - The research was conducted using qualitative research methods in an exploratory study.
Methodology - Data were collected through in-depth interviews with a total of six visually impaired touring cyclists in Turkey.
Approach - An inductive approach was used in the study.
Findings – After the analysis, four themes were identified: 'embodied experiences,' 'equal difficulties,' 'friendships' and 'social inclusion.' First, the analysis revealed that participants embodied experiences of nature, socialisation, freedom, entertainment, and exploration through body performance in a multisensory manner. Second, disabled people have similar challenges as non-disabled people. Third, friendships rather than acquaintances developed between tandem partners with and without visual impairments, which contributed to long-term social inclusion. Finally, cycling tours play an important role in the social inclusion of people with disabilities by facilitating access to the social environment and raising disability awareness
Originality of the research - This study contributes to the expansion of theoretical and practical knowledge about the cycling experiences of disabled individuals in tourism and leisure.
Keywords Disabled tourism, visually disabled, bicycle tourism, tourism experience, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Cycling activities for recreational or tourism purposes offer many experiences that serve the wellbeing of individuals. Cycling activities can also be considered a physical and mental method of rehabilitation for both disabled and non-disabled individuals. Cycling facilitates the socialisation of disabled individuals and reduces social exclusion (Dunford et al. 2016). Social inclusion refers to the inclusion of disadvantaged individuals in social life and integrating them into society (Genç and Çat 2013). Social inclusion is presented as a basic condition of a well-balanced life and has fostered the participation of disabled individuals in social life along with non-disabled individuals (Khayesi et al. 2010; Lucas 2012).

The vast majority of studies on cycling experiences focus only on individuals without any disabilities (Coghlan 2012; Lamont and McKay 2012; Lamont and Ross 2020; Shipway et al. 2016, Skår et al. 2008). In practice, visually disabled individuals participate in cycling activities by using tandem bicycles (two-person bicycles) with non-disabled individuals: The non-disabled person (pilot) sits on the front seat and steers the bicycle, and the visually impaired person (co-pilot) sits on the back seat and pedals[1]. These cycling activities are not only for disabled individuals: They are activities that allow for socialisation between disabled and non-disabled individuals. In this context, cycling tours can be seen as a means for disabled individuals to participate in social life or, in other words, experience social inclusion. In addition, social inclusion constitutes a basis for discussing and solving the problem of exclusion of individuals and groups from various transport systems (Church et al. 2000; Lucas and Musso 2014). Accordingly, social inclusion is a means of ending social exclusion while simultaneously granting access to society. However, there are very few studies that provide empirical evidence or deeper insights into social inclusion and the cycling experiences of disabled individuals. Therefore, the aim of this study is to detail the experiences of visually disabled individuals who participated in tourism and recreational activities using tandem bicycles, and to reveal the insights on social inclusion in terms of these experiences.

An exploratory field study was conducted through interviews with six disabled cyclists. The results of the study can be used as a guide to create new and improve on already existing recreational and tourism activities for visually disabled participants. Therefore, the results of this study can offer insights for policymakers and businesses in accessible tourism by providing an understanding of the demand for these activities.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is a concept that aims to include disadvantaged groups, such as the disabled, elderly, and women, in social life by helping with socialising and integration into society. Social exclusion generally happens when certain members of society are actively deprived of economic, social, political, and cultural rights (Bilton et al. 2002, 79). Exclusion is a condition and process in which individuals are prevented from integration into society and have limited access to opportunities; they are deprived of basic needs, detached from the society, and are lacking in or are deprived of civil, political, economic, and social rights. Social exclusion is a state of physical, emotional, and social disability. Socially excluded individuals and groups are unprotected and vulnerable people who are subject to inequality and exposed to all kinds of risks (Sapancalı 2005, 53). In this regard, the concept of social inclusion is aimed at the integration of disadvantaged groups into society. It is also concerned with the levels of integration into society in general (Genç and Çat 2013, 369). In this context, social inclusion is defined by the policies and actions put into place with the aim of fostering social solidarity and erasing the distinctions between ‘me’ and ‘us,’ as well as ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Stjernø 2004, 17). With the help of institutions, social inclusion aims to address

[1] Terms suggested by the Co-pedal Association (in Turkey) for visually impaired cyclists.

the difficulties some people have with integrating into society (Buğra 2005; McConkey et al. 2021).

Another concept that is strongly associated with social inclusion and exclusion is social cohesion (Mohammadi 2019). Social cohesion is the welfare assurance capacity of all members in a society and is based on many factors: equality and justice in accessibility; the prevention of discrimination; autonomous individual development; preserving human dignity; and participating in community life. Strengthening intercultural interactions and communication, as well as recognition and respect for diversity are the essential concepts behind social cohesion (Duman and Alacahan 2010, 105-109). Also, social cohesion refers to the sense of belonging in a community and trust among community members (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2019). In this context, social cohesion can be considered as a concept that supports social inclusion through the development of bonds between individuals with different characteristics within the community.

All humans need social interaction in the form of spending time with family, friends and other people with whom they feel comfortable and they can share their sorrows and joys. Therefore, it stands to reason that everyone needs to be embraced by society, as it allows individuals to see meaning in life and have their psycho-social needs met. A lot of disabled people face the risk of social exclusion, which makes it difficult for them to participate in social life, support themselves, share the same spaces with non-disabled people, see themselves as a part of society, and feel happy with living a solitary life. These difficulties can only be overcome with social inclusion. Therefore, cycling can be considered an important tool that allows for the participation of disabled individuals in social life.

1.2. Bicycle Touring Experiences

Bicycle touring is a recreational activity. As a form of tourism, bicycle touring is now a trending activity around the world (CBI 2022). Due to this, academic studies examining cycling experiences from different points of view have also increased (Lamont and McKay 2012; Shipway et al. 2016; Skår et al. 2008) as there are many characteristics of cycling experiences. The concept of cycling experiences has multiple meanings that vary considerably (Ritchie et al. 2010; Skår et al. 2008). This variation is determined by several external factors, such as the type of activity, bicycle, route, and geography, as well as internal factors, such as the motivation, interest, and expertise of the participant. Those who regularly participate in cycling activities are motivated to pursue many experiences, including adventure experiences, becoming competent, personal challenges, relaxation or retreats, making friend and social encounters (Guo et al. 2021; Ritchie et al. 2010).

Performance-based existential originality is also seen in cycling experiences (Aşan and Akoğlan Kozak 2015; Lamont and McKay 2012). Urry and Larsen (2011, 189) explain the concept of performance in terms of embodiment and complex social relationships. Embodiment is the process of interpretation and experiencing a sensorial human condition through practice (Crouch 2000, 67). During their cycling experiences,

individuals increase the embodiment of their experiences by using more than one sense: They perceive their environment and have physical experiences, such as looking at sights, smelling, hearing voices, and feeling the rain or wind. In addition, cycling is also a body performance, as the cyclists move by using their muscles (Aşan and Akoğlan Kozak 2015; Lamont and McKay 2012). Based on their performance, individuals taking part in cycling activities experience existential originality in three forms: active, subjective, and individual.

Cycling activities can also help build new social relationships (Guo et al. 2021; Taylor 2010), as cyclists form communities by gathering for events. These cycling communities act as a social institution loaded with symbolic meanings, in which individuals can acquire social identities in addition to their personal identities (Aşan and Yolal 2018; Volgger and Demetz 2020). Social identity is formed as a result of social interaction, and the effects of this interaction can be observed in the development of a sense of belonging (Sutton and Giddens 2010). Shipway et al. (2016) have also focused on the symbolic meanings of cycling experiences through the observation of practices in a major bike race held by a large organisation in Australia. These researchers conclude that the cyclists in this race produced collective meanings and engaged with other cyclists during the event. Likewise, Lamont (2014) suggests that a cyclist subculture has formed through the rituals, symbols, and stories shared by cyclists. Therefore, taking part in cycling activities on a regular basis can provide individuals with a certain social identity from which they can draw a sense of belonging (Coghlan 2012; Lamont and Ross 2020; Shipway et al. 2016). Moreover, a cyclist may gain a new social identity by leaving one cycling group and joining another of their own free will.

Consequently, in the cycling tours that will be examined in this study as a special interest type of tourism, the cycling experiences are understood to be highly active, reflexive, multiple, and existential, and these experiences have unique social dynamics and distinctive features.

1.3. Cycling Experiences and Social Inclusion

As mentioned in the previous section, cycling experiences, especially in group activities, are social experiences. Participants come together and form new social structures in which they develop a sense of belonging. Social interactions of heterogeneous participants in cycling events can support social inclusion. For example, The ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) Research Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) investigated and generated action on small-scale local cycling projects in the UK, with a focus on exploring the links between such projects and social inclusion. According to the project report (CASE 2000), small-scale cycling projects can be effective in addressing community development and social inclusion needs.

One of the concepts strongly associated with social inclusion is social cohesion (Mohammadi 2019). Asan et al. (2022) focuses on social cohesion in cycling groups. According to this, participants share ‘an intense sense of us’, in other words, cohesion in cycling group events. When evaluated collectively, such group membership offers a temporary space of belonging where themes such as acting together, cooperation, entertaining together, appreciation, shared concerns and values co-exist (Asan et al.

2022, 12). In this context, cohesive cycling socialites can be considered are supporting platforms for social inclusion.

On the other hand, studies in fields such as education, sports, sociology, and health revealed that cycling facilitates the socialization of disabled individuals and supports social inclusion (Dunford et al. 2016; Krizek 2018; Lin et al. 2010; Mohammadi 2019; Verdot and Schut 2012). For example, Dunford et al. (2016) examined the bicycle learning experiences of children with disabilities such as developmental coordination disorder, autistic spectrum disorder, general learning difficulties, hearing impairment. The study supports the observation that learning to ride a bike for children with disabilities is a popular activity which increases confidence and provides opportunities for shared recreation with families and peers and promotes social inclusion. Similarly, Mohammadi (2019) examined the potential and limitations of a cycling community initiative in fostering social inclusion of newly arrived adult female asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. According to this study to facilitate social inclusion the participants' prolonged and sustained engagement in the program as volunteers are crucial.

There are also studies in the field of tourism on disability experiences (Darcy 2012; Gillovic et al. 2021). However, no study has been found focusing on cycling activities of the disabled as a touristic and recreational experience. In this context, this study aims to reach theoretical and practical implications by examining the bicycle tour experiences of visually impaired individuals.

2. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study was designed, in line with the objective of the study. An inductive approach was followed in the study. An inductive method is guided and focused by the research objectives, where reliable and robust findings arise directly from the raw data, not from preconceived expectations (Thomas 2006). Furthermore, analysing qualitative data necessitated the application of a pragmatic general inductive technique as a practical and systematic set of methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Although there are studies on cyclist experiences, the experiences of disabled cyclists are waiting to be explored as it is a new subject. From this point of view, the study was designed as exploratory qualitative research in which the inductive approach was followed.

In addition, the researcher has knowledge in this field, as they have observed these cycling activities through their volunteering as an active cyclist for touring organisations specifically for the visually impaired between 2015 and 2018. Therefore, the researcher is familiar with the common communication codes used among the cyclists. This experience is advantageous for this study in terms of long-term interaction, which is a criterion required for the credibility of qualitative studies (Glesne 2016).

2.1. Data Collection

The data were collected through in-depth interviews. Disabled individuals who join cycling activities with tandem bicycles were asked to participate. The snowball sampling method was used to identify the interviewees. The snowball sampling method is an approach used frequently in qualitative research that helps with reaching key persons who can provide rich sources of information (Patton 2002, 237). The first interviewee was identified during a social responsibility tour held with tandem bicycles in Eskişehir, Turkey. When selecting the other participants, the criterion that determined preference was the potential candidate having participated in both recreational and tourism cycling activities for at least two years. When the concepts and processes from the theoretical sampling became repetitive, it was decided that a sufficient number of individuals has been reached (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Yıldırım and Şimşek 2011, 115). The aim of theoretical sampling is to refine ideas, not to increase the size of the sample and it helps to identify conceptual boundaries and pinpoint the fit relevance of the research categories (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p. 519). So, in the light of the theoretical sampling approach, it was decided that a sufficient number of individuals were reached when the emerging concepts and processes started to repeat and, a total of 6 people were interviewed.

In the interviews, the participants were first asked about their tourism experiences and they were presented with an overview of bicycle tourism. After this, questions related to cycling experiences were asked. The interviews were conducted either telephonically or face-to-face during August and September of 2019. The average duration of the interviews was 25 minutes for all six interviewees.

2.2. Participants

A selection of the participants' demographic information is provided in Appendix 1. All of the participants support themselves through active employment. In addition, people with any disability were invited to participate in this study and it is only coincidence that all participants chosen are visually impaired. Some of the tour activities were classified as recreational tours and further divided into daily, weekend, or evening tours, which was determined by the information provided by the participants. The tours that lasted longer than one day and that were held in different regions were categorised as tourist tours. These include tours where the participants joined other cycling festivals, organised their own bicycle tours with their friend(s) independently, and/or participated in amateur cycling races planned by large organisations, such as Gran Fondo. It is important to note that, although the visually impaired cannot obtain a licence for cycling, they can cycle for sporting purposes, such as being healthy and staying in shape.

2.3. Data analysis

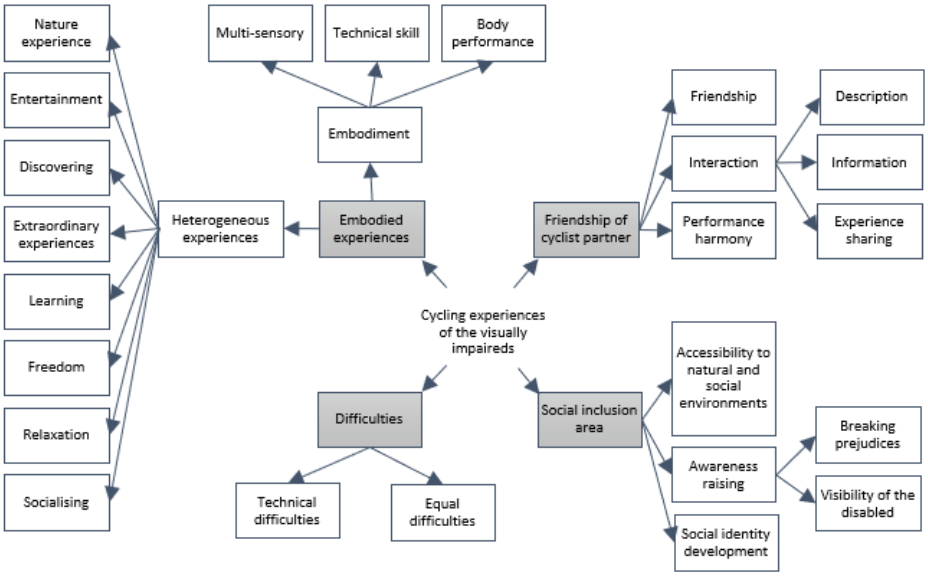
The interviews were recorded with the consent of participants. These audio recordings were then transcribed and analysed. The data were analysed using the NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis program, and the coding was performed using the similarities and differences technique (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A three-step coding procedure,

using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, was used to determine the themes. Themes arose from the qualitative data using similarities and contrasts, as well as cutting and sorting techniques. The similarities and differences technique are used to establish systematic comparisons between data units (Glaser and Strauss 1967). While the cutting and sorting process entails picking phrases or statements that appear to be significant and then grouping them into piles of related items (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These techniques are the most versatile techniques for discovering themes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). A mixed-method approach was followed to determine the formation and names of the themes by using both the concepts from the data and the frameworks from the literature (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The consensus and disagreement formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994, 64) was used to ensure the reliability of the qualitative data, with the reliability coefficient being 0.81. Furthermore, the themes that disagreed with the others were reformulated.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main themes and subthemes were determined from the analysis performed. They are shown in Figure 1. The idea of displaying main themes and subthemes on a single sheet is useful as a coding structure evolves (Miles and Huberman 1994). In this regard, all findings were visualized by manual mapping.

Figure 1: **Themes and subthemes**



3.1. Embodied Experiences

According to the thematic analysis, the participants had various experiences through their embodiment. First of all, the participants have had many different experiences and these were categorised as: nature experience, entertainment, discovery, extraordinary experiences, learning, freedom, relaxation, and socialising. For example, Participant 1 (P1) expresses their nature experience as follows:

'*The best thing about tours is sleeping outside, being in nature. When camping is included in the tour, one is in a completely natural setting: an experience not usually accessible for the visually impaired.'*

When asked what a bicycle means to them, participant 2 (P2) highlights the freedom that a bicycle offers, saying it is, '*Freedom in a nutshell*.' In another example, participant 6 (P6) attracts attention to their socialising experience by stating that they have an active social life with the people they have met through bicycle tours. From these observations within the context of socialising, it can be determined that new friendships are formed during bicycle tours. Participant 3 (P3) summarises the situation by saying, '*We make new friends and grow our circles. For example, I meet new people such as dentists, university students, teachers, and engineers on the bicycle tours*.'

On the other hand, P3's statements regarding the extraordinary experiences offered by bicycle tours indicate that the concept of an ordinary life has subjective meanings for the visually impaired:

'*Once, when we went to a race, there was a guy who had left his mother, probably for the first time in his life. We went camping and slept in the tent for three days. This was an incredible experience for him; he was impressed by everything. He was saying, "Look, there is the gear on the left," and this blew his mind because he had never seen something like that in his life.*'

According to these findings, it can be seen that the participants' cycling experiences have pluralised. The fact that bicycle tourism experiences have a heterogeneous nature is also supported by other studies in the literature (Ritchie et al. 2010; Skår et al 2008). Moreover, the experiences that visually impaired participants have, such as nature, entertainment and discovery, are frequently found in the bicycle tourism literature (Ritchie et al. 2010; Skår et al. 2008). It is also noted in the literature that the participants had some experiences that were different to those experienced in everyday life. In other words, these participants had extraordinary experiences in their cycling activities. However, this study makes room for the fact that the definition of extraordinary experiences may differ, depending on the visually impaired participants' lives and experiences. In addition, according to the literature, socialisation experiences are the most observed experiences in cycling activities (Guo et al. 2021; Ritchie et al. 2010; Skår et al. 2008). Similarly, in this study, socialisation was one of the experiences mentioned most by participants. In the light of these findings, it can be determined that visually impaired cyclists may have similar types of diverse experiences as non-disabled cyclists.

Participants actively display performance in cycling activities and have subjective experiences. As pointed out by Urry and Larsen (2011), performance in tourist experiences contributes to embodiment, complex social relationships, and existential experiences. In the analysis made from this point of view, the embodiment experiences of the participants' performances in the cycling activities have been explained as a subtheme.

The cyclists can travel from one place to another with their muscles, thereby expending physical effort to move. This use of physical force was an experience emphasised by the participants during the interviews. For example, Participant 2 (P2) draws attention to the importance of using physical force with the following words:

'*All in all, it has two wheels working with human force. You've got to keep going, no matter the physical conditions, whether there is wind, a faulty mechanical system, or a hill. You know you can go nowhere without your own strength*.'

According to the literature, using physical force is the main indicator of the embodiment experience (Aşan and Akoğlan Kozak 2015; Lamont and Mckay 2012). People move by using their bodies in their cycling experiences. Similarly, the visually impaired participants in the study experience mobility by travelling between certain points with their physical strength.

On the other hand, participants highlighted their technical skills while talking about their cycling experiences. This is relevant as having technical knowledge on the maintenance and repair of bicycles and applying this information may be another physical experience for the participants. P3 gives an example of this situation:

'*We dismantle and reassemble the tandem bike by memorisation. And I think this is what should be taught. Sometimes it happens, for example, that we need to inflate a tyre, and the visually impaired cyclists get too excited. I think the visually impaired should also be taught the technical side of this job*.'

As this statement indicates, the bodily movements required for technical issues, not only the physical effort spent while cycling, are important experiences for the visually impaired participants. This finding, unlike the literature, indicates that visually impaired individuals may have embodiment experiences during cycling activities in more diverse ways than those of non-disabled individuals.

The senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling can be experienced simultaneously when cycling. Although visually impaired participants cannot see during their cycling experiences, they can hear the voices around them, and they can smell and feel the physical changes. P2 expressed such perception experiences: '*It's like the smells we catch, such as the smell of the animals, we hear the other cyclist's voices, and feel the condition of the roads.*' Another example P5 states, '*it's exciting to feel the wind*'.

Using more than one sense organ at a time is defined as multi-sensory perception and is an indicator of an embodied experience (Lamont and Mckay 2012; Urry and Larsen 2011). As supported by the literature, the visually impaired cyclists gain physical

experiences through their multi-sensory perceptions due to their other sense organs, despite their loss of sight.

As a result, rather than uniform experiences, the participants have highly diverse and subjective experiences during their cycling experiences. Participants have embodied experiences, despite their visual disability, due to the use of their physical strength, technical skills, and multi-sensory experiences. These embodied experiences enable the participants to have existential freedom.

3.2. Sharing the Difficulties of Tandem Bicycles

In the interviews, the participants were asked what kind of difficulties and problems they had encountered during cycling activities due to their disabilities. All of the participants agreed that they did not have many problems. A few problems encountered were related to the pilot and/or the tandem bike. For example, P2 explained their problems with the pilot by stating: '*In fact, there is nothing difficult. It is hard to organise people. One can usually say, "Come on, let's go." But I can't say it since I need a pilot*.'

In addition, participants stated that they have difficulties when moving the bicycle manually, especially on long tours, due to the heavy weight of tandem bikes making them difficult to carry: '*We usually don't have any difficulties. As a problem… We have a transfer problem due to the size of the bike*'(P4). According to field observations, transferring bicycles, carrying loads on long tours, finding a suitable companion, cycling in traffic, lack of bicycle paths, etc. problems are common problems experienced by all cyclists. Therefore, it can be seen that these difficulties are related to external factors rather than the disabilities of the participants. On the other hand, it was observed that the participants compensated for the difficulties caused by their disabilities with their own methods. For example, P1 points out that they find it important to carry a walking cane as a safety precaution: '*I carry a cane with me to not trip over a rock or something. I know where my cane is even if we sit down. I mean, we can take some measures as well.'*

P2 also interacted with their environment, despite their loss of sight, by being organised:

'*There is no difficulty actually. For example, I ask the person ahead to tell me where to put the gear. There are also some fixed things that we regularly do. For example, I always keep the pole bag of the tent in the tent pocket. The places in which I put my stuff are always the same. I am trying to set standards*.'

This shows that the participants find their own solutions for the difficulties they encounter and, therefore, do not consider them difficulties. When comparing these activities against their daily lives, all of the participants state that they do not experience more problems in cycling activities than those they encounter in their everyday lives. The difficulties described by sighted people could be the daily reality for visually impaired people.

The participants highlighted the difficulties of finding a suitable pilot. When considering that the pilot is also a touring partner, finding a suitable touring partner could be

problematic, even for sighted touring cyclists (Aşan and Akoğlan Kozak 2015). Physical movement of the bicycle is a common challenge for touring cyclists. As a matter of fact, all of the participants stated that they had similar difficulties with people who have the ability of sight. For example, P1 states, '*The only difference is that we don't see around us. However, we experience the same difficulties while riding up a hill*,' and P3 asserts that, '*So far, I have joined some activities and had no difficulties. I mean, I didn't have more difficulties compared to others. For example, if the pilot gets a flat tyre and falls off, the co-pilot falls off too*.' Another example, P5 states, *'I don't have a big problem on tours. Finding a friendly pilot is enough for me".*

It is important to note that, in cycling activities, riding a tandem with a visually impaired individual should not be considered the same as riding a tandem bike with a sighted person. As pointed out by the participants, a pilot with the ability of sight takes a complementary role in the activities, which means that the cyclists with visual disabilities can overcome problems they encounter with the help of a pilot. The most important finding here is the fact that the visually impaired face similar problems to those without visual disabilities. What is more, these similarities bring both groups together so that they are on the same social level during the cycling activities. Accordingly, cycling can equate visually impaired individuals with healthy individuals in terms of difficulties. Similarly, Research Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE 2000) supported that social inclusion can be achieved on the basis of equality. Therefore, cycling activities can be considered as a social inclusion activity by bringing the participants together on the basis of shared difficulties.

3.3. Friendships with Cycling Partners

The complementary actor in the cycling activities of a visually impaired individual is the cyclist partner and pilot. In the analysis of the interviews, the findings on pilots were categorised under one theme. This theme includes the concepts of performance harmony, friendship, and interaction, which reflect the characteristics of a good relationship between the pilot and co-pilot.

First of all, the participants emphasise that the pilots and co-pilots should physically cycle in a harmony. P1 states that, '*In the end, everyone has a unique cycling style. Some take the bends more widely, while others turn by tilting; some of them are slow and some are fast. You get used to each other.*'

According to the literature, performance harmony is one of the required characteristics for being good touring partners (Aşan and Akoğlan Kozak 2015). In principle, the pilot and co-pilot are touring partners. At this point, the pilot is not only a partner but also a friend who develops emotional bonds with the visually impaired individual.

The participants pointed out that they all made friends during the cycling activities. P6 still spends a lot of time with their cycling partner in their daily life, in addition to the touring activities: '*The people I cycled with later became my close friends*.' Accordingly, it is an important factor for visually impaired individuals to establish friendships with their pilots, especially during long touring events. Supporting this finding, Guo et al.

(2021) revealed that developing friendships in cycling activities is a prominent experience. In addition, according to P6, a relationship of trust must be established between a cyclist and their cycling partner. Regarding this trust, P3 states that, '*Sometimes it happens that we get on the bike, and I notice that the pilot has suddenly disappeared. They should help us go somewhere and come back. They should be like a partner rather than just a pilot*.'
P1 also says:

'*For example, the sound of vehicles passing over a puddle of water echoes and makes it difficult to hear. But when it comes to being on the bike, a car driving over a puddle does not do anything, as we are already on the bike with someone who can see. These are the kinds of advantages.*'

According to the participants, visually impaired cyclists feel more confident with the presence of a pilot. Being accompanied by someone with the ability of sight gives a sense of trust to the participants, which is related to the pilot's complementary role. As a result, this sense of trust may encourage the formation of a friendship. On the other hand, the pilots participate voluntarily in some cycling activities with the visually impaired. P3 highlights that volunteer participants may become mandatory participants:

'*For example, university students sometimes come for community service. But once we get on the bike, the team falls apart, and then there is no one around to help. I mean, it disturbs us when they see this situation as a duty*.'

Also, Mohammadi (2019) studying the cycling community initiative for asylum seekers and refugees emphasizes volunteering. According to Mohammadi (2019), interaction and volunteering of all participants are necessary to ensure social participation. However, in this study, it is understood that there is a need for friendship beyond volunteering for the integration of disabled and non-disabled individuals in touristic or recreational activities. The individuals with the ability of sight participate in bicycle tours along with visually impaired individuals, but this does not automatically guarantee friendship. Being a pilot, according to the researcher's experience as a volunteer cyclist in the field, requires a great deal of sacrifice, especially on long tours. Because everyone, disabled or not, cycles for personal reasons such as enjoyment and relaxation. It's difficult to take on someone else's responsibilities, especially on long travels. As a result, rather than volunteering, friendship is the primary motive. Consequently, harmony, trust, and interaction are necessary for the volunteering relationship to transform into a long-term cycling partnership.

Finally, pilot and co-pilot interaction can be described in one of three ways: description, information, and experience sharing. Firstly, as expressed by all the participants, the most important type of interaction is description, which entails pilots verbally describing the physical environment unseen by the co-pilot. Description supports and complements multi-sensory perceptions in the experiences of visually impaired participants.

During field observations, an experienced pilot said that description is not one-sided: In some cases, the visually impaired co-pilot can describe something for the pilot that does not require sight. For example, the co-pilot could describe some non-visual sensory

experiences such as feelings, voices, and smells. This supports the interaction between the pilot and co-pilot.

In addition, the participants interact with the pilot through experience sharing. Sharing experiences enables the formation and development of a cycling social unit (Taylor 2010). Similarly, visually impaired individuals establish social relationships by sharing their experiences with their pilots. They usually share through conversations, as stated by participant 5 (P5), when the say, '*I prefer to have someone that I can chat with. I'd like for it to be more sincere, rather than serious*.'

Consequently, the pilots in the cycling activities of visually impaired individuals are complementary actors. Based on these findings, particularly in touring activities, it can be seen that establishing a friendship between the pilot and the co-pilot beyond the level of volunteering is the ultimate aim. As witnessed in field observations, these relationships, based on trust and healthy interactions between the visually impaired individual and their sighted pilot, can foster the development of a good cycling partnership**.**

3.4. Cycling Activities as an Area of Social Inclusion

Analysis of the data reveals that cycling activities offer participants the experience of socialising. It can be said that, by meeting new people and socialising through cycling activities, the participants gain a place in society. Cycling, in particular, is a common daily practice for many. Therefore, disabled people who cannot ride bikes are restricted from participating in this practice and the chance of socialisation that comes along with it, whereas the visually impaired who can ride a bike gain a place in social life due to these activities. Like sighted cyclists, visually impaired cyclists take part in bicycle tours, festivals, organised events, and social and cultural activities related to cycling. P1 affirms this by stating, '*It is enjoyable to join tours and festivals because, in this way, we see our friends, cycle together, and have a chat*.'

Cyclists form communities by gathering for shared activities. Understandably, visually impaired individuals may gain an identity and develop a sense of belonging by joining these cycling communities. It is reasonable to say that acquiring a social identity lends itself to social inclusion. Stjernø (2004) stated that social inclusion can only be achieved when the distinctive lines between 'us' and 'them' disappear. Similarly, Asan et al. (2022) point out that acting together, cooperation, entertaining together, appreciation, shared concerns and values co-exist in cycling groups will provide social cohesion. In this regard, it can be considered that cohesion and a sense of belonging develop between disabled and non-disabled cyclists who have similar experiences and difficulties. In this way, the visually impaired individuals acquire a cyclist identity after joining the activities of cycling groups, taking part in social activities, and making a connection with other individuals.

'*Almost all of my close friends are from the cycling group... Cycling is part of my life… Everyone knows me as a cyclist'* (P6)

According to the participants' statements, the bonds established in the activities are not only limited to the tours, but may also extend to life-long relationships, as highlighted by P6. P3 affirms this situation with the following words:

'*For example, I made friends like dentists, university students, teachers, and engineers in the cycling activities. It is good because we greet each other when we see each other on the street… We don't have to cycle every time: We meet with them and converse in everyday life as well*.'

This finding is also supported by observations made in the field by the active researcher. Accordingly, socialization is not limited to tour activities only. Visually impaired cyclists become friends with their tour partners and also spend time in their other leisure time.

In addition to being a means of socialisation, cycling also provides access to other circles. These circles may have natural, social and cultural characteristics. For example, P1 states that, '*Nature becomes accessible when it is usually not for the visually impaired*.' Accordingly, it can be seen that the exclusion of individuals from these environments is prevented by the mobility provided by cycling.

Another area where cycling is a means for visually impaired individuals to socialise is competitive sporting activities. Participants can have amateur sports experiences by participating in Gran Fondo. As a matter of fact, while there originally was no category for disabled individuals, a tandem category has been added for disabled participants, upon the request of visually impaired individuals and the relevant associations. This development is an important point in order to prove that cycling is a means of social inclusion. P3's words reflect very well the impact cycling has on social inclusion:

'*I think and say that I am also living and I am able to do things as well. I am strong and I am racing too… But apart from all of this, you can only just sit at home when you have nothing to do*.'

In addition to these findings, both the participants' statements and the field observations show that cycling activities have the power to create awareness of disabilities. Therefore, it can be concluded that cycling activities create awareness by making disabled individuals more visible and helping them overcome the prejudices related to being disabled. As stated by P1, '*One of the biggest problems for the disabled is being ignored*.' However, the individuals who join the cycling activities become visible on the streets and in public places, such as town centres. Additionally, a bike as large and extraordinary as a tandem draws great attention, as stated by P4: '*When I ride a bike, some people say "Hey, what a nice bike! Let's ride*". They ask for the price. I like it. Sometimes kids on the street see it and we take a tour with them.'

The disabled individual frequently seen on bicycles in social life can create awareness in society. Thus, people seeing visually impaired individuals cycle can develop awareness of the fact that obstacles can be overcome when the required conditions are met. Moreover, the prejudices towards disabilities can be overcome. P1 summarises the situation with the following words: '*It is especially important for sighted people who do*

not have much information about those who cannot see. I mean, people can have stereotypes. Those beliefs are often wrong. We encounter misinformation often.'

On the other hand, the visually impaired individuals who join cycling events also see overcoming bias and creating awareness as a mission, as stated by P2:

'*Sighted people are familiar with the Co-Pedal Association since they often participate in festivals. People help others solve their problems through this organisation. I adapted immediately once I joined. I guide different people so that they can understand how to help and behave towards a disabled person*.'

The findings of the study empirically support studies that suggest that the participation of disabled groups in cycling activities reduces social exclusion and increases social inclusion (Case 2000; Dunford et al. 2016; Mohammadi 2019). To summarise, visually impaired individuals can find a place in social circles as a result of joining cycling activities, acquiring a cyclist identity, accessing other environments through cycling, raising awareness of disabilities, and joining popular and successful cycling races.

CONCLUSION

This study, which focuses on the experiences of visually impaired individuals on cycling tours, explains the social inclusion function of cycling activities. First of all, visually impaired cyclists have varied experiences, categorised as nature, entertainment and socialisation, similar to sighted cyclists. As stated in the literature, the fact that the social experiences, in particular, are the most frequently expressed experiences supports the idea that cycling activities are an important social activity. In addition, the participants have physical experiences that include multi-sensory perception, bodily performance, and use of technical skills. These embodied experiences of the participants, despite their physical barriers, are subjective and have existential meaning for the participants. Thus, these individuals do not only take part in experiences which ease their existential worries and satisfy them, they also experience social life.

For visually impaired participants, cycling tours do not offer any additional difficulties than those that they encounter in their daily life. As agreed upon by all participants, the difficulties that visually impaired cyclists go through, such as manually moving the bicycle, malfunctions, and finding a good touring partner, are similar to those that sighted cyclists experience. As a matter of fact, it is necessary to establish equal conditions for everyone in order to avoid social exclusion and foster social inclusion. Going through similar difficulties during cycling activities creates a natural equality, which supports the idea that cycling activities contribute towards social inclusion.

In cycling activities for the visually impaired, the complementary factor is the sighted cycling partner. In other words, a travel companion is necessary for visually impaired individuals. For a healthy and long-lasting social inclusion experience, the partner should not consider cycling with the disabled individual as an obligation or a temporary volunteering task. It is possible to achieve long-term social inclusion by establishing relationships based on trust and friendship between partners. Descriptions of local

surroundings by sighted partners, being informative, and being willing to establish open lines of communication are determinant factors in building these relationships.

Lastly, it is possible to explain cycling activities as an area of social inclusion through the functions of establishing an identity, raising awareness of the challenges faced by disabled individuals, and access to natural and social environments for the disabled. It is understood that individuals who participate in cycling activities and acquire a social identity usually develop a sense of social belonging, which directly connects with social inclusion. Moreover, these activities, which prevent the exclusion of disabled individuals and makes them visible in social life, also raise awareness and help to counteract stereotypes about the disabled.

Cycling as a social inclusion activity needs recognition and further development. There is a need for policymakers, public administrators, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to take the functions of tourism and recreational activities into more consideration in order to ensure the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals. The disadvantaged groups that experience social exclusion experience it on a greater level due to their lower economic standing. Public institutions can encourage participation in these activities in order to pursue a state of social equality, NGOs can encourage volunteering, government projects can be created to educate the public, and universities can organise activities to raise awareness. In addition to the cycling activities discussed in this study, other activities held with non-disabled cyclists will further support social inclusion.

There is a possible niche market product, in that tours and customised tourism services can be offered to disabled individuals requesting tandem tours. The findings of this study can offer practical contributions to this niche market, as expertise is required to be successful in this field. However, the main problem with this niche market is the lack of awareness regarding this type of tourism. There is a need to promote the knowledge that visually impaired individuals can also ride bicycles. In this context, within the scope of cycling communities, cyclist influencers could be hired for marketing and networking. This awareness could also lead to an improvement in the economy due to an increase in demand for bicycle equipment and tools.

This study aimed to contribute towards the literature on both cycling tourism and accessible tourism by addressing the relationship between tourism experiences and social inclusion. However, this study has various limitations. Firstly, in order to explain the effect of cycling activities on the social lives of individuals, only those who have taken part in cycling activities for a long time were interviewed. Despite the increase in the number of visually impaired individuals undertaking tandem cycling through various associations or social responsibility projects, it was observed that these individuals did not or could not continue with these cycling activities for many reasons, including lack of a partner or not being able to foster a good relationship with the partner. This created a limitation in terms of sampling. Interviews were held with participants who were engaged in the activities for different purposes, including sporting, recreational, and tourism. Future studies carried out with homogenous sampling groups may make it possible to obtain in-depth insights on relevant groups. In addition, the cycling experiences and social inclusion status of individuals who suffer from other disabilities

may differ. Based on this, studies can conducted to examine the attitudes towards participation in activities in terms of the type and even degree of disability.

In this study, cycling activities as a social inclusion activity for disabled individuals were examined. As indicated by the analysis, pilots play a complementary role in these activities. Accordingly, further studies can conducted on the perception, attitudes and behaviours of pilots. Finally, apart from visually impaired individuals, tandem bike activities are also performed with some other disabled groups, such as the hearing impaired and those with Down syndrome. Research on disabled groups carried out in the fields of recreation and tourism may provide understanding in terms of the behaviour of these groups and could become a guide for how to model specific practices. Further recreation and tourism studies can improve the well-being of individuals, as well as ensure that disabled individuals are accepted by society and become a part of social life.

Table 1: **Characteristics of the participants**

Code	Age	Gender	Marital status	Educational status	City of residence	Employment status	Participated/performed tour activities
P1	25	Male	Single	Bachelor's degree	Eskişehir	Active	Recreational; Sporty; Touristic*
P2	36	Male	Single	Bachelor's degree	İstanbul	Active	Recreational; Sporty;
P3	36	Male	Married	Bachelor's degree	Eskişehir	Active	Recreational; Sporty; Touristic
P4	33	Male	Single	Associate degree graduate	Eskişehir	Active	Recreational
P5	21	Male	Single	High school graduate	Eskişehir	Active	Recreational; Sporty
P6	32	Female	Single	High school graduate	İstanbul	Active	Recreational; Touristic

* (independent tour, festivals and races)

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