Digital Inclusivity

Subjects: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism
Contributor: Giannis Theofanous, Alkis Thrassou, Naziyet Uzunboylu

In the fast-paced digital economy, stakeholders across regions, industries and organisational typologies are recognising the growing significance of adopting customer-centric digital strategies. Inexorably, this necessitates the comprehension of consumer behaviours across a diverse customer spectrum, including individuals with disabilities (PwD).

Keywords: digital inclusivity ; accessible tourism ; sustainable development

1. Introduction

Research on consumer behaviour increasingly highlights the significant and rising power that the customer holds in the marketplace in relation to businesses. Starting in the early 2000s, with the notions of business versus consumer “balance of power” and “symbiosis” [1][2], it continued in the 2010s with the works of Opute and Gbadamosi [3][4]. In the 2020s, the concept has been cemented in marketing theory and practice, particularly consequent to advancements in digital technology and the globalised market [5]. This shift in market power from organisations to consumers largely relates to the ability of contemporary customers to easily compare prices, express their dissatisfaction and opt for the best sales deals [6][7].

In this evolving landscape of the digital economy, organisations are increasingly recognising the imperative of adopting customer-centric strategies, with a particular emphasis on understanding diverse consumer behaviours and preferences [6][7]. This is especially salient in the realm of tourism, where the digital experience often serves as the initial touchpoint for potential travellers. However, a pressing question arises: How are people with disabilities (PwD) catered to within this digital tourism marketplace?

Accessible tourism has emerged as a promising market niche within the travel and tourism industry [10]. The involvement of PwD in tourism-related activities can be advantageous for both the tourism industry and disabled individuals [11][12][13]. According to the World Health Organisation [14], there are over 1.1 billion people worldwide who have a disability, which accounts for approximately 15% of the global population. According to Ginis et al. [15], PwD are defined as those who have a lasting physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment that, when combined with various obstacles, may limit their ability to engage in society fully and effectively on an equal footing with others (p. 1). According to Zhang et al. [16], disabled tourists contribute significantly to the tourism industry, making approximately 40 million trips and spending a substantial USD 17.3 billion annually. This highlights the considerable size and economic potential of this market segment [17].

2. Accessible Tourism and Inclusivity

The tourism industry has been greatly influenced by e-commerce, which has made it easier to promote and sell services online. This is crucial for gaining and retaining customers, as it replaces outdated methods and makes promotions more efficient [18]. The emergence of e-commerce has transformed the manner in which individuals travel, facilitating a seamless exchange of information and data. This, in turn, enriches the travel experience by enabling users to effortlessly explore diverse destinations [19]. Within the realm of accessible tourism, which seeks to guarantee that tourism activities and destinations are available to all individuals irrespective of their physical constraints, health circumstances or age, the significance of incorporating e-commerce and technology cannot be underestimated. With the advancements in technology, individuals with disabilities are now able to enhance their quality of life through the use of assistive devices [20]. Disability-friendly websites and their accessible features are designed to facilitate the retrieval of information and communication for individuals with disabilities. The goal is to provide a level of information accessibility that is comparable to that of individuals without disabilities [21]. In this context, digital inclusivity means creating an environment where disabled tourists can access and utilise digital resources. In other words, digital inclusivity in e-tourism platforms can enhance the accessibility of tourism sites by facilitating the exchange of information and coordination among all parties involved in collaboratively developing tourism experiences [22].
Accessible tourism refers to a type of tourism that promotes inclusivity and independence for individuals with various access requirements. It involves collaboration among stakeholders to provide universally designed tourism products, services and environments that cater to the needs of people with mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access. In other words, the cooperation among different stakeholders in service ecosystems results in the development of valuable tourism experiences for PwD. Various actors play a crucial role in shaping the overall tourist experience throughout the customer journey for PwD, with the potential to either meet or fall short of expectations. Collaboration among the actors in the tourism service ecosystem is crucial for creating value for the customer, whether it is a single ecosystem or a combination of ecosystems. The perspective of value co-creation and value co-destruction is considered very relevant, especially in the tourism context. Some scholars highlight that the idea of co-recreation is well-suited for the tourism industry, which places more emphasis on the customer experience. The concept of co-creation involves the collaboration between organisations and consumers to create value, leading to a complete overhaul of business processes. However, it is common to see a lack of coordination among the various actors involved in co-creating the tourism experience, and sometimes they are not even aware that they are part of the same ecosystem.

Each actor involved in the tourist customer journey often has a limited perspective and may not fully grasp how customer experiences are shaped, which leads to co-destruction. Value co-destruction is the deterioration of the relationship between a provider and a consumer resulting in a negative outcome, such as a decrease in well-being. This accentuates the need for a comprehensive framework of stakeholder interrelationships and value contributions at a systemic level.

Accommodating PwD can greatly benefit the tourism industry in true business and social terms. This category of tourists typically chooses to travel during the off-peak season and shows a more consistent travel pattern compared to the general population. Moreover, this particular segment of consumers possesses a remarkable sense of loyalty, which arises from the difficulty they encounter in finding destinations that meet their specific needs. Usually travelling in groups, they often make multiple trips to the destination and tend to spend more in certain regions.

Creating an inclusive environment for all potential travellers requires a thorough and sensitive investigation of the various experiences and obstacles faced by PwD in the smart tourism industry. The need to prioritise accessibility and sustainability in e-commerce and marketing strategies goes beyond simply following legal and ethical requirements. It is closely connected to the organisation’s overall dedication to social responsibility and ensures fair access for all. Without an inclusive environment for PwD, the nexus between providers and PwD will be jeopardised, and the potential for value co-destruction becomes a tangible prospect. In this particular context, it is crucial to consider the intersectionality of digital inclusivity and accessible tourism. This necessitates a conscious integration of technological advancements, such as user experience (UX) design principles, along with sustainable marketing practices.

To ensure that digital platforms and marketing strategies are inclusive and accessible, it is important to conduct thorough research and involve stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, including PwD. This collaborative approach, as suggested by Nigg and Peters, will help create an amalgamation that not only reflects the needs of different users but also actively works towards removing barriers to access. Therefore, it is imperative for strategies to reflect a harmonious nexus between digital inclusivity and sustainable development. This means that accessible tourism platforms and practices should not only improve user engagement and satisfaction but also contribute to the growth of organisations and the overall advancement of the sector in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way.

### 3. E-Commerce and Digital Marketing in the Tourism Industry

E-commerce marketing strategies play a vital role in the world of accessible tourism. Buhalis and Darcy highlighted the significance of fostering collaborative processes among stakeholders in the field of accessible tourism. They emphasised the importance of creating tourism products and environments that are accessible to everyone. It is essential to develop innovative e-commerce strategies that address the diverse needs of travellers with disabilities. Buhalis et al. and Thrassou et al. have highlighted the transformative impact of technology on the tourism industry, making it more inclusive and intelligent. This transformation is revolutionising the way services are marketed and provided. Furthermore, the Tourism Customer Journey (TCJ) model, explored by Åstrøm and Lemon and Verhoef, emphasises the importance of tailoring marketing strategies to various stages of a traveller’s journey. These stages require e-commerce strategies that prioritise user-friendliness and aim to deliver a seamless and considerate experience for all travellers. A study conducted by Cassia et al. showed that the integration of digital ecosystems can significantly
enhance the co-creation of valuable tourism experiences [22]. This highlights the significance of e-commerce marketing strategies that are flexible, inclusive and technology-driven.

4. Digital Inclusivity and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The recent literature on accessibility emphasises the importance of sustainability and inclusivity, with a focus on fostering a strong connection between industry and society in the future [45]. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a collection of 17 interlinked global goals, designed to be universal blueprints for addressing global challenges and promoting prosperity and well-being for all, as well as to support strategic choices of responsibility by 2030 [46]. Among these goals, SDGs 9, 10 and 11 focus on industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; and sustainable cities and communities, respectively. The emergence of digital platforms and cutting-edge marketing strategies marks a significant milestone in the realm of accessible tourism, aligning with the core principles of SDGs 9, 10 and 11.

The integration of digital inclusivity into the marketing landscape has the potential to enhance tourism engagement and contribute to a more inclusive societal framework by reducing inequalities. The importance of SDG 9, which focuses on industry, innovation and infrastructure, is reflected in the digital transformation happening in the tourism sector. This transformation is seen through interactive marketing approaches that improve the tourism experience for a diverse demographic [47]. In addition, the concept of SDG 11, which focuses on creating sustainable cities and communities, is reflected in the pursuit of digital accessibility in smart cities. This makes them more inclusive and sustainable as tourist destinations [48]. The nexus between e-commerce and sustainable development highlights a framework in which technological progress, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, not only drives the e-commerce industry but also establishes a path towards environmentally friendly production and consumption [49]. This aligns with the larger concept of responsible tourism [50]. The digital realm is constantly reshaping accessible tourism, and the alignment of these SDGs with sustainable e-commerce and marketing strategies highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to creating a fair and sustainable world.

Adaptive technologies are crucial for enhancing the experiences of PwD in the tourism industry. There is a significant issue regarding the limited availability of tourist options for PwD. The lack of sufficient support through e-commerce and the limited availability of innovative assistive equipment for PwD are the main factors contributing to this issue. There is a significant demand for innovative assistive technologies that can provide improved support for PwD in different areas of their lives, such as tourism. This is essential for fostering their social reintegration. Developing innovative procedures that cater to the needs of PwD is becoming increasingly important. These will also aim to greatly enhance their potential for tourism [51].

A Preliminary Conceptual Framework on Digital Inclusivity and Accessible Tourism

To further explore the connection between digital inclusivity and sustainable development, it is crucial to examine the practical aspects and approaches involved in developing accessible digital platforms and marketing strategies in the tourism industry [52]. In order to effectively implement these strategies, it is important to first develop a preliminary conceptual framework that includes the foundational pillars of digital inclusivity and sustainable development (Figure 1).
This framework provides a generic comprehensive overview of the thematic “load-bearing” pillars identified in the existing research, laying the groundwork for exploration and examination. Researchers have selected the foundational pillars of “sustainable development” and “digital inclusivity” with a specific focus on the fields of disability and tourism. These pillars form the foundation of the framework, capturing the key themes and important discussions from the research community in these areas. The emphasis on collaborative efforts in the context of sustainable e-commerce and marketing strategies, especially for people with disabilities, underscores the significance of stakeholder engagement and co-creation. This inclusion is crucial to ensure that solutions in the tourism sector are both inclusive and practical. The second element of the model focuses on implementation strategies, which are essential for effectively applying the model in the ever-changing field of disability and tourism. The third element, “continuous evaluation and refinement”, is influenced by the ever-changing nature of these fields, highlighting the importance of being adaptable and continuously improving. Finally, the “outcomes” component is incorporated to evaluate the real-world effects of the model, particularly in improving experiences for individuals with disabilities in the tourism industry. This panel has dually acted as an information provider as well as quality control at each step of the research development. The panel members have also carefully studied the proposed framework, drawing on their expertise to assess and contribute towards each important aspect. Their contribution has led to the reformation and incorporation of important points, resulting in a better and more comprehensive, subsequent final conceptual representation of the topic. This collaborative effort ensured that the framework is built upon thorough existing scientific research and provisionally tested and refined through valuable insights from field experts, thereby enhancing the credibility and applicability of the study.

Final Conceptual Framework Development

The figure below (see Figure 2) illustrates the final conceptual framework of digital inclusivity and accessible tourism, summarizing the key findings.
Figure 2. Final conceptual framework of digital inclusivity and accessible tourism (Source: Authors’ own, 2023).

References


22. Cassia, F.; Castellani, P.; Rossato, C.; Baccarani, C. Finding a way towards high-quality, accessible tourism: The role of digital ecosystems. TQM J. 2022, 33, 205–221.


Retrieved from https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/125799