

# Analysis of inclusive tourism from a critical theory perspective: A look at the mexican case

## Análisis del turismo inclusivo desde la teoría crítica: una mirada del caso mexicano

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### Abstract

The objective of the text is to analyze the concept of Inclusive Tourism through the contrasts of reality. The Critical Theory provides the methodology which is based on the “verification of differences”, i.e. in the confrontation and conflict of the affirmed reality and the real reality of the phenomenon in question. The so-called “inclusive tourism”, as a typology of tourism, has seen fit to raise awareness in both public and private organizations, and even academia, making visible sectors of the population that could hardly have access to the practice of tourism, in almost any of its modalities and forms. Tourism is undoubtedly an economic practice and why not say it, even elitist, so it is hardly inclusive.

**Keywords:** Inclusive tourism, Critical Theory, Human right, Mexico, Marketing strategy

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### Resumen

El objetivo del texto es analizar el concepto de Turismo Inclusivo mediante los contrastes de la realidad. La Teoría Crítica proporciona la metodología la cual se basa en la “constatación de diferencias”, esto es, en la confrontación y conflicto de la realidad afirmada y la realidad real del fenómeno en cuestión. El

llamado “turismo inclusivo”, como tipología de turismo, ha tenido a bien concientizar tanto a organismos públicos, como privados, e inclusive la academia, visibilizando sectores de la población que difícilmente podrían tener acceso a la práctica del turismo, en casi cualquiera de sus modalidades y formas. El turismo, es sin duda una práctica económica y por qué no decirlo, hasta elitista, de modo que con dificultad es inclusivo.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo inclusivo, Teoría Crítica, Derecho humano, México, Estrategia de marketing

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### 1. Introduction

It is well known that tourism, as an economic activity, carries the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of regions or places with tourist potential; however, natural phenomena (earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, etc.) and more recently global public health issues (SARS-CoV-2) have severely impacted this activity, with significant consequences. Tourism has gradually managed to recover due to protective measures required by international official bodies.

Nevertheless, it is not only natural or public health issues that prevent people from visiting tourist destinations; economic and physical barriers also



make it impossible. This paper addresses this issue, with the aim of:

Analyzing the concept of Inclusive Tourism through the contrasts of reality, to identify both theoretical and practical challenges of this type of tourism.

The specific objectives that will help achieve this aim are:

- 1) Describe the concept(s) of inclusive tourism.
- 2) Describe the events in Mexico related to inclusive tourism.
- 3) Contrast the realities of inclusive tourism.

After an exhaustive review of the specialized literature on Inclusive Tourism, it was discovered that the scientific community has yet to reach a consensus on the concept of inclusive tourism, which represents a significant theoretical gap on the subject.

It is precisely due to this theoretical gap or research problem that the hypothesis of this study is that if there is a conceptual consensus on inclusive tourism, then its practice will make sense and benefit both users and tourism service companies, thus justifying its conceptual existence.

Critical Theory provides the methodology used for this analysis, which is based, according to Bonß (in Leyva, 2005), on the “identification of differences”, that is, the confrontation and conflict between the affirmed reality and the real reality of the phenomenon in question, to contribute to the construction of the theoretical body, in this case, of tourism. This means that criticism should be made to construct, not the other way around.

Such contradiction or contrast of realities arises in the context of lived experience, that is, in social praxis, which comes from arguments, in this case, of a theoretical-conceptual nature. The affirmed reality refers to official arguments, which – generally – serve to convince or manipulate various actors to follow an established model that should not be questioned. On the other hand, the real reality refers to processes that do not take official arguments for granted, generating the contrast or conflict between both realities.

To illustrate the two realities, the example of the new Felipe Angeles airport will be used. According to the affirmed reality (the official perspective, in other words, the federal government), it is a world-class airport capable of competing with the best in the world. However, the real reality exposes the lack of both road access, complementary services (taxis or buses), and options, meaning that it does not have enough air routes.

Although the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School was born in a particular context, its arguments serve for studies like the one presented here, since it is necessary to critique and deconstruct the reality of the phenomenon from its concept to later transform it socially.

As tourism researchers, it is necessary to question the existence and proliferation of a large number of tourism typologies, which only describe the activities tourists engage in, so that this critique contributes the basis for the formal continuity of tourism knowledge.

The so-called “inclusive tourism,” as a typology of tourism, has made public and private organizations, as well as academia, more aware, highlighting sectors of the population that would have difficulty accessing tourism in almost any of its forms and modalities.

Through the documentary review, it was found that it lacks a homogeneous concept accepted by the scientific community, as it presents argumentative flexibility, allowing derivations and complicating its conceptual properties.

Historically, it has been the case that both economically vulnerable people and those with physical or intellectual disabilities belong to groups or segments that are disadvantaged in terms of labor, educational, recreational, and tourism opportunities, among others, which hinders social and human development, making them almost invisible to official entities and society. Culturally, this leads to marginalization and segregation due to their difficult integration into economic and even leisure activities.

In the social context, the issue of inclusion has been raised in the form of the well-intentioned need for

integration or visibility of the segment in question, opening some labor-related spaces or opportunities.

In terms of the political framework, both inclusion and inclusive tourism have gained relevance in official discourse. Through entities such as infrastructure policies or the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), there is a stated urgency to adapt both city and building facilities (in terms of accessibility, such as the implementation of ramps) and tourism products and services (special rooms, special beach wheelchairs, etc.). Similarly, the idea of enjoying rest and leisure, expressed as the right to tourism, is emphasized, where “everyone” can enjoy tourism resources, and along with this, the creation of “social” or “inclusive” programs involving vulnerable sectors of society is promoted.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology employed for this study will be qualitative and documentary in nature. However, it will also be necessary to incorporate statistical evidence from official sources to empirically contrast the reality of inclusive tourism in Mexico.

Critical Theory from the Frankfurt School, in turn, provides a research method inspired by Hegelian-Marxist postulates, which leads to interdisciplinarity (Hernández, 2013).

According to representatives of the Frankfurt School, the method must “fulfill the task of accounting for its object of study and result in a theory that reveals social contradictions” (Hernández, 2013: 3-4). This means that both the method and the theory share the responsibility of uncovering contradictions arising from the object of study.

For Hernández (2013: 4), “The epistemic-ontological emphasis of this methodology necessarily leads to a critique of ideologies,” where the research focuses, according to the author, on “destroying any illusion constructed as scientific discourse, philosophical system, political or cultural model” that attempts to evade or obscure contradictions.

In summary, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School offers a framework aimed at overcoming “the simplicity, idealistic stereotypes, and rigidity

of conventional conclusions and interpretations regarding the progress of scientific knowledge in the social sphere” (Gamboa, 2011: 48).

## 3. Theoretical framework

The Frankfurt School’s Theory is founded on the rejection of any justification of the socio-historical reality, as it considers it to be unjust and oppressive. Instead, it advocates for the search for a new, more rational and humane reality.

Critical Theory, according to Gamboa (2013: 48), was conceived and developed to foster an understanding of the historical and cultural situation of society, with the firm objective of “generating actions aimed at its transformation”.

Such understanding enables the interpretation of the problems of modernity, “which contemporary capitalist society faces due to the changes and transformations it has undergone” (Gamboa, 2011: 49), thus prompting a call to awareness among the social groups capable of enacting societal transformation.

At this point, traditional theory—understood as that which serves the natural sciences and later contributed to the “physicalization” of society—fails to perceive social issues. On the contrary, by employing scientific methods, it remains committed to the pursuit of economic progress and development. Therefore, it became necessary to propose a theoretical stance that would be critical, one that, in the words of Hernández (2013: 4), “must assume and account for these oppositions”.

Hence, the fundamental task of Critical Theory has been to uncover contradiction by grounding itself in its temporal context and the human condition throughout history.

The primary concern of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory is thus the revolutionary reconstruction of society in the interest of human emancipation. In other words, it seeks to lift the veil—cultural, intellectual, scientific, etc.—that certain interests impose on society to conceal realities that may be uncomfortable.



Finally, theory must address the economic, historical, cultural, and psychological aspects that influence various events. Consequently, society must be explored not only through positivist tools that provide economic explanations, but also through an interdisciplinary approach—drawing on philosophy and psychology, for instance—not only to contrast but also to understand and achieve transformation.

#### 4. Conceptual approach to inclusive tourism

This tourism type has shifted attention towards demographic sectors for whom tourism and its practice become secondary due to economic, mobility, and even cognitive limitations. However, it is essential to begin by delving into its concept, which can easily lead to conceptual confusion regarding its scope and limitations.

The term “inclusive”, according to the RAE (2022: n/p), is the adjective “that includes or has the virtue and capacity to include”. This implies that the community can integrate or include any individual regardless of their origin, economic situation, etc. When applied to tourism, it is defined by [www.autismomadrid.es](http://www.autismomadrid.es) (2013: n/p) as:

Tourism that enables equal opportunities for all people to fully engage in tourism activities in a safe, comfortable, autonomous, and standardized manner, also seeking economic profitability, benefiting both people with disabilities and sector businesses.

In this regard, Quintero and Núñez (n/d) state that it is “the tourism that seeks to adapt environments, products, and services so that all people can access, use, and enjoy them on equal terms, safely, comfortably, autonomously, and in a normalized way”.

Del Real (2018) adds that it is “the one that uses universal accessibility and design for all as necessary strategies and tools to make tourism a reality for all people”.

The previous definitions agree on the premise that tourism should be “for everyone”, as stated in Article #7 of the World Ethical Code for Tourism (2001:

112), which notes that “The right to tourism for all must be understood as a consequence of the right to rest and leisure...” Additionally, Article #24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms: “Everyone has the right to rest, to enjoy leisure time, to reasonable limitations on working hours, and to periodic paid holidays”. (UN, 2015: 50).

Sánchez et al. (2000: 230) uphold the previous idea and describe the population segments that inclusive and accessible tourism should reach, merging them into a single group:

People with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, as well as other population groups such as citizens of the destination, elderly people, foreigners, individuals with strollers, pregnant women, those with temporary disabilities, people with injuries, obese individuals, very tall or very short people, people carrying loads, children, companions of people with disabilities, and those with allergies, among others.

In this sense, Correa et al. (2020) argue that there is conceptual synonymy between Inclusive Tourism and Accessible Tourism, stating that it refers to the conditions and characteristics that tourism establishments must offer for users with disabilities.

The fusion of Accessible Tourism and Social Tourism is what Molina and Cánoves (2010) call Inclusive Tourism or, more specifically, “Tourism for All”, emphasizing the need to facilitate access for economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

In summary, inclusive tourism shows conceptual flexibility, allowing it to merge with accessible tourism, both agreeing on the premise of making tourism resources and services available to unconventional population segments for the enjoyment of tourism activities. However, it is worth noting Correa et al. (2020) focus not on the individuals but on tourism service companies with infrastructure or facilities for clients with disabilities.

Thus, inclusive, accessible, and tourism for all represent synonyms, as all three embrace the same idea of equal opportunities, also benefiting the destination and the tourism service businesses involved.



## 5. About different abilities and tourism in Mexico

Empirical evidence on the different types of disabilities is essential to reflect on their current status concerning tourism activities and their inclusion in the tourism phenomenon.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), over one billion people, or 15% of the global population, have some form of disability, requiring specialized medical attention. This also involves human rights issues, as individuals with disabilities suffer or are victims of violence, abuse, prejudice, and, as a result, social, economic, labor, and even emotional marginalization. This means that they face not only architectural or informational barriers but also social ones.

According to the Population and Housing Census (INEGI, 2020), there are just over six million people with disabilities in Mexico, representing nearly 5% of the total population. This number increases to over 20 million people, or 16.5% of the national population, when considering those with limitations in performing daily activities such as walking, hearing, communicating (11.1%), or those with mental conditions (0.6%) (see Table 1). More than half of these individuals are women.

**Table 1.** Percentage of the population with disabilities by activity difficulty, 2020

DISABILITY	PERCENTAGE
Walking, climbing, or descending	48%
Seeing, even with glasses	44%
Hearing, even with hearing aids	22%
Bathing, dressing, or eating	19%
Remembering or concentrating	19%
Speaking or communicating	15%

Source: INEGI, Population and Housing Census 2020.

It should be clarified that the sum of the percentages in Table 1 exceeds 100% because some individuals have more than one disability.

In terms of age distribution, 40.9% (the largest group) are over 60 years old; 29.8% are adults between 30 and 59 years old; 9.8% are between 18 and 29 years old, and 9.1% are under 17 years old (INEGI, 2020).

In contrast, in the population without disabilities, the largest group is between 30 and 59 years old. As this population ages, the disability rate is expected to rise.

In Mexico, there are some tourist destinations already positioned or in the process of positioning themselves regarding accessibility in products or services, with conditions for adapting facilities (architecture, urban planning, equipment, and furniture), services (staff awareness, policies, and information in various formats for different types of disabilities), and transportation (local, air, and specialized) as minimum requirements for the enjoyment of resources (SECTUR, 2016).

However, there are still few tourist destinations in Mexico with the necessary conditions for accessible tourism development: Cuastecomates in Jalisco, Playa Delfines and Playa Las Perlas in Cancun, Playa Caribe in the municipality of Solidaridad, Bahía Papanao in Guerrero, Playa Bonita and Playa Puntilla in Campeche, Playa La Entrega in Oaxaca, Kino Mágico in Sonora, and Playa Miramar in Tamaulipas (Morales, 2019).

These destinations are a reality today, thanks to the efforts of both local governments and private investments. However, there are still few destinations that offer this accessibility for the large number of people with disabilities. The services offered are primarily for individuals with mobility issues, providing ramps and special beach chairs, but other types of disabilities are often overlooked.

It is also justifiable that hotels—regardless of their star rating—are unlikely to invest heavily in modifying or adapting their facilities to make them accessible, focusing mainly on ramps. This could be expanded to include signage, menus in braille or sign language, furniture for shorter individuals or those with obesity, staff training, and other measures to meet the needs of all types of disabilities.

## 6. Tourism: For everyone?

As previously mentioned, inclusive or universal tourism responded to the United Nations' call regarding the human right to leisure and paid vacations.



This may be a human right worth claiming in countries where the poverty index is zero, ensuring that everyone has the economic means and time to explore the world or at least part of it.

In Latin America, and particularly in Mexico, this right exists only on paper and is accessible to few due to the large number of marginalized Mexicans living in poverty.

**Table 2.** Multidimensional poverty measurement

Indicator	Percentage	Millions of people
Population in poverty	43.9	55.7
Population in moderate poverty	35.4	44.9
Population in extreme poverty	8.5	10.8
Educational backwardness	19.2	24.4
Lack of access to health services	28.2	35.7
Lack of access to social security	52.0	66.0
Lack of access to housing spaces	9.3	11.8
Lack of access to nutritious, quality food	22.5	28.6

Source: CONEVAL estimated based on INEGI, 2020.

The idea of the right to tourism and free time to explore the world's beauty is poetic, utopian, and even romantic, at least in Mexico, as the numbers do not support this. As shown in Table 2, high poverty rates prevent millions from exercising their right to travel for leisure. It's important to acknowledge that tourism, as a practice, is an economic activity where not only people move but also money.

Mexico City launched the "Colibrí Viajero" program, aimed at implementing the "for everyone" ideology. The program offers low-cost tours coordinated by the Institute for Dignified Aging. According to the program's website, it was created "to guarantee the right to tourism and inclusion of vulnerable populations in tourist activities through leisure actions..." (SECTUR-CDMX, 2022). These lines contradict the United Nations as the program is not truly for everyone, not just in economic terms but also in age, as it focuses on a specific age group.

Now, considering the informal labor sector, which is economically active yet lacks formal registration or social security, individuals in this segment also have

the right to tourism but cannot exercise it because they "live day by day". They cannot afford to take vacations, especially unpaid ones.

Tourism is undoubtedly an economic and, one might say, elitist practice, where certain social strata compete to see who has visited the most distant or expensive destinations. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that tourism is for everyone; or, to put it bluntly, tourism is not inclusive.

We can tell a homeless person they have the right to tourism, but it will be of no use if they have no money to back that right, no matter how noble the intentions of the official or governmental body inviting people to enjoy tourist destinations.

Now, while we reflect on economically and health-challenged groups, what about other social groups that are less attended to? When considering the creation of products or services for everyone, what about vegans, LGBTQ+ individuals, or Muslims? There are few food and beverage establishments offering options for vegans or other diets.

While some destinations are already recognized as part of "Pink Tourism", this does not mean tolerance is widespread, as social prejudices and stigmas persist. Religious groups also need to be included, such as Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others.

To truly be for everyone, the idea of building tourist clusters should be considered, accounting for economic conditions, health, size, sexuality, religious beliefs, and age. This raises the question: Is it possible to create products and services for everyone? As a business, it is undoubtedly a good idea, offering maximum profitability by targeting the entire market.

## 7. The problem of inclusive tourism: A marketing issue

Tourism, as a field of study, has classified or named various activities tourists engage in, such as religious tourism, adventure tourism, cheese tourism, or inclusive tourism.

Many of these tourism types have been designed to position destinations, like romantic tourism, where the Mexican state of Morelos has a strong offering

and, thanks to marketing, a high demand.

Another advantage of these tourism types is the diversification of products or services at destinations. For example, inclusive tourism, where already recognized and established destinations offer alternatives to underserved market segments, such as the Playa Delfines in Cancun, Quintana Roo. Morales (2019: s/p) notes that the sensitization of destinations should be viewed as a “commercial tactic” due to the profitable market niche, as “people with disabilities spend on average almost 30 percent more on travel than tourists without special needs”.

Similarly, Correa et al. (2022: 48) argue that inclusive tourism “is adopted as part of the family of services, with the full aim of attracting greater economic flow to Mexico’s tourism sector, a market that is still untapped and with great potential”.

Here, a question arises: Is the need for visibility and sensitization toward certain demographic segments driven by economic motives, to increase the profitability of tourism products and services?

It is obvious to recall the importance that image holds for any tourist destination, as its future economic success depends on it. But what happens if that image cannot be seen or heard?

The Government of Mexico created the Inclusive Tourism Seal “to certify all those tourism service providers that incorporate accessibility criteria into their daily operations and organizational culture, so that national and international tourists with disabilities can enjoy our destinations” (SECTUR, 2017: s/p). This program recognizes companies that meet indicators such as:

- External facilities;
- Internal facilities;
- Rooms and bathrooms;
- Signage; and
- Attention and information services.

The Ministry of Tourism itself registered the companies granted the seal, and of the 32 tourism service companies, 30 are located in the municipality of León, Guanajuato (SECTUR, 2020). It is evident that both the municipal government and the private sector are making efforts in response

to this call. Nevertheless, this initiative makes the destination more accessible than inclusive, due to the distinction between the two concepts.

## 8. Final considerations

Talking about Inclusive Tourism, it is not limited to the installation of ramps, which is the main mistake made to meet certain minimum requirements. To truly say that tourism is inclusive, we must consider, technically, half of the human population: senior citizens, people of short stature, those with obesity, pregnant women, and even parents with strollers.

This can be justified due to the ambiguity of the concept, which allows for interpretation—often to the benefit of certain groups, who act for the spotlight and social visibility, rather than considering the real transformation that is needed.

Both inclusive tourism, accessible tourism, and tourism for all respond to the urgent need to make forgotten social groups visible. While these groups have the right to tourism, it is the tourism industry itself that closes off recreational possibilities for them. Ironically, this is another reason why the issue has been brought to the attention of both public and private organizations, driven by the economic benefits generated from this segment, which helps enhance both the destination’s image and the products or services designed for them.

Thanks to Critical Theory and its methodology, the significant contrast between the concept of inclusive tourism and its related terms, the official discourse, and what actually happens as a result of the proposed concept has been revealed. This means that neither the concept, nor the discourse, nor the practice are coherent with each other, as it has been shown that tourism for all is not actually for everyone, at least not in Mexico, due to marked social, economic, educational, and other differences. This makes the right to tourism and leisure an unattainable and utopian idea for the large number of Mexicans living in poverty.

If only the installation of ramps in tourism services and infrastructure at destinations were considered, the severe delay or lack of attention for this social group would still be evident. Therefore, it would not be accurate to describe a country as being concerned about people who use wheelchairs, whether temporarily or permanently.



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