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Factors influencing accessibility in judicial institutions for people with disabilities: a study of the Serbian judicial system

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Factors influencing accessibility in judicial institutions for people with disabilities: a study of the Serbian judicial system

Abstract

The ability to access judicial institutions significantly improves the quality of life of people with disabilities in relation to their legal matters. This paper examines factors that influence the implementation of accessibility measures in judicial institutions for people with disabilities by analyzing the accessibility of the judicial system in the Republic of Serbia. A dataset collected from a convenience sample of 233 judicial authorities in Serbia was analyzed using statistical methods. Binary logistic regression revealed that familiarity with public premises standards (PPS familiarity) and the implementation of adaptations significantly predict the likelihood of providing accessible services at the institutional level. Specifically, judicial institutions that had implemented accessibility adaptations were 5.5 times more likely to provide adapted services, while PPS familiarity increased this likelihood by 2.8 times. A second logistic regression model demonstrated that PPS familiarity and specific requests for adaptations increased the likelihood of implementing accessibility measures by 4.8 and 2.9 times, respectively. Path analysis further clarified the relationships among these factors, indicating that PPS familiarity and the implementation of adaptations play crucial roles in enhancing the accessibility of legal services. The findings can inform the development of strategies aimed at improving the quality of life of people with disabilities through increased accessibility of judicial institutions.

Keywords: accessibility of judiciary, people with disabilities, statistical analysis, Republic of Serbia

Introduction

The status of people with disabilities and their protection represent one of the most sensitive segments of a state's social and welfare policy. Disability is a complex social phenomenon that affects all areas of modern life, which is why it requires a multisectoral and multilevel approach, involving cooperation among local communities, government bodies, ministries, and other stakeholders. Access to justice is a broad topic that has been shaped by technological factors and has attracted renewed interest among researchers (de Souza and Spohr, 2021; McCormack, 2024). The judiciary in various countries is finding new ways to address existing problems, while simultaneously facing new challenges that have emerged alongside the use of new technologies (De Villiers, 2016; National Institute for Trial Advocacy, and Penal Reform International and Bluhm Legal Clinic of the Northwestern University School of Law, 2007; Duffy et al., 2021; Ali, 2014).

The concept of access to justice can be defined in various ways (Sabatino, 2019). It generally refers to people's ability to pursue and achieve justice, whether through formal legal systems or informally, thereby ensuring that their rights are upheld in accordance with human rights principles (UNDP, 2005). It is, therefore, one of the key factors in achieving equal rights for all citizens (Lucy, 2020). The accessibility of the judiciary for people with disabilities (PWD) represents a

distinct area, first addressed within legislative frameworks through Article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN General Assembly, 2006; Flynn et al., 2019). The need for accessibility for PWD is comprehensive and includes various aspects, such as the physical accessibility of facilities, the accessibility of information and communication, and the accessibility of services. Neglecting the needs of PWD by failing to ensure accessibility in this sector has serious consequences, as it hinders individuals with disabilities from achieving full access to public services and justice.

Accessibility for PWD encompasses a wide range of elements aimed at ensuring complete and equal access to services and procedures within the judiciary. This includes providing multiple modes of communication, including alternative forms of communication for individuals with sensory (see de Hoog et al., 2015) or cognitive impairments. Accessibility in the judiciary also involves ensuring that judicial proceedings are clear and understandable for all parties involved, taking into account varying levels of education as well as the existence of specific needs. Ensuring accessibility guarantees the provision of judicial services and the fulfilment of basic rights for all citizens, while also contributing to more efficient service delivery by reducing the risk of irregularities and increasing overall efficiency, thereby facilitating cooperation. Investigating the accessibility of judicial institutions is particularly relevant, as these institutions represent the most authoritative bodies of the state. It is therefore essential to determine the extent to which they are familiar with, and adhere to, the legal standards they are required to implement.

Most national reports on the accessibility of courts and judicial institutions for people with disabilities focus on shortcomings in the current system, as well as on qualitative progress over time, such as improvements in physical accessibility, accommodations, and technology (Bornman and Msipa, 2024; Janković, 2022; Honcharuk and Skvortsov, 2017; Kermit and Olsen, 2023). Particular attention is paid to compliance with the European Accessibility Act of April 2019 and with national disability strategies (Flynn et al., 2019). However, there remains a gap in examining the impact of familiarity with accessibility standards on the likelihood of ensuring accessible judicial services.

Although the accessibility of public institutions has been the subject of extensive international debate, systematic empirical research on the accessibility of judicial institutions in Serbia remains largely absent. Previous studies have been fragmentary and have tended to rely on small-scale observations, without providing a comprehensive, data-driven assessment. This study addresses that gap by offering the first systematic quantitative analysis of accessibility across judicial institutions in Serbia. It assesses the current state of judicial accessibility for people with disabilities in Serbia, focusing on adherence to accessibility standards, physical infrastructure, and the availability of support services. In addition, it seeks to identify connections between various influencing factors that could contribute to improving efficiency in addressing existing shortcomings. The study not only maps the current state of accessibility at the national level but also provides evidence-based insights that are relevant beyond national borders.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the legal framework and institutional landscape of disability rights and accessibility policies in Serbia are presented. The subsequent section outlines the conceptual and methodological framework, including the research design, data sources, sample characteristics, statistical techniques employed, and the results. In the Discussion section the findings are interpreted in light of the existing literature. Finally, in the Conclusion, the key contributions are summarized, outlining limitations of the study, and suggesting directions for future research.

Legal framework and institutional landscape of disability rights and accessibility policies in Serbia

The prohibition of discrimination and the principle of equal access to the judicial system are prescribed in Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia. Article 21, paragraph 1, stipulates that everyone is equal before the Constitution and the law, while paragraph 2 guarantees the right to equal legal protection without discrimination (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2006). Paragraph 3 further provides that any discrimination, whether direct or indirect, on any basis, especially on the grounds of race, gender, nationality, social origin, birth, religion, political or other beliefs, is prohibited (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2006). In addition to the Constitution, discrimination as a socially unacceptable form of behavior is regulated through several legal acts, including the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Labor, and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities. Accessibility and the rights of persons with disabilities are regulated by laws and other regulations across all protection systems within the legal framework of the Republic of Serbia. These include the fields of social, health, family, and legal protection, as well as education, employment, labor, pensions, communication, public space and building design, rehabilitation, transport, and the judicial system. The Strategy for Promoting the Position of Persons with Disabilities 2020–2024 is a public policy document of medium priority but high impact, according to public policy impact and priority assessments (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2025; Vlada Republike Srbije, Republički sekretarijat za javne politike, 2020). The strategy encompasses all aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities.

The needs of persons with disabilities are addressed by the Sector for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities within the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs of the Republic of Serbia. Although several ministries include units responsible for disability rights, these units often have limited capacities and weak inter-institutional coordination (UNPRPD and UN Serbia, 2024). Disability rights are also addressed by independent bodies established under national legislation, such as the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman) and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (European Commission, 2024). Organizations of persons with disabilities play a key role in advocating for the rights and interests of this population.

Serbia ratified the CRPD in 2009, thereby committing to the implementation of these international standards (UNPRPD and UN Serbia, 2024). However, data collected in Serbia in 2014 indicated

widespread inaccessibility of judicial institutions for people with disabilities. At the time of the survey, none of the courts were equipped with orientation paths for blind and visually impaired persons, nor did they have accessible restrooms for people with disabilities (NOOIS et al., 2015, pp. 14–15). Only one in five courts (36 out of a total of 164) provided access for wheelchair users (NOOIS et al., 2015, pp. 14–15). The legal framework at the time did not guarantee accessibility within the judiciary for people with disabilities, thereby directly threatening their fundamental human rights (NOOIS et al., 2015, pp. 14–15). Findings from another study conducted in the same year, based on a survey of citizens, indicated that the judiciary in Serbia faced serious shortcomings in terms of accessibility for PWD. The most significant barriers were physical inaccessibility – particularly access to buildings and movement within them – as well as insufficient adaptation of information for individuals with visual, auditory, or learning disabilities (Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Justice Sector Support in Serbia and World Bank, 2014, p. 202; Numanović et al., 2014).

Despite the diversity and scope of legislation regulating disability rights and the existence of relevant institutions, Serbia continues to face challenges in the effective implementation of these policies, according to the situational analysis report prepared by the UNPRPD (UNPRPD and UN Serbia, 2024). The legislation has been assessed as outdated and largely based on a medical model of disability, with an emphasis on medical assistance and charity, while prevailing practices remain discriminatory.

Accessibility of judicial institutions today: the case of Serbia

In 2023, an assessment of the accessibility of judicial institutions in the Republic of Serbia was conducted. For this purpose, a structured survey was sent electronically to all institutions of this type in Serbia. The institutions in focus were those that people with disabilities most frequently turn to when exercising their rights, such as courts and public prosecution offices.

Research questions

To address the context presented above, this study examined the following research questions:

- (Q1) Have judicial authorities adapted their legal services for people with disabilities?
- (Q2) Are these authorities familiar with various documents aimed at ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities?
- (Q3) Have they implemented specific measures or adaptations to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities?
- (Q4) What are the values of other background variables that may be relevant to the adaptation in question?
- (Q5) Can the provision of legal services adapted for people with disabilities be explained in terms of familiarity with various accessibility-related documents and by background variables related to the sampled institutions?

Method

Sample. This study used a convenience sample comprising 233 judicial institutions of various types. The representation of institution types varies within the sample. The most represented were Basic Public Prosecution Offices, followed by Basic Courts, Misdemeanor Courts, Higher Courts, Higher Public Prosecution Offices, Commercial Courts, Commercial Appellate Courts, Appellate Courts, Appellate Public Prosecution Offices, Misdemeanor Appellate Courts, Administrative Courts, and Public Prosecution Office for Specific Cases. Institutions such as Public Notaries and Correctional Facilities were not included in the research.

Design and variables. The survey included twenty-two questions, most of which were used in this study to conduct a descriptive analysis of the topic and to form variables. The following binary variables were used:

- Services adapted – Provision of legal services adapted for people with disabilities;
- PPS familiarity – Familiarity with public premises standards for ensuring the accessibility of public premises for people with disabilities;
- BPS familiarity – Familiarity with business premises standards for ensuring the accessibility of business premises for people with disabilities;
- NLF familiarity – Familiarity with the national legal framework for ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities;
- Adaptations implemented – Implementation of specific measures or adaptations to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities;
- Adaptation requested – Receipt of a request for the adaptation of services for people with disabilities;
- PWD present – Presence of a person with disabilities among employees or hired personnel.

The values of these variables were derived from responses to the questions presented in the Appendix. Answers “Yes” were coded as 1, while “No” or “Partial” were coded as 0.

Results

Q1> *Adaptation of legal services.* Legal services were fully adapted for people with disabilities in 15.5% of institutions, partially adapted in 57.9%, and not adapted in 26.6%. Among institution types, the highest absolute number of “negative” or “partial” responses was recorded among Basic Courts and Basic Public Prosecution Offices, which is expected given their numerical dominance in the sample. However, the relative distribution across all twelve institution types was relatively uniform, as each type reported at least 75% of responses indicating that services were either partially adapted or not adapted. Moreover, in four out of twelve institution types (33.3%), the percentage of such responses reached 100%, indicating a complete lack of full alignment of services with the needs of persons with disabilities. Three of these four institution types accounted for only 0.4% of the sample each (Administrative Court, Misdemeanor Appellate Court, and Public Prosecution Office for Specific Cases), while the fourth accounted for 1.7% of the sample

(Appellate Public Prosecution Offices). Accessibility of the facilities varied by area and can be ranked, from higher to lower accessibility, as follows: entrances, hallways, courtrooms, service counters, and counter areas. Only 9% of institutions reported having a plan or strategy for improving accessibility and the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Q2> *Familiarity with various documents.* Only slightly more than one third of surveyed institutions (35.6%) confirmed familiarity with standards for ensuring the accessibility of public spaces for people with disabilities. A similar share (36.5%) reported familiarity with standards for ensuring the accessibility of business spaces for people with disabilities, while just over one quarter (26.2%) reported familiarity with the national legal framework in this area.

Q3> *Implemented measures or adaptations.* A small proportion of institutions (13.7%) reported having implemented specific measures or adaptations to ensure accessibility. Only 8.6% indicated that they possessed communication equipment for people with disabilities. The majority of institutions lacked clearly defined practices or rules specifically aimed at this population. Some institutions reported having received requests to take specific initiatives, such as engaging sign language interpreters (29.2%) or translating documents into Braille (3.4%). One sixth of participating institutions (16.7%) reported having received at least one request for adaptations. When asked whether they had an employee specifically responsible for working with people with disabilities, only 2.1% of institutions responded affirmatively. In a small number of institutions (3.9%), employees had completed training to work with people with disabilities, while only 6% of institutions provided special forms of support (such as adapted services or psychological support) for women with disabilities. Collaboration with organizations of people with disabilities to promote accessibility and inclusion was reported by only 8.6% of institutions. The proportion of institutions that have employees with disabilities was also low, at 16.3%.

Q4> *Relevant background variables.* Q5> *Explanation in terms of variables.* A forward (Wald) binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of six variables (PPS familiarity, BPS familiarity, NLF familiarity, PWD present, Adaptations implemented, and Adaptation requested) on Services adapted. The model including two predictors (PPS familiarity and Adaptations implemented) was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 28.434$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). This model explained 19.9% of the variance in Services adapted (Nagelkerke R^2) classifying 85.4% of cases correctly. The implementation of adaptations was associated with a 5.5-fold increase in the likelihood that legal services were adapted for people with disabilities, while familiarity with public premises standards increased this likelihood by 2.8 times (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1.

A second forward (Wald) binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of five variables (PPS familiarity, BPS familiarity, NLF familiarity, PWD present, and Adaptation requested) on Adaptations implemented. The model including two predictors (PPS familiarity and Adaptation requested) was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 22.354$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$). This model explained 16.6% of the variance in Adaptations implemented (Nagelkerke R^2), classifying 86.3%

of cases correctly. Familiarity with public premises standards was associated with a 4.8-fold increase in the likelihood of implementing accessibility measures, while having received an adaptation request increased this likelihood by 2.9 times (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Correlations among the seven variables are presented in Table 1. Four key correlations were given in bold.

Table 1.

Discussion

The analysis of accessibility in judicial system institutions provides key insights into the level of accessibility and support available to people with disabilities.

Adaptation of legal services. With only 15.5% of institutions reporting services that are fully adapted for people with disabilities and only 9% with plans for improvements, the data indicate that judicial institutions have poorly adapted their legal services and largely do not plan to improve the situation. These findings suggest a broad and structurally embedded lack of alignment between institutional services and the needs of persons with disabilities. Although basic-level institutions are more numerous, the relative proportions of partially adapted or non-adapted services align closely to those of the overall sample, supporting the conclusion that this issue transcends institutional type. This finding is consistent with a 2024 study in which public institutions were perceived by people with disabilities as inadequately adapted to their needs (Masliković and Tomić, 2024). In relation to other areas, that study identified “information on mobility and physical adaptability within institutions” as receiving the lowest evaluation scores (Masliković and Tomić, 2024).

Familiarity with various documents. Results concerning familiarity with accessibility-related standards and legislation show that the majority of institutions are partially or completely unfamiliar with this subject area. Insufficient awareness of existing legal frameworks designed to guarantee accessibility for people with disabilities highlights the need for additional training and improved dissemination of information regarding these frameworks. Given previous findings that people with disabilities in Serbia are themselves insufficiently informed about regulations governing access to information (Kadijevich et al., 2022; Kadijevich et al., 2020), judicial institutions bear a particular responsibility to inform people with disabilities of their rights and to ensure that legally guaranteed provisions are implemented. The previously identified positive effect of high-quality communication between people with disabilities and state authorities on familiarity with regulations further emphasizes the importance of effective communication with institutions (Kadijevich et al., 2022; Kadijevich et al., 2020).

Implemented measures or adaptations. The findings indicate a low level of implementation of measures or adaptations (13.7%) aimed at ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities within the judicial system. The low proportion of institutions with employed people with disabilities further suggests that concrete steps toward creating an inclusive working environment have not been systematically undertaken, and that people with disabilities remain marginalized within this sector. Broader implementation of accessibility measures or adaptations, along with accessible information formats (Masliković et al., 2023), as well as establishing clear guidelines that promote fairness, is necessary to ensure equal access to the justice system. The presence of employees with disabilities may be particularly important for understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by this population in the justice sector, and for certain types of disabilities this represents a specialized task (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021) even in the context of remote work capacity building (Simović et al., 2024; Lazić et al., 2022; Lazić, 2024; Lazić et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the overall employment rate of people with disabilities in Serbia remains low (Kadijevich et al., 2022; Kadijevich et al., 2020; Lazić et al., 2022; Lazić, 2024).

Overall, the results demonstrate low level of legal service adaptation and limited implementation of accessibility measures and adaptations, indicating a misalignment between judicial institutional practices, and social policy related to disability rights and accessibility policies within Serbia. Findings on limited familiarity with accessibility-related documents, which are themselves products of social policy, further confirm this misalignment.

An example of good practice in enhancing accessibility within the Serbian judicial system is the adapted approach to testimony. The introduction of special protocols for individuals with special needs enables electronic testimony using tablets, as well as written testimony, thereby improving participation and accessibility.

Relevant background variables. A clear relationship was identified between the provision of adapted legal services and the implementation of measures or adaptations, as well as familiarity with standards for ensuring the accessibility of public premises. The implementation of specific accessibility measures and adaptations was associated with increased provision of adapted services, indicating that the measures prescribed by policymakers were appropriately selected. Familiarity with public premises accessibility standards also positively influenced the provision of adapted services, albeit to a lesser extent. These findings suggest that responsible personnel within judicial institutions must be familiar with accessibility standards in order to effectively adapt services for people with disabilities. This result further highlights the importance of spatial accessibility for broader service adaptation within the judicial system.

A relationship was also established between the implementation of accessibility measures and adaptations, and familiarity with public space accessibility standards, as well as the receipt of requests for service adjustments. Familiarity with accessibility standards positively influenced the implementation of measures and adaptations. In fact, familiarity with these standards also influences the adaptability of judicial services, partially through the implementation of existing

measures and adaptations. Requests for service adjustments likewise played a significant role: once a request was received, institutions tended to initiate procedures leading to the implementation of specific accessibility adaptations.

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite some progress, the accessibility of judicial public institutions for people with disabilities remains insufficient. The observed distribution of institutions with inadequately adapted services suggests a systemic pattern that transcends individual institutions and institutional types, pointing to broader structural barriers to accessibility. Binary logistic regression analysis revealed several important relationships between variables. Two key factors – familiarity with public premises accessibility standards and the implementation of accessibility measures or adaptations – significantly influenced the provision of accessible services in judicial institutions. Also, familiarity with accessibility standards and the receipt of adaptation requests significantly affected the implementation of such measures or adaptations. Path analysis further demonstrated the interconnected nature of these factors, underscoring that familiarity with accessibility standards directly contributes to more accessible services.

To address existing accessibility gaps, it is essential to promote the practical application of public premises accessibility standards through the implementation of concrete adaptations and to increase awareness of these standards. While awareness is a key precondition for implementing adaptations, requests for adaptations also play a crucial role. Ensuring high-quality services for people with disabilities in judicial institutions is therefore a necessary step toward their full inclusion.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis relied on data provided by the Ministry of Justice. Although this source represents an authoritative institutional record, potential delays in administrative updates or discrepancies with publicly available data cannot be entirely excluded. Second, the analysis is based on self-assessment by representatives of each institution, which introduces the possibility of subjective or inconsistent responses. Third, the study reflects a single time point (2023) and does not capture developments occurring after that year. As the study focuses exclusively on judicial institutions, it may encourage further research expanding the scope to other public services relevant to the exercise of citizens' rights. Future research could also adopt comparative perspectives, both across sectors in Serbia and in relation to judicial systems in other countries. Incorporating the perspectives of people with disabilities themselves would further enrich future analyses by complementing the institutional viewpoint.

These findings can serve as a model for planning strategies to improve the accessibility of judicial institutions. For this purpose, we propose several recommendations that address the weakest points in the process, from policy design to the achievement of an inclusive environment within judicial institutions. The recommendations are addressed to policymakers and relevant independent bodies, as well as to organizations of persons with disabilities. A stronger link should be established between public premises accessibility standards and the provision of accessible services. Training

for responsible institutional staff on relevant standards and legal frameworks should be prioritized, along with initiatives promoting the importance of their implementation. Increased budgetary allocations for adapting existing buildings and services in line with disability standards are also necessary, accompanied by advocacy aimed at decision-makers responsible for financial planning. In addition, organizations of people with disabilities should be encouraged to submit adaptation requests, given their demonstrated influence on institutional responsiveness.

Key actors – including court presidents, the State Public Prosecutor, the Chamber of Public Notaries, the Bar Association, and the Ministry of Justice – should take the lead in initiating staff training, implementing accessibility standards, planning financial resources, and adopting new regulations. Improving accessibility and inclusion requires adherence to established rules and practices, heightened awareness of equal rights within the judicial system, and the introduction of measures supporting the employment of people with disabilities. These efforts should be supported through systematic implementation of legal provisions, regular staff training, and investment in the physical accessibility of judicial facilities. Finally, examples of good practice from judicial systems in the former Yugoslavia region – such as innovative communication methods, support networks, adapted testimonial procedures, and targeted staff training – may provide valuable guidance. The findings of this study identify both the areas requiring intervention and the mechanisms that can be employed to improve accessibility within the judicial system.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Path diagram of the first model suggested by correlations.

Figure 2. Path diagram of the second model suggested by correlations.

Figure 3. A combined path diagram based on the previous two.

Table 1. Percentage of positive responses and correlations among the analyzed variables.

Variable	Percentage of 1s	Correlations					
		2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Services	15.5	0.252**	0.219**	0.205**	0.347**	0.158*	0.133*

adapted							
2.PPS familiarity	35.6		0.907**	0.719**	0.276**	0.099	0.036
3.BPS familiarity	36.5			0.705**	0.216**	0.090	-0.021
4.NLF familiarity	26.2				0.216**	0.125	0.054
5.Adaptations implemented	13.7					0.189**	0.060
6.Adaptation requested	16.7						0.051
7. PWD present	16.3						

** p < 0.01 * p < 0.05

Competing interests:

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data availability:

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical approval:

The study does not involve human participants data.

Informed consent:

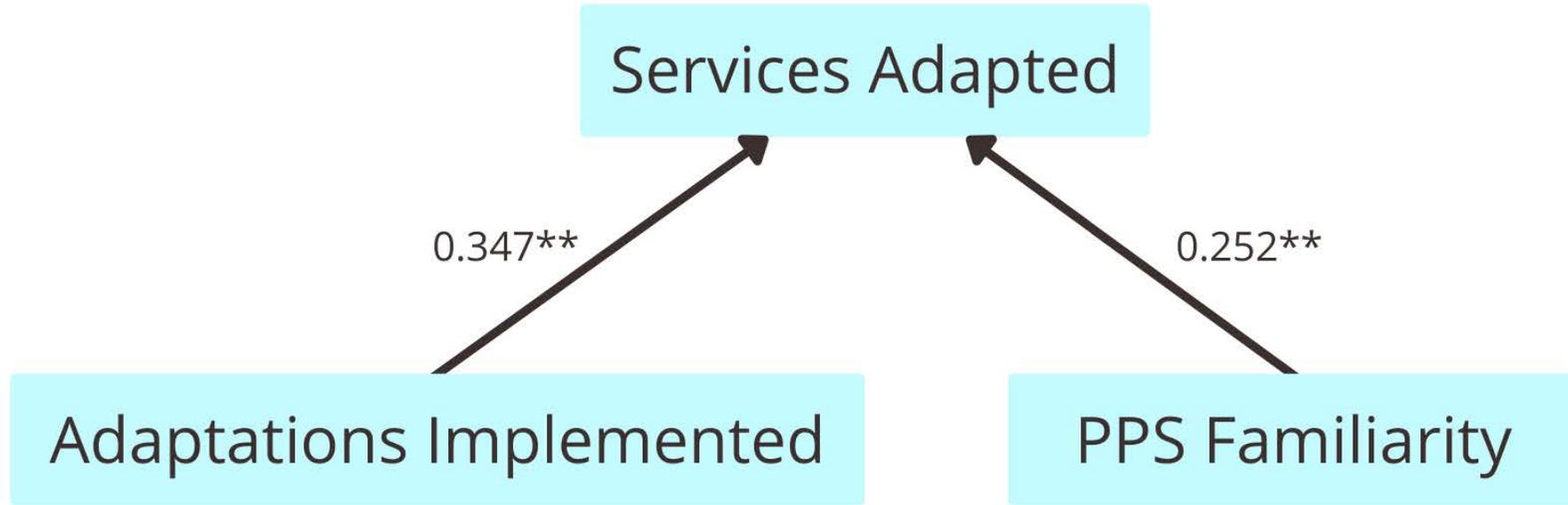
The study does not involve human participants data.

Author contribution:

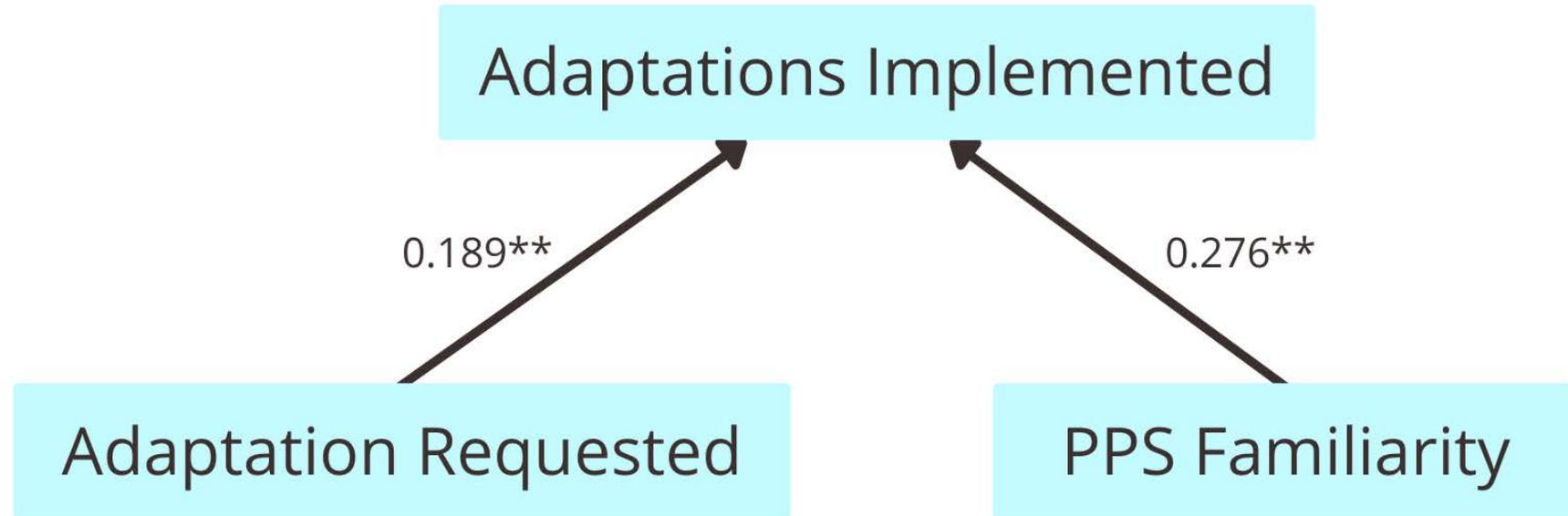
D.M. Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Writing – original draft. **B.M.T.** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Dj.M.K.** Methodology, Formal Analysis.

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** $p < 0.01$



** $p < 0.01$

