

Italian Accessible Tourism Startups and Regional Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The concept of accessible tourism has been recently extended by involving permanent and temporary disabilities and also gender, race, ability or sexual diversity and every kind of inequality. Therefore, providing services capable of improving it for different market groups is an important challenge for the sustainable development of regions. This research intends to identify to what extent Italian accessible tourism startups meet regional sustainable development.

Design/methodology/approach – This study performs an exploratory qualitative analysis based on a netnography collecting data deriving from the ten best projects awarded in the Invitalia 2019 challenge “Accessible”.

Findings – Startups help not only cognitive but also actual accessibility dimension of regional tourism development, indeed, the findings reveal three different categories of "access gain": physical, cultural and health-related all suitable to increase the regional sustainable development.

Research limitations – The main limitation is represented by the qualitative study, whose results are not generalizable. Indeed, it is the first step of broader research aimed to investigate the linkages between accessible tourism and regional sustainable development.

Research implications – Existing firms and new entrepreneurs could enhance their business activities, taking into account accessible tourism opportunities. Policymakers should design and improve accessibility regulations as a competitive advantage for any sustainable regional tourism policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies highlighted that the accessible tourist's market is the largest tourist group of consumers and that the overall demand-side exceeds the supply-side consistently (Kasimati & Ioakeimidisb, 2019). Based on an estimate from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2016), the tourism market which benefits from the accessible tourism exceeds one billion international tourists travelling each year and similar results emerged by projections made by the European Union Commission (EU, 2015).

Accessible tourism is a complex concept constantly evolving, and it is linked with the instance of sustainable development. It is due to notice that art. 7 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (2007) establishes that access to tourism constitutes a right equally open to all the world's inhabitants and should be regarded as one of the best possible expressions of sustainable growth.

In the famous definition given by the UN-Commission in 1987, 'Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. R&D departments of many manufacturing companies have developed technological solutions for disabled people, but sustainability is rarely intended as an integral part of these solutions. The tourism sector, interacting daily with a plethora of industries, is called to internalize the sustainability issues, creating the opportunity to recognize and meet the needs and desires of disabled people in the future.

Moreover, in the light of the goals underlined in the Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development, accessible tourism has to be considered as a synonymous of inclusion involving not only permanent and temporary disabilities through changing embodiments during lifespan (Darcy & Dickson, 2009), but also gender, race, ability or sexual diversity and, at least, every kind of inequality. In other terms, the approach based on health limitations is placed side by side with the non-conventional lens of human rights (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011).

Indeed, Goal 11, to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", highlights the principle of universal design referred to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹, for accessible and sustainable transport systems, inclusive urbanization, and access to green and public spaces (Preiser & Ostroff, 2001). The broader vision is better clarified in the research requested by the Eu Transport and Tourism

¹ Signed in New York on 13 December 2006.

Committee (Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2019) in which is recommended the accessibility of tourism for all. Accessible tourism guarantees the full social and economic inclusion of all persons with the added value of promoting more sustainable travel habits among users. As a matter of fact, the approach of the World Health Organization was immediately based on the difference between "Impairment", "Activity Limitation" and "Participation restriction", where "Impairment" is the absence or the significant difference in a person's body structure or function or mental functioning; "Activity Limitation" is linked with the difficulty in performing a task or an action, and "Participation restriction" highlights problems that a person may find in involvement in a life situation. Therefore, in an evolutive interpretation, it could be referred a different context from the traditional view of the term disability to achieve the initial goal of the Organization, which considered it a "versatile tool" (World Health Organization, 2002) suitable to cover every case in which an individual is deprived of his/her full participation in society by suffering a disadvantage in the common life.

The previous framework highlights the importance of accessible tourism as an unmissable business opportunity for a Country and, in particular, for regional sustainable development. As a result, promoting accessible tourism at a regional level is an effective economic driver of new potential because it allows enhancing local cultural, historical, ethnographic and natural specificities, consolidates the macro-branch and territorial excellence, improves infrastructures, and trains skills (Andreyeva et al., 2018; Saenko et al. 2017). Therefore, it is fundamental an integrated management strategy based on a multidisciplinary point of view, including the financial and fiscal approach. The European Union Commission is devoted to increasing accessibility in tourism through several actions, and also the Member States are working to support and improve the field. Italy is a proper example due to 2017-2022 Strategic Plan for Tourism (from now SPT 2017-2022) created by the State and engaging the Regions, which have fundamental competences in this matter entrusted by the Constitution. Thus, many regional laws and programs, based on public funding, benefits and tax incentives increasing tourism accessibility by improving infrastructure, technology, services and equipment are provided in order to support the strategy. Therefore, platforms operating in the form of innovative startups take advantage of all these circumstances.

In light of the above, this study intends to examine how the theme of accessible tourism can constitute as well as a new business opportunity, a driver for regional sustainable development. The qualitative research here conducted is aimed to identify innovative patterns followed by the 2019 Top Ten Italian startups in the competition for accessible tourism, whose core

business has been designed to overcome the limits to accessibility, thus promising to impact positively on sustainable development in a regional context, too.

The limits to accessibility to tourism constitute an offer void to which new businesses are looking with some interest in recent years, by taking this opportunity coming from the marketplace to concur effectively in pursuing regional development objectives. More specifically, this study examines how accessible tourism startups meet the principles of regional sustainable development in the Italian case. This setting addresses the research question in a context where poor accessibility has emerged to be one of the main obstacles to the development of the tourist supply (Agovino et al., 2017) and where the phenomenon of accessible tourism is still underexplored with a practical lens. The paper aims to fill this research gap, investigating the subject of accessible tourism in context, where abstract principles and values take the shape of real business opportunities and services supply. On the other hand, it is well-known that newcomers follow the good practices in the competitive arena and that pioneristic ventures, being bench tests in a specific regional context, can suggest business models suitable also in other contexts.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the existing literature on accessible tourism and its link with regional development. Section 3 presents the methodology, describing the research setting, data collection and analysis conducted on a sample of accessible tourism startups in Italy. Section 4 presents findings, and Section 5 presents conclusions, implications and future research avenues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted by Taleb Rifai, UNWTO Secretary-General, “accessibility is a central element of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. It is both a human right and an exceptional business opportunity” (UNWTO, 2016). In this perspective, accessible tourism refers to a responsible *modus operandi* oriented to the removal of existing barriers, by enabling people with disabilities or special needs to function independently and with dignity and equity through the delivery of Universal Tourism products, services and environments (Darcy, 2006).

Existing literature has identified different typologies (Smith, 1987; Darcy, 2010) and effects of barriers (McKercher & Darcy, 2018) which represent one of the many reasons why participation rates and qualities of tourism activities and experiences are lower than that of the general population (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011; UNWTO, 2016). More specifically, it has

mainly considered the following: environmental barriers related to the mobility and physical accessibility (Israeli, 2002; Darcy, 2002; Marston & Golledge, 2003; Small & Darcy, 2010); information barriers related to the organization of the trip or the retrieving of information concerning the location (Yau et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2012); and economic barriers (Shaw & Coles, 2004).

Several studies have linked the economic barriers with the concept of social tourism that brings a moral dimension to the broader concept of accessible tourism, including socio-economically disadvantages limiting people in tourism (Shaw & Coles, 2004; Pagan, 2012). In this respect, social tourism constitutes a “potential measure in the fight against social exclusion” (Agovino et al., 2017), as recently supported by the European Economic and Social Committee. It can lead a set of relevant benefits that consider the improvement of well-being effectively, the personal development of the beneficiaries, the recognition of the right to holiday and the expression of the need of widened accessibility (physical, economic and social accessibility) and inclusion.

Similarly, the idea to encourage and develop accessible and inclusive tourism for greater participation, overcoming the complex and heterogeneity of the barriers, obstacles and/or constraints, emerges clearly in the Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development, where accessible tourism has been considered as a synonymous of inclusion involving not only permanent and temporary disabilities through changing embodiments during lifespan (Darcy & Dickson, 2009) but also gender, race, ability or sexuality diversity and, at least, every kind of inequality. In other terms, the approach based on health limitations is placed side by side with the non-conventional lens of human rights (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). In this perspective, the focus of accessible tourism should be oriented in the future not only to a range of supports to excluded target groups but becoming a set of rules, principles and practices which contribute to the development of all tourism offerings assuming that tourism induces relevant changes in social, environmental and economic areas.

Additionally, accessible tourism cannot be considered as a specific sector or industry because it is essentially a complex ramification of different activities and initiatives that, in combination, produce a wider range of positive effects, and also determine the quality and quantity of the tourism products and services of a specific regional area. In this context, the quality of tourist products and services offered is more decisive for the economic impact on the local and regional economy (Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 2006).

Regional tourism providers and public actors at different levels have to recognize that those rights for all (e.g. tourists with disabilities, Design for All, the inclusion of the local communities in a transparent system of remuneration and participation, opportunities for the socially excluded group, the inclusion of other groups normally not considered, etc.) are becoming the threshold, determining whether their regional proposals will succeed or fail in the future. Thus, tourism will increasingly be seen as having transformational power as "a shaper of society" (Michopoulou et al., 2015), by operating as an efficacious key promoter of economic growth and occupancy, a strategic and active participant for developing future accessible region experiences, and finally, a partner in global development programmes.

Indeed, in many regions, cities are changing intending to provide new living areas, structures, services and facilities for all, where accessibility is taken as a central topic for sustainable development.

On the other hand, many positions converge in looking at accessible tourism as a relevant driver for the sustainable regional development by providing different benefits (UNWTO, 2016), such as reduction of the seasonality phenomenon in certain tourism regions, new business opportunities for innovative tourism products/services/technology solutions characterized by high levels of accessibility and/or assistance, improvement of the standard of living of the residents and visitors in terms of higher quality service, sustainability and social inclusion, and finally, increase of the profitability and reinforcement of the financial base of tourism businesses (Vila et al., 2015) and tourism regional contexts.

Responding to this call for action, in recent years many tourism firms are trying to transform themselves in an attempt to cope with accessible tourism issues, acknowledged to be critical factors for business success, though often "addressed in a piece-meal fashion by the majority of operators" (Darcy et al., 2010). To meet customer needs (market demand) that are estimated to be also relevant in terms of profitability, a growing number of companies operating in the tourism sector are now committed to experimenting innovative business models, intending to improve the quality of their services and cover new segments (Alén, et al., 2012; Darcy et al., 2020), also taking advantages from the opportunities offered by digital technology (Accordino et al., 2019).

Thus, accessible tourism constitutes a significant opportunity of competition both for existing companies and for new ventures, based on innovative business models capable of enhancing regional development, capturing/attracting financial resources and tax breaks.

On this theme, despite the plethora of studies devoted to socio-economics and geographic aspects, there is still a shortage of research examining in the specific Italian context, on an empirical basis, the elements of novelty and the features characterizing the development of companies aimed to fulfil these specific needs, since their foundation. Such companies, given the enforcement received at EU and UN levels, are seen as a potential driver both for innovation in the tourism sector and for the sustainable development in regional contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With all the above in mind, this study intends to identify *to what extent Italian accessible tourism startups meet regional sustainable development*.

This research is inspired by the assumption that the institutional enforcement toward implementing innovative ideas in response to the accessibility issue is linked to the recognition of the potential to be attributed to accessibility for Regional development.

The study is based on explorative research on young startups that, in the Italian context, represent a “native” response to a relevant offer void in the tourism sector.

The basic idea is that making tourism accessible means increasing jobs, improving the quality of services and ensuring that many tourists with special needs also choose one Region over another to spend their holidays, decreeing an improvement in their reputation, a harbinger of success and development. Over the years, initiatives taken by Regions in this direction have been more and more both for an ever more widespread awareness regarding the removal of barriers, and because sensitivity towards disability in particular but, more generally, towards diversity is becoming the litmus map test of a country's cultural advancement. The reason why the particular attention to the accessibility of tourist services for the disabled is combined with the broader category of diversity concerns the fact that including or dedicate particular attention for all kind of diversity it is strategic because of the several cultures and sensibilities that cannot be neglected in the travel/leisure experiences of all tourists.

Research setting

In the last ten years, startups have significantly supported the regions' growth so much that scientific contributions have investigated the critical success factors impacting on this positive business performance (Gilmore et al., 2004; Schutjens & Wever, 2000; Watson et al., 1998). As a result, the European

Union Commission has undertaken many policies² to favour their development, issuing directives and regulations with a specific impact on innovation, and to remove obstacles limiting their development. In the previous context, highly relevant is ensuring an adequate capitalization of innovative startups due to the depending on the equity which is a key factor for the long-term investment necessary for the implementation of the innovative programs and the whole economic development of the Country. On it impacts the financial leverage that could press investors to prefer equity over debt which usually ensures a better remuneration. Therefore, many Member States have recently introduced more explicit rules for innovative startups to assure various kind of benefits paying attention to European Union State Aid rules, if conferred to undertakings by national public authorities. In the case of Italy³, a long-term strategy has to be highlighted. The main requirements of an innovative startup are the following: the enterprise has to be newly incorporated or has been operational for less than five years; the headquarters in Italy or another EU country, but with at least a production site branch in Italy; a yearly turnover lower than €5 million; do not distribute profits; have as exclusive or prevalent company object the production, development and commercialization of innovative goods or services of high technological value; are not the result of a merger, split-up or selling-off of a company or branch. The new policy privileges tax incentives provided for investors and the innovative startups⁴, the provision of work for equity scheme in favour of employees with the additional extent to create loyalty to the new entrepreneurship, new rules regulating the crowdfunding and attention to measures like the Patent Box, the Research and Development tax credit, the Super and Hyper Depreciation and the Allowance for corporate equity (Accordino, 2020). In the previous framework, Invitalia, the National Agency for Inward Investment and Economic Development owned by the Italian Ministry of Economy has the relevant role of boosting Italy's economic growth,

² As the "Capital Markets Union", in September 2015 planning over 30 actions and related measures to establish the building blocks of an integrated capital market in the EU by 2019.

³ Decree-Law 179/2012 on *Further urgent measures for Italy's economic growth*, converted into Law 221/2012, and Decree-Law 3/2015, known as *Investment Compact*, turned into Law 33/2015 and other actions in the last ten years.

⁴ It is due to notice that in the so-called Relaunch Decree no. 34/2020, the tax deduction for individuals who invest in innovative startups, either directly or through collective investment schemes, has been increased to the 50%, up to an expenditure ceiling of 100 thousand euros, which will rise to 300 thousand euros in the decree's conversion threshold. The company must maintain the investment at least for three years; otherwise, the benefit is forfeited, and the restoration of the amount spent is due, with legal interest.

promoting the creation of new companies and innovative startups as an accelerator. Last but not least, in Italy, many regional institutions as the Chambers of Commerce, in cooperation with banks and other lenders, have recently promoted actions supporting accessible tourism in favour of SMEs operating in the regional business ecosystem. They consist of different kind of incentives, as grants or tax credit, in case of interventions in the field of infrastructure, technology including digitalization, plant engineering, services, equipment suitable to improve the tourist accessibility of the operators concerned. The innovative startups deepened usually interact with this kind of firms.

Data collection

This research is based on exploratory, qualitative analysis (Stebbins, 2001; Zack et al., 2009). The use of qualitative methods allows for a deep, detailed, rich data collection that can help to understand complex issues, and to develop further knowledge (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Gummesson, 2005) and are useful for theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). In particular, this study uses a netnography analysis to gather data. Specifically, it is an interpretive research method that applies non-intrusive observation and focuses primarily on the context of online textual communication and not on the physical forms of human communication (Kozinets, 2002). It permits to collect data from online searching on webpages and social media channels looking for content related to the topic investigated (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets, 2002; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2014; Bartl et al., 2016; Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). As for differentiating the data collection strategy and sources, researchers were independently involved in the retrieval of information regarding the selected case studies. After a first-round of search, all retrieved information was collated, duplicates were removed, and each researcher independently analyzed the remaining documents.

The starting point of the research is the Invitalia first appointment in 2019 concerning the specific challenge “Accessible” of the program “Accelerathon FactorYmpresa Turismo”. It offers tutoring services and economic contributions to businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs in the tourism area. In particular, the challenge has the purpose to “Offer innovative services for the physical, generational and cultural accessibility of places and territories, opening them up to tourist enhancement for all. Identify the barriers and propose solutions to overcome them in order to widen the

usability of our Country as much as possible to travellers who require specific services based on their needs.”⁵.

With a national call, Invitalia selected (among 115 projects) 20 teams who worked for a few days together with its tutors and mentors on topics such as physical, information, generational and cultural accessibility, to improve the team's ability to present the business idea to potential investors/partners/customers and accelerate the project's development. In this way, the teams verified the strengths and weaknesses of the business model, defined how to strengthen the project by identifying the need for specialist services and prepared a 3-minute pitch which they presented to the jury at the end September last year. The ten winning projects were awarded a 10,000 euro check in addition to the accompanying services provided by Invitalia.

Moving from these ten projects, we collected data on the above companies using various sources, and we deepened the research regarding their peculiarities, firm-specific factors, effective business idea implementation.

Table 1 reports the list of the startup projects investigated. The second column provides the year of their creation, while the third column shows the regions of startups. The last column indicates the startup assistance organization, such as accelerator or business incubator, oriented to help entrepreneurs for bringing their technologies, ideas, or products into the marketplace and ideally lead entrepreneurs to develop viable businesses.

Table 1. List of startups

STARTUP	FOUNDED	LOCATION	MAIN INCUBATOR/ ACCELERATOR
MONUGRAM	2018	Lazio	Dock3-The Startup Lab (Roma Tre University)
BABAIOLA	2016	Sardinia	Contamination Lab (University of Sardinia)
TRAVELLY	Not yet	Tuscania	--
EUROPASS ITALY	2018	Lombardy	Europass Eu Fintech District Community
BOOKINGBILITY	2015	Sicily	ConsorzioArca University of Palermo
DISHCOVERY	2018	Emilia Romagna	Primomiglio SGR (Barcamper Ventures)
WEMOVEON	2016	Veneto	Business accelerator based on Digital Geography in Italy: GEOSmartcampus by ESRI
DUPLICART	2019	Lazio	DTC Lazio Centro di Eccellenza
N.I.C.O.	Not available	Sicily	TIM#WCAP
ARTPLACE MUSEUM	2016	Emilia Romagna	TIM #WCAP

Source: our elaboration.

⁵ <https://factorympresa.invitalia.it/le-sfide/le-sfide/accessibile>.

Data Analysis

Data analysis has been carried out by following a five-step procedure, adapted from Easterby-Smith et al. (2012). The first step consisted of a set of online meetings, involving the authors, which were useful to familiarise themselves with the contents of this research. In the second step, the research goals and methodology were defined and shared among the researchers themselves. This step was highly useful to have a preliminary assessment of the information needed for the remaining steps. The third step consisted of a systematic collection of data useful for exploring the research issue and in a structuring activity of these data following a coding scheme. The collected data were analyzed using a coding scheme and recursive abstraction derived from the research question and the existing theoretical framework (Mayring, 2002, 2010). Codes provided a means to manage a large amount of data and identify the relevant elements for the present research. The fourth step consisted of critical analysis and interpretation of the collected and structured data. During this step, each researcher participated in several meetings during which personal results were shared, discussed, and validated or discarded by the other colleagues. In the process, the data sharing resulted in a common understanding of the data collected, analysis technique used, and possible application to the study. The final step consisted of the definition of concepts deriving from the data and its usefulness to answer to the research issue.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents and summarizes the ten startups' profile information regarding their activity, kind of diversity features target and specific tools for removing several relevant barriers that can effectively limit the tourism experiences.

Table 2. Startups profile

Startup	Activity	Kind of diversity	MAIN INCUBATOR/ ACCELERATOR
Monugram	An app mobile considered as a digital touristic guide. "Shazam" of monuments. Has also a section of travel management	Cultural	Dock3-The Startup Lab (Roma Tre University)
Babaiola	Search holiday system oriented to LGBTQI community.	LGBTQI community	Contamination Lab (University of Sardinia)

We Travelly	not yet operative	Single family single parents	--
Europass Italy	Easy access to digital and financial services for Chinese people	Cultural barriers for Chinese people	Europass Eu Fintech District Community
Bookingbilty	The site allows to find, and book accessible structures for people with special needs	physical disability (mobility, hearing, vision...)	ConsorzioArca University of Palermo
Dishcovery	The startup provides a digital menu service (QRcode) with details about dishes, allergens, ingredients, recommended combinations that reflect diet (vegan, vegetarian ...) or intolerances.	Physical disability (allergies and intolerances) covid19 barriers (limitation of papers, minimizing time of interaction between clients and waiters, digitalization of payment, etc.)	Primomiglio SGR (Barcamper Ventures)
WeMoveOn	Promote the autonomy of travel for people with disabilities and sustainable mobility	physical disability, mobility difficulties, "citizens in need"	Business accelerator based on Digital Geography in Italy: GEOSmartcampus by ESRI
Duplicart	Improve the accessibility and use of the Italian artistic and cultural heritage thanks to the use of new digital technologies.	physical disability	DTC Lazio Centro di Eccellenza
N.I.C.O. Sicilia	It seems not yet operational. The only news are brought back to UniCT, the Invitalia award and TIMWCAP	Visually impaired and blind users	TIM#WCAP
Artplace Museum	It provides directly on the smartphones of visitors exclusive digital and multimedia contents.	Cultural	TIM #WCAP

Source: our elaboration.

At first glance, it is possible to highlight that each project fully meets the SPT 2017-2020's vision and foster and enhance regional development. However, after the preliminary data collection, the sample was skimmed as three projects (i.e. Duplicart, We Travelly and N.I.C.O.) do not seem to have been fully implemented their business idea yet.

Startups here investigated present different peculiarities related to cognitive dimension and actual accessibility of tourist areas dimension, having the objective of improving their attractiveness and competitiveness. Regarding the cognitive dimension, the projects and initiatives examined aim primarily at overcoming the barriers linked to the possibility to obtain rich, correct and reliable information, by presenting themselves as user-friendly digital solutions. Emblematic in this direction is the experiences of Monugram, Babaiola and Artplace museum startups that are mainly focused on the improvement of the accessibility of information for tourists, becoming facilitators or reliable information sources. In that way, they operate coherently with the SPT's idea for the accessibility by giving the opportunity to fully appreciate the tourists' experiences. In effect, the focus on the diffusion and sharing of available knowledge is the primary tool for meeting those who seek (and often find barriers related to information asymmetries) and those who offer actual travel experiences. This tool allows improving knowledge experiences (information and language) of history, traditions and culture of the specific area.

Regarding the actual accessibility dimension, the main tools developed by the startups investigated for gaining and improving accessibility for the "unconventional" tourists (i.e. the diverse and people with disabilities), can be easily divided into three categories of "access gain": physical, cultural and health-related.

Cultural access gain. Culture differences between international tourists and service operators can negatively affect the experiences with tourism areas and, consequently, customer satisfaction. In this respect, large cultural differences may create cultural conflicts between a host population and tourists (Wei et al., 1989). Therefore, the development of tools, services and platforms that foster and permit to assume the cultural background of different international visitors assumes particular relevance for providers oriented to understand and address the needs of culturally different markets. In this respect, the experience of Europass mainly focuses on facilitating and supporting access to digital and financial services for Chinese travellers, becoming the only social media used by these tourists for having information about destinations and their attractions, etc. Additionally, this startup provides to different operators (independently of the sector of activities) the development of a global communication strategy to attract Chinese tourist in the pre-during and post-trip.

Physical access gain. Information on tourism for the disabled is collected, organized and proposed as a travel book. In particular, the startup Bookingbility allows to find, and book in real-time, truly accessible structures

that host people with disabilities. Truly accessible because the critical success factor of this travel platform is that it aims at clearing the gap that emerges between the experience of the disabled and other network users. Online booking is practically impossible for the people with disabilities because often is not possible to ascertain the real accessibility of the rooms (i.e., the rooms seem fully accessible but are separated from the hall or other standard rooms by a flight of stairs or lifts are unable to accommodate electric wheelchairs). This implies that it may become risky booking in real-time or last-minute: things that seem essential rights are not protected as it is challenging to be ready to face the extreme variability that exists among the needs of the varied world of disability. An interesting example to facilitate physical tourist access is offered by WeMoveOn. Here, to contribute for improving the autonomy of travel for people with disabilities, the professional skills involved (architects, specialists in disability programs, software and web apps programmers, experts in sustainable tourism) work on technological innovation and communication of georeferenced data for disability planning for urban areas management and transport.

Health-related access gain. The evolution of the culinary culture, and the discovery of food intolerances in the health field that can become disabling causes for people, have shed light on a disability that is not entirely evident but which in any case creates a barrier to the access of tourists' routes. A service that provides a digital menu service accessible with a QR Code and offers several related services (translates menus into different languages, allows to enter details about dishes, allergens, ingredients, recommended combinations etc.), permits to activate interactive menus where is possible to highlight only dishes that reflect diet (vegan, vegetarian ...) or intolerances. In this direction, Dishcovery is one of the leading companies to which over 1,500 restaurants have turned (1000 of which in the last three months) to activate a digital menu because of the covid19 barriers (limitation of papers, minimization of time of interaction between clients and waiters, digitalization of payment) that need a timely adjustment to ensure safe access to restaurants. Besides, in Covid-19 lockdown time WeMoveOn offered an exceptional support service for "citizens in need": elderly, disabled, people in quarantine having difficulties in daily supply, associations of volunteers. Doing so, a synergy between the attention to the accessibility in the tourism sector and the socially sustainable development it is created.

To sum up, these three "open doors" facilitate access and, therefore, multiply the users of public and private services by breaking down barriers that sometimes turn out to be obstacles even for the so-called able-bodied. This confirms a widespread inclination already described in previous researches

namely that of the linkages between tourism and local and development and the importance of innovative business models to seize and create new development opportunities (Darcy, 2020, Accordino et al., 2019; Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 2006). Moreover, these experiences also highlight how the attention to "niche problems" can turn into the possession of strategic solutions to maintain and improve the development trends of a territory.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the relationship between accessible tourism startups and regional sustainable development. Using an exploratory and qualitative analysis, we recognize that startups put in place activities for tourists to overcome information, physical and cultural barriers and present themselves as user-friendly digital solutions. Moving from the SPT's idea for accessibility and adding the Agenda 2030's concept of inclusion, we have emphasized a strategic view of several sensibilities that should be taken in account in all tourists' experiences to breaking down barriers for unconventional. Thus, our analysis focused on tourist services for both disabled and, more generally, all kinds of diversity, identifying two relevant dimensions (cognitive and access gain).

Startups here examined follow different paths and provide a set of heterogeneous services through innovative digital solutions, platforms and applications capable of ensuring that many "unconventional" tourists can knowingly choose one region over another. All their activities are linked to themes relevant for regional development and can be considered niche markets with a good fit between accessible tourism and regional sustainable development. For improving tourist accessibility, Italy has responded to the European Commission's input with its SPT involving the regions which have full competences in order to support this strategy with many regional programs based on public funding, benefits and tax incentives.

This research provides some interesting implications. From a theoretical point of view, this work contributes to deepening the debate on the crucial relationship between accessible tourism startups and regional sustainable development, recognizing that rights for all (tourists with disabilities, the inclusion of other groups usually not considered, etc.) is going to be a crucial factor for regional success. From a managerial point of view, existing firms and new entrepreneurs could enhance their business activities, taking into account accessible tourism opportunities. Policymakers should design and improve accessibility regulations as a competitive advantage for any sustainable tourism policy. In recent years, for encouraging greater

attention to accessible tourism and stimulating companies' investments, some initiatives taken by Regions in this direction have been activated, such as grants and financial instruments, but much more needs to be done. Accessible tourism should be effectively developed as a suitable activity for promoting inclusion and well-being for all equitably. Hence, this field requires increasing attention from regional authorities.

Our study has some limitations. The main limitation is the qualitative study, whose results are not generalizable and the sample dimension. We consider only accessible tourism startups operating in some Italian regions. Thus, it would be useful to extend the validity and generalizability of the results by expanding the geographical boundaries of the analysis to other European countries. Moreover, we did not investigate for customers and operators' opinions.

This study can be considered a first pilot step of broader research that aims to investigate the linkages between accessible tourism initiatives and sustainable regional growth. Further studies could use a longitudinal analysis to study evolution over time and other research methodologies for comparing Italian regions with other European regions.

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