

Equal Voices of Theatre: Investigating Cognition, Emotion and Behavior of Visually Impaired Audiences through Playwright and Sound Design

Article History

Received: January 23, 2025

Revised: June 22, 2025

Accepted: June 25, 2025

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Abstract

The study explores the creation of a stage play paradigm tailored for visually impaired audiences, addressing a significant gap in knowledge and practice. It is not only grounded in theatre, drama, music, and audience theories, but also the acknowledgment of disability as part of the human condition and the promotion of equal rights and opportunities as outlined by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. With an aim to investigate how visually impaired audiences cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally respond to five storytelling elements of the stage play script (plot, character, dialogue, sound, and spectacle), the stage play, "Turn Left Turn Right: The Musical," with script and sound especially design for visual disability was implemented with 15 Thai visually impaired individuals in Bangkok, Thailand, during October and November B.E. 2566. Adopting a qualitative approach, an observation was conducted during the stage play and in-depth interviews were conducted after the show. Data analyses reveal that five storytelling elements of the stage

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play script evoke all three kinds of responses – creating mental images, joy and exaltation, and strong physical reactions (e.g., clapping, laughing); however, “sound” is the most crucial element. The participants favor comedy, and narratives that are easy to follow yet contain unexpected endings. Findings not only fill academic gaps in understanding the paradigm for visually impaired stage play, but also enable creators to create impactful and inclusive content.

Keywords: *Stage Play Script, Sound Design, Storytelling Elements, Visually Impaired Audiences, Responses*

Introduction

The United Nations (2018) emphasized the importance of promoting equal rights of life among people, their families, and society, ensuring equal opportunities regardless of living quality and access to entertainment, as aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (quality education) 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions.), and 17 (Partnerships for the goals), and 10 (reduce inequalities). Ramke and Gilbert (2017) mentioned that the number of blindness and visual impairment further increased from 36 million people to 115 million people in the year 2020. The World Health Organization (2018) classified vision impairment into two groups, distance vision impairment and near vision impairment. A person’s experience of vision impairment varies depending upon many different factors. This includes for example, the availability of prevention and treatment interventions, access to vision rehabilitation (including assistive products such as glasses or white canes), and whether the person experiences problems with inaccessible buildings, transport, and information. Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired (n.d.) recited that two out of ten activities that blind people do for fun are in the field of live entertainment and performing arts such as watching movies and attending concerts. Blind people love to enjoy themselves by attending live entertainments and performing arts which focus on sounds instead of visuals. Physical visits to art venues for social, cultural, and emotional experiences were important. It highlighted that providing tactile and audio descriptions is key to providing access to it (Li et al., 2023).

According to the modern list of six human needs; reaching motivation, well-being, physical stamina to seek out physical exercise, emotional stimulation, and creative expression as needed throughout their lives, there are just a few utilities that fulfill the disabled’s needs, especially in terms of arts and entertainment such as theatre (Quora, 2018). As one of the channels entertaining people since ancient Greece (Ali, 2016), the stage play is a complicated pastime, combining the fields of arts and leisure and the drivers of aesthetics, hedonics, emotions, education, and

entertainment (Walmsley, 2011), and is also people-oriented, intangible and perishable” (Hume et al., 2007).

Beyond developing playwrights and stage plays to be inclusive to the visually impaired audiences, Australia developed programs to include work with actors who have are colorblind and gender-neutral which allows for new stories and experiences and promotes more inclusive representation of the group (Taylor, 2024). Spain have taken the initiative to develop standard guidelines for audio descriptions for media to improve the quality and consistency ensuring enjoyment and richer cultural experiences (Mazur, 2020), while South Africa has developed opportunities for visually impaired patrons to experience the stage and props before the show begins which provides more interaction rather than just the audio-description (Theatre Development Fund, 2024).

While specific data on audience trends and participation in Thailand remains limited, there has been a noticeable increase in the establishment of contemporary art studios and theatres across the country since 2010, particularly in Bangkok (Testy Thailand, 2011). Despite these developments, research indicates that the number of theatre attendees in Bangkok has remained relatively unchanged over the past two decades, highlighting a persistent challenge in audience development (Piyawat, 2021). This discrepancy between growing investment in modern art infrastructure and stagnant audience engagement warrants further investigation to better understand the current patterns of attendance and participation in various leisure and cultural activities among Thai audiences.

The Department of Physical Education and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2012) further stressed that everyone should be able to access and enjoy all forms of entertainment equally. It was highlighted that alternative forms of entertainment are generally designed for ordinary people, with performers often neglecting the needs of visually impaired individuals due to a lack of focus on live performance elements tailored to them (Butterwick, 2022).

In Thailand, there are approximately 185,523 visually impaired persons (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2022). However, their access to theatre is still limited. There have been Lack of clear guidelines or standards for producing accessible theatre. Artists do not have knowledge in designing theatrical experiences for the visually impaired. In addition, there has been very small financial and technical support from the government and key cultural organizations. Although developments in applied theatre for special needs in Thailand has begun, they usually focus on specific target groups and the process of participation rather than the outcome of the performance (Thamkulangkool, 2021).

Based on the importance of SDGs, and current situations regarding the visually impaired persons and performing arts in Thailand, this study is interested in exploring the creation of a stage play paradigm tailored for visually impaired audiences, addressing a significant research gap in knowledge and practice, focusing on five elements of the stage play script that make visually impaired audiences earn exaltation.

Literature review

Theatre and the visually impaired audiences

People mostly earn their entertainment through the five senses: sight, hearing, smelling, taste, and touch (Hadjiphilippou, 2018). Thus, for visually impaired persons, the thing that can replace their visualization to experience the world is sound. Caltech (2015) showed that 99 percent of our daily life depends on multisensory or multimodal processing. Senders normally use both verbal and nonverbal communication to transfer messages to audiences. This is an example of the way sensory causality is not unidirectional, since vision can influence sound, and sound can influence vision. In fact, most theatres use audio description to replace the sight limitation for the visually impaired (Andriani, 2016). Audio description provides people who are blind or have low vision with access to live in theatre (Udo et al., 2010), which sometimes interferes with their entertainment; visually impaired audiences cannot concentrate on the play directly. Listening to the audio description would result in the loss of some emotions and feelings. Ramke and Gilbert (2017) predicted that in the future our society will be filled with a lot of visually impaired people. The principal problem for the visually impaired is their limited sight. They cannot see the movement, facial expression, gestures, or what people call body language from the theatre, stage play, and environments. This may affect their access and recognition of the messages and influence their perceptions and enjoyment (Hadjiphilippou, 2018).

Stage play script and five storytelling elements

As a manuscript of theatrical performance, the stage play script has been written for actors to perform. It includes the name of the play and the playwright, acts and scenes, setting and property, characters, dialogues, and stage directions of the actors or actresses. It consists of five elements: plot, character, dialogue, sounds, and spectacle (Nair, 2023). Firstly, *plot* is the sequence of events within a story, describing what happens and why it happens. It is part of the story and includes settings, characters, themes, and other factors that influence the events (Master Class, 2022). Based on Craiker (2022), plot consists of five elements -- 1) exposition, 2) rising action,

3) climax, 4) falling action, and 5) resolution or denouement. Secondly, *character* refers to a person, animal, or object presented as a person in a narrative or play. It also included physical and mental information, age, and gender. According to Jerkin (2025), eight types of characters in the story are a) protagonist, b) antagonist, c) sidekick, d) orbital character, e) love interest, f) confidante, g) extras, and h) foil. Thirdly, *dialogue* is defined as spoken lines by characters in a story by adding context to a narrative, establishing voice, tone, or setting to reveal conflict in a story (Literary Devices, 2023). Moreover, Literary Devices (2023). described dialogue in theatre as a spoken exchange between two or more characters. It is a key element in theatre, as it allows the story to move forward and the characters to develop. It can further the *plot*, reveal character information, or create an emotional connection between the characters and the audience. Fourthly, *sound* refers to everything we hear in the play in the form of sounds, sound effects like foley, sound design, ambiance, music, and soundtrack. Illuminated-Integration (2020) mentioned that the theatrical production's sound design is defined as the overall atmosphere and effectiveness of telling a story. It is a critical narrative component and influences the audience's perception of the play. Therefore, it is essential to create sound effects and musicals to communicate the story without overwhelming or understating it. Finally, *spectacle* refers to extraordinary effects on the stage play, including light, sound, sets, props, and costumes, which create a theatrical experience. It also included special effects to use to transport audiences to imagination world (Louis, n.d.). It may increase audience awareness or interest (Steinberg, 2018), and provides sensory effects: costumes, scenery, the gestures of the actors, the sound of the music, and the resonance of the actors' voices (Zuern, 1998).

Laid the foundation of narrative theory through the poetics, which became scripts during our period, Aristotle's "Six Elements of Drama" consists of theme, plot, character, language, rhythm, and spectacle. The first three elements are presented through the media in terms of diction, dialogue, songs, and music, and the rhythm and spectacle are referred to as the least essential to building emotion and feeling (Fergusson, 1961). The scripts and sounds seem very important to a play to make audiences understand the story, enjoy and can get into it. In addition, the primary description of the nature of drama can refer to many types and styles, such as tragedy, comedy, mixed form, epic, expressionism, and musical (Trumbull, 2008).

Drama and theatre theory

In the 20th century, both drama and theatre theory began focusing more on the deeper meanings hidden in texts. These meanings are often understood through two different lenses—linguistics and semiotics. Drama theory looks at how language helps us understand a script, while

theatre theory looks at signs, symbols, and visual elements to make sense of a performance. One key idea they both share is communicability, or the ability of a play or performance to communicate something to someone. This includes how the message is shared, who it's meant for, and what the message actually is. All these parts together create what's called a dialogic process—a two-way interaction between the performance and the audience (Boroch, 2015). Drama theory emphasizes the importance of a well-structured *plot* to maintain engagement and evoke emotional responses of visually impaired audiences. It also suggests that well-developed *characters* are essential for audience engagement while emphasizes the importance of *dialogue* in revealing *character* motivations and advancing the *plot* (Hall et al., 2025).

Music theory

Developed by Guido D'Arezzo and Jean-Philippe Rameau, Music Theory provides an understanding of the meaning and structure of musical compositions. Helfer (2022) noted that music is a group of harmonized or creatively organized sounds. It involves the dissemination of information and the expression of emotions. The important components of music include tone, rhythm, tempo, and harmony (Pansithiworakul, 2015). Accordingly, music and sound effects can enhance the *plot* by signaling changes in scenes, building tension, and highlighting key moments. Music can provide insight into a *character's* emotions and personality through thematic elements and leitmotifs; and can complement *dialogue* by enhancing the emotional tone and providing a rhythm to the spoken words. In addition, music and *sound* effects play a significant role in eliciting emotions and creating a shared experience (Rangshila Theatre Group, 2024).

Audience theory

It explains how audiences encounter media, how they use it, react to it, and how it influences them. The Uses and Gratification Theory by Katz et al. (1973) explains why and how people as active audiences seek out specific media to satisfy their needs, and their media use is goal-oriented.

Accordingly, integration of these theories and above literature provides a foundation for exploring the role of five storytelling elements of the stage play script (plot, character, dialogue, sound, and spectacle) on visually impaired audiences' exaltation.

Objectives of study

This study aims to examine how visually impaired audiences cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally react to these five storytelling elements of the stage play.

Research methodology

This research used a combination of two qualitative research methods--naturalistic observation, and in-depth interviews -- to explore the topic. Naturalistic observation was chosen as it can observe the flow of behavior while the participants watch the stage play and generate new ideas because it allows the researcher to study the total situation, and it often suggests avenues of inquiry not thought of before (McLeod, 2024). Moreover, the in-depth interview allows researchers to understand the respondents deeper, and also capable of obtaining an insight into the respondent and gaining more knowledge (Reddy, 2016).

The theatrical script and synopsis of this study was adapted from the original stage play titled "Beyond the Light." The play was selected for its strong emotional narrative and potential for sensory adaptation. The story follows a young woman who loses her sight in an accident and gradually rediscovers purpose and connection through music, relationships, and self-acceptance. Key scenes were modified to include music, rich auditory cues, descriptive dialogue, and tactile interactions to reflect the lived experiences of visually impaired individuals.

Population and sample selection

As the target population of this study is visually impaired individuals who have limited sense in terms of vision, the participants were recruited by using a mix of cluster sampling, quota sampling, and judgmental sampling. The sampling size is 15, the minimal number of participants as suggested by Guest et al. (2006). To ensure the right samples for this study, sample selection is based on two criteria -- attentiveness and visual perception -- by including 18–39 years old Thai citizens of both genders with complete blindness or partial blindness, living in Bangkok, who love to attend live entertainment and live performances such as concerts, talk shows, and stage plays.

Research instrument and data collection procedure

The research instrument of this study consists of one intervention (stage play), and two data collection tools-observation form, and depth-interview questions.

a. Intervention (stage play)

The intervention of this study is a stage play. Inspired by Jimmy Liao's *A Chance of Sunshine*, this study adopted the stage play "Turn Left Turn Right the Musical" to explore elements of the stage play script for several reasons. First, the story's setting and staging revolve around the daily life of Thai citizens, making it easy for audiences to understand and relate to the characters. While

primarily romantic, the play incorporates comedic elements that promote relaxation for viewers. Second, the location and environment during the stage play provides a better imaginative atmosphere and good sound system, which are essential for visually impaired individuals. Third, the play integrates multiple audio and smell-sensory scenes, such as the smell of coffee, fresh baked goods, and rain, which can be perceived without audio descriptions, while street and car noises further enhance the vividness of the setting. Lastly, the simplicity of the story, coupled with a minimal number of characters, allows audiences to enjoy the play effortlessly without the concern of losing track of the narrative.

The intervention includes two parts: the creation of the play, and the evaluation of the play. The play which is suited for the visually impaired by using playwriting and sounds was created. The techniques applied storytelling, sound design, and senses into the script and the direction of the stage play such as the first scene, the senses that use on this scene are hearing, smell, taste, and touch to create atmosphere and environment. Songs that give some feel of a café to guide audiences to imagine the setting were played, the actors speak to audiences like they are customers of this café (hearing sense). Moreover, the actor brewed coffee to let audiences get the smell of coffee (smell sense) and let audiences try it (taste sense).

b. Data collection tools

The first tool is an observation form of a structured format. The behaviors were recorded by using the anecdotal recording to recognize how the audiences reacted to five elements of storytelling -- plot, character, dialogue, sound, and spectacle. The second tool is in-depth interview questions of a structured format developed to investigate whether and how these five elements influence audiences' cognition, emotion, and/or behavior.

Script of the stage play, observation form, and a set of in-depth interview questions were pretested prior to actual invention and data collection by experts in stage play for handicapped audiences. Participants were asked to have a seat and sign two identical information and consent forms. After obtaining informed consent, the participants enjoyed the stage play; during the show, the participants' reactions toward five storytelling elements of the stage play were observed. During the stage play, the 15 forms were prepared and a team of three was prompt on completing observation form during the show. One observer was responsible for five patrons during the observation to ensure timely and tentative data collection. In-depth interviews were completed one week after the stage play ended with the selected samples. All responses were recorded manually

and recorded on audio file for review later. Interviews took half an hour to complete for one participant and audio review for each participant took two hours to ensure quality data records.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the in-depth interview were analyzed by using narrative analysis and a constant comparative analysis approach. This approach examines qualitative data to understand the data or part of it by comparing between interviews, and between different interviewees. Open coding was used to take raw data from interview transcripts and break them up into individual particles. Then connect the data between codes and create categories that connect codes together (Turner, 2022). Data coding and recording were done in Microsoft Word and Excel. The data were then reviewed and compared to existing literature to find patterns and changes in the data. To ensure the validity of the research, data triangulation was employed by two different qualitative methods observation and in-depth interview.

Findings

Mean age of the participant is 25.20 years, with almost equal gender distribution (7 males versus 8 females). The participants include government officers (n = 7), students (n = 6), company employees (n = 1), and an actor/MC (n = 1). Almost all are unmarried (n = 14). The majority hold a bachelor's degree (n = 10), while few earned a high school diploma (n = 4) or a master's degree (n = 1). In terms of prior experience, 2/3 of the participants have had experience.

As for the five storytelling elements of the stage play script, it was found that all elements can make visually impaired audiences earn an exaltation after watching a stage play. Besides, sound design also made visually impaired audiences have cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. The preferred types and styles must be easy to understand and narrative with an unexpected ending. The maximum watching duration is one and a half hours. Comedy is the most preferred genre.

In terms of cognitive reactions, sound and music on the stage play can generate mental imagery. Especially, the concert scene on France 98. The sound design also affects all informants' thinking by linking the sound that audiences heard with the things on the scenes. This means that sounds, sound effects, and music stimulate the visually impaired audiences' imagination and make them enjoy the story. Beyond spectacles, all informants think that spectacles in terms of four human senses -- smell, sound, taste, and touch -- affect their thinking by making them feel as realistic as they felt like confronted in those situations. The informants cognitively reacted to the five elements of the stage play script and sound design by other four senses. Most of them cognitively reacted by

the sound (sound effects, music, and singing voice), while few cognitively reacted by the smell and touch, and only one informant by the taste.

In terms of emotional reactions, the five elements of the stage play script and sound design affected all participants emotionally. Two senses, smell and touch, instead of sound, stimulate the feelings and affections of the informants. Majority of the informants ($n = 10$) reported that without sound, it is hard to decide which sense, smell or touch, is more important. Smell and touch helped them expand their perspectives and get closer to the story or situations.

In terms of behavioral reactions, the participants' behavior differs from other typical viewers. Majority of them do not need a physical reaction because they focus on listening during the show. Character is one of the most important factors stimulating their physical activity, and dialogue and stage plays ignite their verbal reaction and physical activity. Spectacles promoted psychological and physical reactions to coffee and food smell.

Among the five sensory elements, characterization was reported as a key driver of audience engagement, stimulating both mental imagery and occasional physical responses. Several participants described feeling more physically activated when they could clearly perceive the personality, tone, or emotion of a character.

Discussion

The finding that sound was the most crucial element of the stage play for visually impaired audiences is consistent with the conclusion by Sousa (2023). It is important to utilize multi-sensory descriptions to improve engagement and understanding. In terms of *plot*, our finding that the plot of the stage play script made the participants earn exaltation after watching a stage play resonates with findings by Walczak and Fryer (2017) showing that audio description with a creative script can stimulate and provide a more immersive experience. Although some participants reported that having heard or previous experience with the dialogue and plot helped them imagine the story, this finding is inconsistent with the finding by Lopez and Pauletto (2009) showing that even with no prior knowledge of the plot, the audience was able to understand the plot, and those who inaccurately described the plot were non-native speakers.

In terms of *character*, findings yield that the participants recognized the two most important characters and recognized their voice and tone, which is similar to the result of the study by Lopez and Pauletto (2009). However, they were unable to remember all the characters because of the speed and increased number of characters which made it a challenge. Udo et al. (2010) and Lloyd (2019) reveal that unique vocal qualities with consistent tone or vocal attributes were key to the

differentiation of characters and enhanced memory of characters. Employing more unique voices may help audiences to remember more characters. Moreover, Kleege (2017) shared that combining auditory and tactile cues helps with better character understanding. Visual descriptions should focus on textile or touch sensation; those descriptions are relevant and meaningful (Sousa, 2023). However, detail and expressiveness helped build an emotional connection with the characters (Walczak & Fryer, 2017).

The *sound* of the stage play script enabled the participants to earn exaltation as it provided a deeper connection which was agreed upon. Aside from dialogues, ambiance sound, and music were the sounds that were heard the most. The sound was also a key element for the visually impaired viewers to imagine the distance, direction, and setting of the stage play. A study by Lopez and Pauletto (2009) showed that adding the noise of clocks, cutlery in the kitchen, and street sounds helps visually impaired audiences visualize the location without verbal expression.

Based on Blasing and Zimmermann (2021), audio description, additives (choreographed body sounds and movement sonification), and haptics techniques were applied to enable visually impaired audiences to experience dance. The hearing was enhanced to improve the viewing experience; the participants in our study discussed the importance of sense of smell that helps complete the imagination. Cho (2021) discussed the study of multi-sensory experiences for visual art appreciation for visually impaired audiences through integrating patterns, temperature, scent, music, and vibration. The importance of adding multiple senses to improve the stage play and visual art is highlighted.

In terms of stage play types and styles, this study partially reached similar conclusions compared with the surveys on the Thai Drama Watching Behaviors conducted by the NIDA Poll and Nine Entertainment (2014), which concludes that comedy as the first choice that audiences like to watch (37.24%). This finding is also consistent with study by Suwanmaree (2017), and by the Hertie Institute for Clinical Brain at the University of Tübingen in Germany. Based on Smitt (2022), visually impaired people process auditory language about two times faster than non-disabled people. These are the processes that their brain has a co-processing between pictures and sounds, resulting in the transmission of information between them. Similarly, Guzzell (2012) defined the perception of humans as the perceptions and interpretations of lived experiences that can be stored in memories. The memories can be recalled at any time, and the perception is influenced by connecting to the meaning people give to their own experiences and relating that to how they communicate and interact with others or perceive the situation they are experiencing.

As for communicability and empowerment, Nasir and Aikomo (2020) discussed communicability as a core concept in theatre and drama theories while emphasizing how participation empowers individuals to express themselves, making theatre a medium for social communication and representation. The findings of this study support Smitt's study (2022) that co-processing between pictures and sounds results in the transmission of information between them. Some parts of the brain control our muscles and thoughts, then command and express them by behaviors. In addition, Fleming (2018) noted that secondary imagination echoes the primary imagination, existing with the desire of the consciousness. Stage play creators should find appropriate techniques, using script, dialogue, physical interaction, and symbolism, to let the audience enjoy, release, and get into the story.

Recommendations

Recommendations for different sectors are provided. For the performing arts scholars, the inclusiveness of the visually impaired audience, investigating demographic characteristics of the actual audience is necessary since the range of visual impairment varies and it can have an impact on the consumption of the visual, spectacle and auditory information. The Uses and Gratification Theory plays an important role in understanding why individuals choose the type of preferred media/performance and the main type of gratification they seek. For the Thai visually impaired audience, it was an escape from reality and the lighting of stress of life. Second, scholars should apply the Dual Coding Theory, which was not considered in this study, may enable more exaltation from the visually impaired group. With applications and new innovative techniques for sensory substitution, it requires the use of not just one sense in this study focused on hearing but can also include touch and smell. Third, it is recommended to increase instructive elements with the audience through pre-show and post-show tactical experiences and during show engagement such as helping answer questions or being part of the show. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) helps communication scholars to understand how visually impaired audiences can be engaged more deeply as they are looking for other forms of entertainment beyond stage play. In addition, visually impaired audiences expect multi-dimensional experiences, which allow them to have more active engagement with the performances, similar to stand-up comedy.

For the stage play creators, the target audience is the most important element. The visually impaired audiences are diverse in terms of gender, age, vision type, social status, and learning experiences. Accordingly, selecting a plot or a presentation format must be appropriate for the target audience. Duration of the stage play is also important. This is because the visually impaired

audiences generally can attend stage play in a maximum of 90 minutes. The duration also depends on how interesting the story is and on the surrounding atmosphere. One method to improve stage play production is to involve members of the visually impaired into production and performance of stage play. Nasir and Aikomo (2020) suggested that their involvement will not only provide a better stage play production, but also will ensure self-reliance within society.

Our recommendations for the policy makers are to provide more monetary support for stage play creators to produce the shows for the visually impaired, and for theater owners to improve infra-structure in their theaters such as seating arrangement and elevators that are easy access for the visually impaired or other disabilities. It is recommended that policy makers provide sufficient support to educational institutions to develop a curriculum in performing arts that the disabilities including visual impairment can study so that the entertainment industry will have more qualified personnel with disabilities in stage play production in the future. Furthermore, policy makers should enhance the existing policies for inclusiveness such as basic sign language in classrooms and teacher training for the visually impaired. This paper recommends a cultural shift to provide them with inclusive entertainment and opportunities for a variety of experiences. Importance of entertainment for the visually impaired citizens such as signing language for concerts, sports, and music should be recognized by general public. Such awareness can stimulate a positive and inclusive mindset among general public, which in turn, will result in more activity choices and opportunities for the visually impaired persons.

As for future research, understanding of entertainment forms for disabled population remains limited. Increase in other forms of entertainment for the disabled population should be explored along with understanding of human senses for the disabled persons. This research was limited to visually impaired individuals; other disabilities should be explored along with understanding their point of view. Lastly, technology application for forms of entertainment can be explored to enhance the experience of the disabled population.

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