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Improvement of event accessibility and integration measures for people with special needs

Abstract. This study investigates the accessibility barriers encountered by individuals with disabilities in participating in public events in Lithuania and explores integration measures aimed at improving inclusion. Drawing on comparative quantitative research conducted in 2021 and 2024 (N = 253 in 2024), the findings indicate a positive shift in perceptions of event accessibility, with the average rating increasing from 5.85 to 7.22. Despite these improvements, significant challenges persist, including physical, financial, and informational barriers that hinder full participation. The research highlights successful international practices, such as those implemented at EXPO 2020 Dubai and MCM London Comic Con, which encompass physical adaptations, sensory tools, accessible information, and emotional support measures. The study underscores the need for a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to accessibility that addresses both structural barriers and societal attitudes, thereby promoting greater inclusion and social integration of individuals with disabilities in public life.

Keywords: accessibility, inclusion, disability, special needs, social integration, events, integration measures, barriers

Introduction

In recent years, the significance of accessibility and inclusion across various sectors of society has become increasingly recognized, particularly regarding the integration of individuals with special needs in events. Events serve as vital spaces for social interaction, not only providing entertainment and networking opportunities but also playing a crucial role in fostering social integration. They help cultivate a unified community and promote tolerance, irrespective of individual characteristics or abilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) emphasizes that the primary objective is to ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully and equally enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms, ensuring their accessibility and opportunities to engage in society.

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According to data from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, approximately 224,900 individuals with disabilities resided in Lithuania by the end of 2023. Projections by the European Court of Auditors (2023) indicate that this number is expected to rise in the future, suggesting an increase in the population of individuals with special needs. This trend poses challenges not only to the social protection system but also necessitates a broader approach to ensuring accessibility and inclusion within society. Despite events being designed for all, individuals with special needs frequently encounter various barriers that hinder their full participation. Barriers to equal participation are associated with various obstacles, such as inaccessibility, discrimination, and marginalization (Harrison and Kopit, 2020). While special needs can manifest irrespective of age, disability remains a primary factor necessitating additional conditions for societal integration. Therefore, this study examines special needs through the lens of disability.

Disability can significantly impact an individual's quality of life and limit their social roles (Baušytė-Sipovič, 2021). In light of the emerging challenges, prioritizing the integration of individuals with disabilities becomes essential. This research analyzes the challenges faced by event participants with disabilities and evaluates best practices that can facilitate inclusion in organized events.

The aim of this paper is to examine the accessibility barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in participating in events. This research highlights the increasing recognition of accessibility and inclusion as essential components in various societal domains, particularly in the integration of individuals with special needs. Through a comprehensive literature review, the paper summarizes existing studies on event accessibility and the integration of persons with disabilities, emphasizing the challenges they encounter, including discrimination and physical barriers. To achieve this, the research analyzes the obstacles reported by event participants with disabilities and evaluates successful practices from both local and international contexts. This study contributes to the broader discourse on social inclusion, stressing the importance of addressing the impact of accessibility on participation, which fosters a more cohesive society.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing updated empirical data on the accessibility of events for individuals with disabilities in Lithuania, based on a comparative analysis of 2021 and 2024 data. Furthermore, it identifies best practices from both local and international contexts, offering actionable recommendations for event organizers. The research adds value by addressing a gap in national studies on practical measures that enhance inclusion and by proposing ways to adapt successful international models to the Lithuanian setting.

Literature review

According to the Lithuanian Law on Social Integration of Disabled Persons (2005), the concept of "special needs" encompasses a broad spectrum of requirements arising from long-term health impairments and environmental factors that limit an individual's capacity to participate fully in society. This legal framework establishes a critical distinction: special needs exist independently of disability, the ability to

work, or age. As of January 1, 2024, terminology in this area is evolving; the term “special needs” will transition to “individual assistance needs”, reflecting a more comprehensive understanding of accessibility rights across various aspects of life beyond employment. This shift emphasizes the need for adaptive measures that support individuals in diverse settings, signaling a move towards an inclusive society that recognizes the unique challenges faced by those with long-term health conditions. The evaluation of special needs involves assessing an individual’s health status and capacity for daily activities. Such assessments are conducted through medical referrals to the Agency for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022), which categorizes needs into four distinct levels, ranging from complete dependency to minimal support requirements. This classification system highlights the importance of tailoring support services to the individual’s specific circumstances, as needs can vary significantly based on factors such as disability type, familial and financial context, and physical environment. Functional limitations, which can manifest in various domains, profoundly impact healthcare, employment, education, and social participation. Individuals with disabilities often encounter barriers that hinder their engagement in cultural activities, which is critical for their overall well-being and integration into society (Dumbraskaitė, 2018).

As events, both formal and informal, play a vital role in the social integration of individuals with special needs. The diversity of events underscores the need for comprehensive classification, with key aspects including size, status, and the intended audience. Bowdin et al. (2012) categorize events into four groups: major events, mega events, hallmark events, and local/community events. Each category has its implications for accessibility, particularly for individuals with special needs. As noted by Nomanovas (2022), not all venues hosting these events are designed with accessibility in mind, creating barriers for individuals with disabilities. This limitation has led to the increased adoption of remote and hybrid event formats, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they present alternative opportunities for participation and inclusion (Richards and Simons, 2023).

Accessibility remains a crucial element in the discourse surrounding special needs and event participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) underscores that accessibility entails ensuring individuals with disabilities can live independently and participate fully in society. Due to the recognition of accessibility as one of the most important aspects of inclusion, new laws are increasingly being passed in various countries, requiring improvements in physical, information, and media accessibility (Jiménez-Andres, 2024). Various studies, such as those by Finkel and Dashper (2020), argue that creating inclusive events requires a comprehensive understanding of physical, social, cultural, economic, and political factors, asserting that addressing these issues is imperative for effective participation. Montagud, Orero, and Matamala (2020) expand on the concept of accessibility by emphasizing the importance of content availability and clarity, advocating for measures that ensure all participants can comprehend event-related information. Clijsters and Metten (2023) introduce the notion of integral accessibility, which goes beyond merely removing physical barriers

to encompass the accessibility of information and communication, enabling individuals to express themselves and engage fully in events. This holistic approach is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment that supports diverse needs.

Despite significant advancements in understanding and implementing accessibility measures, individuals with special needs continue to face many challenges in event participation. Barriers are often physical, social, and intellectual, with many individuals encountering obstacles that hinder their full participation in societal activities (Serbentienė, 2021). The 2024–2026 Action Plan for Ensuring Participation of Persons with Disabilities states that as many as 65 percent of individuals with disabilities experience difficulties living independently due to insufficiently adapted environments (2023). However, individuals with disabilities participating in societal life face not only physical environmental barriers (stairs, event spaces) but also social barriers (education level, unemployment, social exclusion) and intellectual accessibility challenges (language barriers, sensory impairments) (Sousa and Vlachou, 2021). Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges, as individuals with disabilities often allocate limited resources to leisure and cultural activities, thus facing economic exclusion (Hamilton, 2020).

Moreover, people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or neurological disorders are often viewed as having certain deficiencies (Brown et al., 2018). One of the most commonly encountered terms in foreign academic sources is the concept of ableism, which has not yet become an established term in the Lithuanian language, and refers to the discrimination against people with disabilities. Ableism – the societal devaluation and oppression of individuals with disabilities – remains a significant concern, leading to misguided assumptions about their capabilities (Zigmantavičiūtė and Ostasevičienė, 2023). Such perceptions can result in discrimination, further marginalizing individuals with special needs and perpetuating cycles of exclusion. Architectural barriers at conference venues, for example, often complicate mobility and highlight the necessity for hybrid or online event formats to enhance accessibility (de Picker, 2020). However, even online events can pose challenges, such as technological fatigue and limited engagement opportunities, potentially diminishing the overall experience for participants (Doran et al., 2021).

Research methodology

To assess the challenges encountered by individuals with disabilities in participating in events and to identify potential areas for improvement, a mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

For the quantitative component, an online survey served as the primary data collection tool. The initial survey was conducted between July and October 2021, with a sample comprising 250 respondents with disabilities. For the 2024 study, data were gathered using a revised survey instrument consisting of 20 questions. A comparative analysis was undertaken to examine changes in the attitudes and motivations of individuals with disabilities regarding event participation between 2021 and 2024. This approach facilitated the identification of key similarities and differences across the two periods.

For the qualitative component, a case study analysis was conducted to explore accessibility practices implemented in major international events, such as Dubai's "EXPO 2020," the "MCM London Comic Con", and Edinburgh's "The Fringe Festival". The case study focused on strategies designed to enhance participation among individuals with disabilities, including the use of sunflower lanyards, silent rooms, sensory tools, and sign language interpretation services. The qualitative analysis aimed to identify best practices and innovative solutions that could inform and inspire adaptations for events organized in Lithuania.

The 2024 survey was administered between 19 February and 22 March 2024 via Microsoft Forms. The survey was disseminated through email to associations representing persons with disabilities and social service organizations and was also distributed through relevant Facebook groups.

The sample size was determined based on the population of residents with disabilities in Lithuania, which stood at approximately 224,900 at the end of 2023. To achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, the representative sample size was calculated to be 384 respondents. The final sample for the 2024 study consisted of 253 respondents to ensure comparability with the 2021 data set. Data analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS for the quantitative data, while the qualitative findings were analyzed through thematic analysis of case study documentation and official event reports.

Event accessibility and integration measures for people with special needs

In the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate how they assess the opportunities provided for people with disabilities to participate in events (Table 1). Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of ten, where 10 indicates excellent opportunities and 1 indicates very poor opportunities.

Table 1. Respondents' evaluation of opportunities provided for individuals with disabilities to participate in public events (V – mean values, max = 10)

Category	General averages	Gender		Place of residence			Age					Level of disability		
		men	women	rural	towns, small cities	major cities	18–24	25–44	45–64	65–74	75 and more	mild	moderate	severe
Average (2024)	6.79	7.04	6.71	6.35	6.95	6.76	7.75	6.86	6.70	6.49	7.29	7.51	6.77	6.37
Average (2021)	5.50	5.43	5.55	5.68	5.88	5.23	6.00	5.86	5.19	4.85	(n.d.)	5.81	5.85	5.15

Source: own research.

Research results show that the overall average rating in 2024 was 6.79, up from 5.50 in 2021, indicating improved perceptions of opportunities for people with disabilities to attend events. Men rated these opportunities higher than women in 2024 (7.04 vs. 6.71). Urban residents gave the highest ratings in both 2024 (6.95) and 2021 (5.88), while rural residents also showed improvement in 2024 (6.35). Younger respondents (18–24) gave the highest average rating in 2024 (7.75), and older participants (75+) also rated events highly (7.29). Those with mild disabilities saw the greatest improvement, with a rating of 7.51 in 2024 compared to 5.81 in 2021.

The research also aimed to determine how respondents with disabilities evaluate the opportunities provided for them to participate in events (Figure 2). Respondents were asked to rate on a ten-point scale, where 10 indicates excellent opportunities and 1 indicates very poor opportunities.

Table 2. Evaluation of the opportunities provided for respondents with disabilities to participate in public events (M – mean values, max = 10)

Category	General averages	Gender		Place of residence			Age					Level of disability		
		men	women	rural	towns, small cities	major cities	18–24	25–44	45–64	65–74	75 and more	mild	moderate	severe
Average (2024)	7.22	7.28	7.17	6.74	7.48	7.09	7.25	7.16	7.17	7.31	8.00	8.05	7.20	6.60
Average (2021)	5.85	5.49	6.03	5.90	6.25	5.59	5.38	6.19	5.68	5.21	(n.d.)	7.38	6.36	5.23

Source: own research.

Comparing the 2024 study results (Table 2), the overall average rating was 7.22, higher than the 2021 result of 5.85, indicating more favorable assessments of event accessibility in 2024. Men rated opportunities slightly higher (7.28) than women (7.17) in 2024, while in 2021, women rated them higher (6.03) than men (5.49). Urban respondents consistently rated opportunities higher (7.48 in 2024 and 6.25 in 2021), while rural residents rated them lowest in 2024 (6.74). The highest average rating (8.00) was given by respondents aged 75+, whereas in 2021, it was highest among the 25–44 age group. Respondents with mild disabilities rated opportunities highest in both studies (8.05 in 2024 and 7.38 in 2021).

The study aimed to determine the types of events people with disabilities attended over the past two years (Figure 1).

Results showed that concerts were the most popular, with 72.3% of respondents participating. Over half (61.4%) also attended national, city, regional, or local celebrations. Other popular events included theater performances (57.6%), tours (55.7%), fairs

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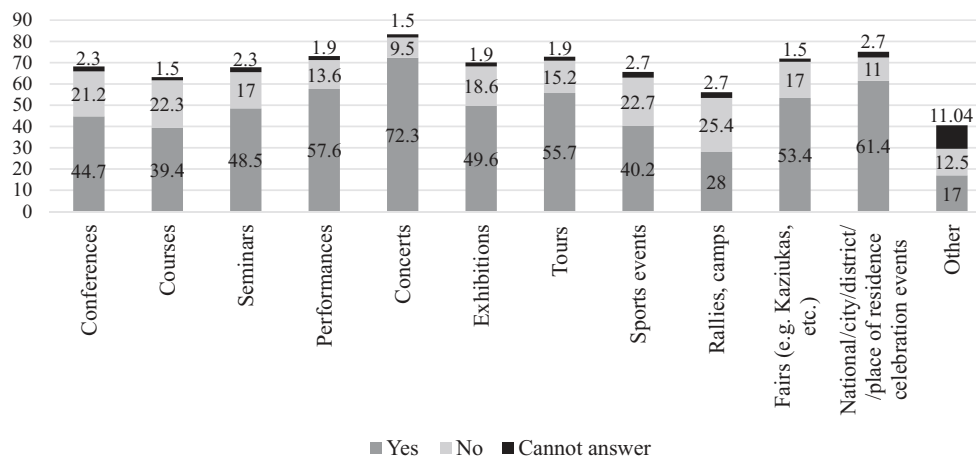


Figure 1. Participation of people with disabilities in events in the last two years 2024 (N = 253; %)

Source: own research.

(53.4%), exhibitions (49.6%), and seminars (48.5%). In contrast, the least attended events were gatherings and camps, with only 28% of respondents participating.

The study aimed to determine how often individuals with disabilities participate in events (Figure 2).

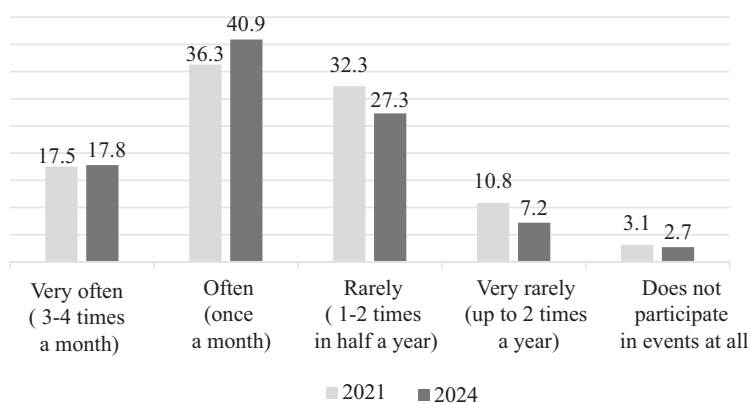


Figure 2. Assessment of the frequency of participation in public events by persons with disabilities (N = 253; %)

Source: own research.

In the 2024 study, 40.9% of respondents indicated they participate in events at least once a month, while 27.3% attend 1–2 times every six months. Additionally, 17.8% attend 3–4 times a month, 7.2% attend up to 2 times a year, and 2.7% do not attend

at all. In 2021, 17.5% attended events 3–4 times a month, and 36.3% attended once a month. While the frequency of event attendance in 2024 showed only slight changes compared to 2021, respondents participated more often in 2024. These changes may be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which significantly affected the events industry and reduced the number of organized events.

The survey also included open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to identify reasons for not participating in events. The majority (22.5%) cited insufficient event accessibility as the main barrier. Additionally, 17.5% indicated a lack of time, motivation, or health issues. Other reasons included financial constraints (10%), difficult venue accessibility (8.8%), absence of the accompanying person (7.5%), and lack of sign language interpretation (5%).

The study aimed to determine how respondents prefer to participate in events (Figure 3).

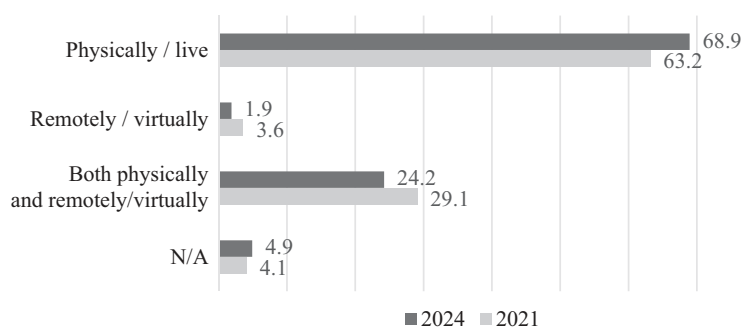


Figure 3. Choice of participation in public events by people with disabilities (N = 253; %)

Source: own research.

Comparative analysis showed that in both 2021 and 2024, most respondents preferred attending events in person, with a 5.7% increase in live participation in 2024 (68.9%) compared to 2021 (63.2%). Nearly a third found it acceptable to attend both physically and virtually (2024 – 24.2%; 2021 – 29.1%). Only 3.6% in 2021 and 1.9% in 2024 preferred remote participation, indicating that virtual events are not popular among individuals with disabilities. The end of the COVID-19 pandemic may have decreased the demand for online events.

To understand the importance of the financial aspect of participating in events and the changes since the 2021 study, respondents were asked whether they choose to attend public events that require them to pay for participation (Figure 4).

From the research, it is evident that most respondents participated in events priced up to 10 EUR, with 24.2% in 2021 and 25.8% in 2024. About 23.3% of respondents in 2021 and 23.9% in 2024 participated if the price was up to 25 EUR. The analysis revealed that 21.5% of respondents did not participate in paid events in 2021, decreasing to

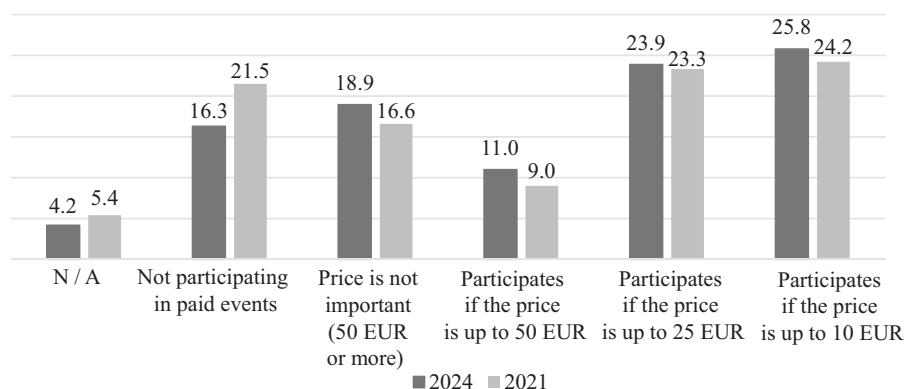


Figure 4. Evaluation of the participation of people with disabilities in public events paid for with personal funds (N = 253) (%)

Source: own research.

16.3% in 2024. This shift suggests that, compared to 2021, the price of events had a slightly lesser impact on event selection in 2024, possibly influenced by the pandemic and improved economic conditions. However, respondents still showed a preference for events costing up to 10 EUR.

Respondents also identified factors that could facilitate event participation, with 26.6% citing the need for a properly adapted physical environment. Financial incentives were mentioned by 21%, while 14% highlighted the importance of assistance from others. Other factors included motivation (9.8%), transportation services (8.4%), information accessibility (7%), a tolerant environment (4.9%), and the timing of events (2.1%).

Lastly, participants offered suggestions for event organizers to enhance accessibility, with 23.4% emphasizing the need to understand the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities. The same percentage stressed the importance of making physical spaces accessible. Financial accessibility was noted by 14.5%, while 8.9% mentioned the need for information availability. Emotional safety and active promotion of events were highlighted by 6.5%, alongside the need for accessible parking and collaboration with organizations supporting individuals with disabilities (2.4%).

Analysis of qualitative study results

The quantitative data collected in this study revealed several persistent barriers that hinder the full participation of individuals with disabilities in public events in Lithuania. Chief among these were inadequate physical accessibility (reported by 22.5% of respondents), financial limitations (10%), the absence of accompanying persons (7.5%), and the lack of sign language interpretation (5%). In response to these findings, this section presents an analysis of selected international events that exemplify good practices in accessibility and inclusion. The objective is to identify strategies that could inform the development of more inclusive event planning frameworks in Lithuania.

This qualitative analysis focused on three international events widely recognized for their innovative accessibility initiatives: EXPO 2020 Dubai, MCM London Comic Con, and Edinburgh's The Fringe Festival. These case studies offer valuable insights into how large-scale events can proactively address barriers similar to those reported by Lithuanian respondents.

In terms of physical accessibility, these events implemented measures that directly correspond to the needs identified in our study. For instance, EXPO 2020 and The Fringe Festival incorporated tactile paths and Braille maps for participants with visual impairments, while all three events provided accessible restrooms, wheelchair charging stations, and designated viewing areas for individuals with mobility difficulties. Such interventions reflect potential responses to the 26.6% of Lithuanian respondents who emphasised the need for appropriately adapted physical environments.

Regarding informational accessibility, these events employed strategies such as sign language interpreter services, subtitled presentations, and content delivery via QR codes to provide audio descriptions and other accessible formats. These practices address concerns raised in the Lithuanian context, where the lack of sign language interpretation was identified as a significant barrier.

To enhance emotional safety and sensory accessibility, MCM London Comic Con and The Fringe Festival offered silent rooms, sensory aids (including noise-cancelling headphones and fidget tools), and emotional support personnel. These measures align with the suggestions of 6.5% of Lithuanian respondents who highlighted the need for improvements in emotional safety at events.

The analysis also identified approaches to mitigate financial barriers, such as discounted ticketing schemes and free access to essential services. These strategies correspond to the 21% of Lithuanian respondents who cited financial assistance as a key facilitator of participation.

Furthermore, these events actively engaged participants with disabilities in their accessibility planning processes. For example, MCM London Comic Con invited attendees to provide recommendations for future accessibility improvements. This participatory approach underscores the importance of including the voices of individuals with disabilities in the development of event accessibility strategies – a practice that could significantly enhance the inclusivity of events in Lithuania.

In summary, the examined international case studies demonstrate how a comprehensive and participatory approach to accessibility can effectively address multiple dimensions of exclusion, including physical, informational, emotional, and financial barriers. The insights drawn from these examples provide a valuable foundation for the advancement of inclusive event management practices in Lithuania, directly responding to the challenges identified through this study's quantitative research.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reflect meaningful improvements in event accessibility for individuals with disabilities in Lithuania between 2021 and 2024. The increased average ratings for participation opportunities, as well as the rise in frequency of event attendance, suggest that initiatives to improve inclusivity are yielding positive outcomes. The higher ratings from younger respondents, urban residents, and individuals with mild disabilities indicate where progress is most apparent, while lower ratings among rural residents and those with severe disabilities highlight areas needing further attention.

While in-person events remain the preferred format, hybrid and virtual options continue to play a supportive role in broadening participation. Financial considerations, although still significant, appear to have a slightly diminished impact on attendance compared to 2021. Barriers such as insufficiently adapted physical environments and lack of support services persist and must be addressed to ensure equal participation.

Moreover, the international examples analyzed – including EXPO 2020 Dubai, MCM London Comic Con, and The Fringe Festival – demonstrate how comprehensive accessibility measures can create inclusive environments. These models emphasize the importance of not only addressing physical barriers but also enhancing information accessibility, providing emotional support, and involving participants in shaping accessibility initiatives. Together, these insights stress the need for a multi-dimensional approach to fostering inclusion in Lithuanian events.

Conclusions

1. The study confirms that individuals with disabilities in Lithuania continue to face specific challenges to event participation, notably insufficient physical adaptations at venues (cited by 22.5% of respondents), financial constraints (10%), and a lack of accessible information (5%). While events play a documented role in fostering social interaction and personal growth, these barriers still limit equal participation despite recent improvements in accessibility initiatives.
2. The 2024 data reveal that 68.9% of respondents prefer in-person events, with 40.9% attending at least once per month. Concerts (72.3%) and national or local celebrations (61.4%) are the most attended, whereas gatherings and camps attract only 28% of respondents. Cost sensitivity remains: over 25% are willing to pay up to 10 EUR, and participation drops significantly for higher-priced events. Event organizers should respond to these findings by focusing on affordable pricing, physical adaptations, and targeted support measures, such as accompaniment or interpretation services, to promote emotional safety and accessibility.
3. The 2024 study demonstrates measurable improvements in event accessibility: the average rating of participation opportunities rose from 5.85 in 2021 to 7.22 in 2024. Younger respondents (18–24) and urban residents rated accessibility highest,

whereas rural residents and those with severe disabilities reported more modest improvements. Notably, price sensitivity appears to have decreased slightly, as fewer respondents (16.3%) reported avoiding paid events compared to 2021 (21.5%). These results suggest that while progress has been made in adapting events for diverse disabilities, further work is needed to close gaps for vulnerable subgroups.

4. Dubai's "EXPO 2020", "MCM London Comic Con" and Edinburgh's "The Fringe Festival" illustrate how diverse and well-integrated accessibility measures – such as sunflower lanyards for hidden disabilities, silent rooms, sensory tools, sign language interpretation, and wheelchair-friendly facilities – can effectively reduce participation barriers. These comprehensive strategies not only support the inclusion of attendees with disabilities but also foster greater awareness among event staff and participants, offering valuable models for adaptation in Lithuania.

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