

Article

Digital Inclusivity: Advancing Accessible Tourism via Sustainable E-Commerce and Marketing Strategies

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Abstract: 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). In this context, the present expert-driven conceptual research examines tourism digital sustainability and inclusion and elucidates the role of tourism e-commerce platforms in promoting a barrier-free digital environment for PwD and creating a more inclusive and sustainable online marketing landscape. The findings highlight the need for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the user experience to achieve satisfaction, loyalty and stakeholder engagement, as well as the factors in need of consideration towards a barrier-free and sustainable e-commerce environment. Further research could explore the assessment of the framework presented here in a practical context towards implementation to uncover its strengths and limitations.

Keywords: digital inclusivity; accessible tourism; sustainable development; tourism e-commerce; co-creation



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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

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 [8,9]. 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 [11–13]. 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].

1.2. Research Gap, Aim and Contribution

The exploration of the abovementioned demographic goes beyond simply acknowledging their consumer needs, with the existing literature identifying a significant gap. The literature on digitalisation and the tourism experience has extensively explored specific groups and consumer segments. However, there is a lack of research in hospitality and tourism management that focuses on the perspectives of tourists and consumers with disabilities. Specifically, a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges they encounter when trying to access digital platforms and services is required [18]. And, equally important, it is now deemed crucial to incorporate digital inclusivity into sustainable tourism e-commerce and marketing strategies. This will ensure that the tourism sector is not only customer-centric but also accessible to everyone [19]. The viewpoint emphasises the significance of taking a holistic approach to smart tourism that should prioritise both accessibility and sustainability, creating an inclusive e-environment that caters to all potential travellers [20].

In this context, the aim of this expert-driven conceptual paper is to identify the sustainable aspects of tourism e-commerce and to focus on and explicate the nature and importance of inclusivity in today's digital age tourism industry. This research provides a unique and fresh perspective on the topic by incorporating the specialised field of accessible tourism into the wider context of sustainable tourism e-commerce and e-marketing. The paper explores the potential of tourism e-commerce platforms in promoting accessible tourism for people with disabilities, striving to create a more inclusive and sustainable online marketing landscape.

The findings of this paper are neither definitive nor conclusive, but they do constitute a comprehensive conceptual underpinning for further, empirical research to develop, refine and test the findings, inspiring scholarly and executive discussion and facilitating the natural evolution of the subject into the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. 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 [21]. 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 [22]. 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 [23]. 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 [24]. In this context, digital inclusivity means creating an environment where disabled tourists can access and utilize 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 [25].

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 [25,26]. 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 [27]. Some scholars highlight that the idea of co-recreation is well-suited for the tourism industry, which places more emphasis on the customer experience [28,29]. The concept of co-creation involves the collaboration between organisations and consumers to create value, leading to a complete overhaul of business processes [29,30]. 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 [31], which leads to co-destruction [29]. 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 [27,32]. 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 [33] 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 [34]. 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 [34]. Usually travelling in groups, they often make multiple trips to the destination and tend to spend more in certain regions [35].

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 [36]. The need to prioritise accessibility and sustainability in e-commerce and marketing strategies goes beyond simply following legal and ethical requirements [37]. 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 [32,38]. 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 [19]. The research into technology empowerment in accessible e-tourism services is of utmost importance, especially when considering the distinct technological features and design considerations required by PwD. These individuals have specific accessibility needs for attractions that differ from those in regular life settings [23].

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 [39], 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 [40] but also contribute to the growth of organisations and the overall advancement of the sector in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way [41].

2.2. 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 [24]. 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 [19,42]. This transformation is revolutionising the way services are marketed and provided [43,44]. Furthermore, the Tourism Customer Journey (TCJ) model, explored by Åström and Lemon and Verhoef [45,46], 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 [25]. This highlights the significance of e-commerce marketing strategies that are flexible, inclusive and technology-driven.

2.3. 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 [47]. 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 [48]. 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 [49]. 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 [50]. 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 [51]. This aligns with the larger concept of responsible tourism [52]. 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 im-

proved 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 [53].

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 [54]. 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).

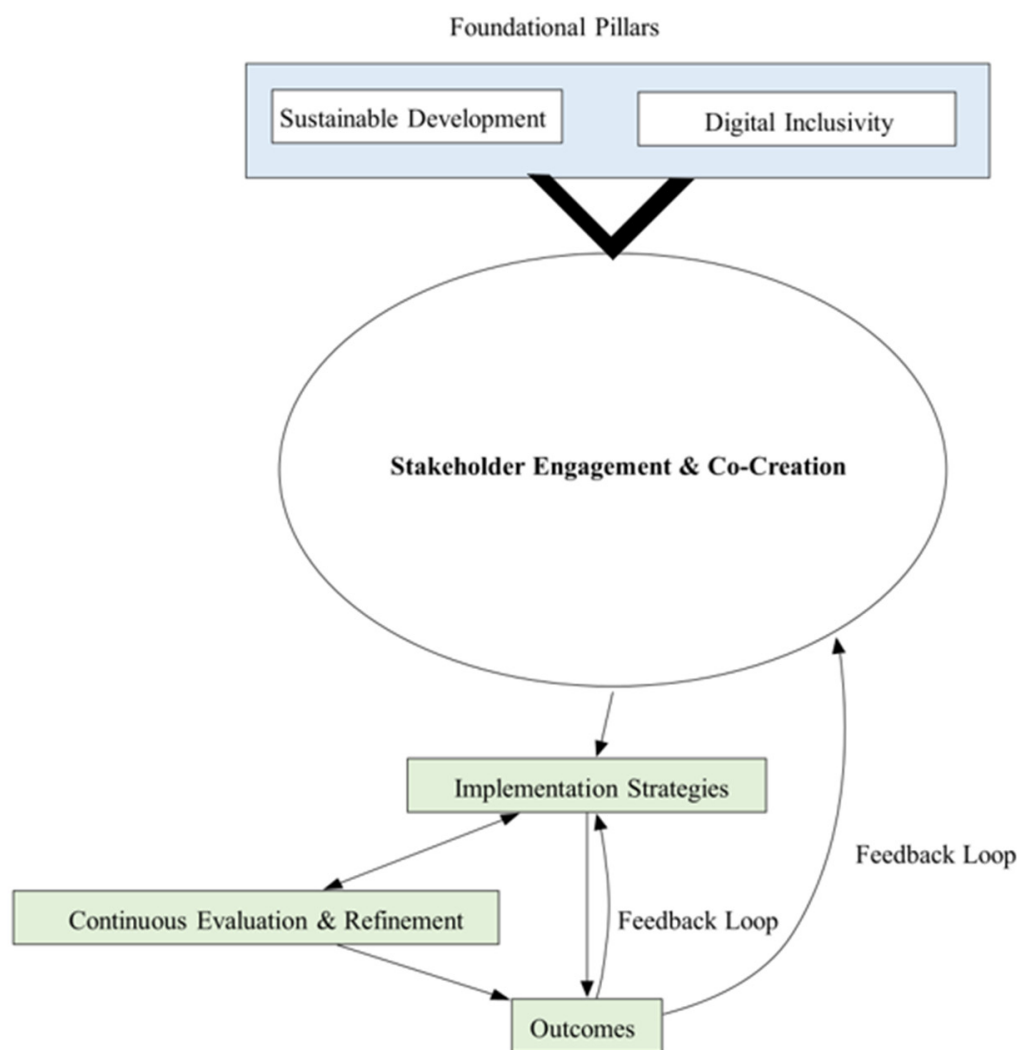


Figure 1. Preliminary conceptual framework (Source: Author’s own, 2023).

Upon thorough analysis of the existing literature, we have constructed an initial (*preliminary*) conceptual framework that serves as the foundation for our study and leads towards the final model to be presented hereafter following analysis. 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. We 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 our 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 our model focuses on implementation strategies, which are essential for effectively applying our 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 our model, particularly in improving experiences for individuals with disabilities in the tourism industry. To enhance and refine this preliminary framework, we have identified and assembled a group of experts, who are highly knowledgeable in the study under investigation, to form an expert panel (see also subsequent section). 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 our 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 our study.

This framework constitutes a preliminary version that is subsequently developed and refined in the manner and approach described in the following section.

3. Conceptualisation Method

A panel of experts was established to expand on and share their opinions of the proposed preliminary conceptual framework and of the key points that should be part of the foundational pillars and particular topics. They were invited via e-mail to participate in this study. The five-member panel included three practitioners and two academics who have firsthand, expert experience with PwD as well as extensive knowledge of the topic under investigation [55] (Table 1). Their profiles and positions are:

Table 1. Expert panel.

Practitioners	■ Founder/CEO of IREROBOT Ltd. (Nicosia, Cyprus)
	■ Head of Corporate Social Responsibility at Together Cyprus
	■ Marketing Officer at Limassol Marina
Academics	■ Lecturer in Clinical and Educational Psychology at the University of Limassol
	■ Assistant Professor of Management and Technology at the University of Limassol

Source(s): Developed by the authors.

Their contributions were instrumental in evaluating and improving the theoretical framework. The incorporation of a hearing-impaired practitioner (Head of Corporate Social Responsibility at Together Cyprus), as one of the expert panelists, contributed an invaluable and distinctive viewpoint. This expert’s contribution greatly enriched the diversity of our discussions and played a pivotal role in shaping the development of our final conceptual framework. Their perspectives, based on a unique lived experience, significantly enriched the depth and relevance of our analysis. This practitioner’s contribution was instrumental in shaping the nuanced understanding that is crucial for the strength and integrity of our study. Individual online meetings were conducted with each member of the expert panel.

These meetings, lasting 30–45 min, were conducted at three critical stages of the research process: at the outset, in the middle and after the completion of the theoretical framework. There were several reasons for conducting these meetings at three different stages. First, at the beginning of the research, the meetings aimed to gather initial information and perspectives that could guide the early developmental stages of key points within the theoretical framework, and to provide the panel experts with important information regarding the research aim and how this research can contribute to the research community. The mid-research meetings provided a timely opportunity to assess the evolving framework and incorporate intermediate feedback. Finally, the meetings conducted after the completion of the theoretical framework were crucial in validating the final model and ensuring it aligned with current practices and expert opinions. This strategic timing of the interviews integrated the expert panel's input throughout the research process, allowing a dynamic and responsive development of the theoretical framework. Also, we used an interview protocol as a guideline rather than a formal tool for data collection. This approach was crafted to cultivate a collaborative atmosphere among the experts, enabling the creation of varied and perceptive viewpoints.

4. Results, Discussion and Final Conceptual Framework Development

4.1. Digital Inclusivity and Sustainable Development

This process includes the implementation of adaptive technologies, such as voice recognition, screen readers, and user-friendly interface designs. These technologies play a crucial role in improving the digital experience for PwD. In addition, incorporating sustainable e-commerce practices, such as using green hosting services, optimizing website energy efficiency and employing ethical marketing tactics, may further show dedication towards sustainability principles. It is important to ensure that these efforts are not isolated but instead are incorporated into a unified strategy that is consistently improved through ongoing interaction and input from a wide range of users. The iterative process should be internalized in the organisational culture and operational practices. This will not only contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and sustainable digital tourism ecosystem but also play a role in fostering a more equitable and responsible future within the global tourism industry.

The concept of accessibility revolves around ensuring that a product, service, environment or facility can be used by individuals with a diverse range of capabilities [56]. This range includes auditory, cognitive, neurological, physical, speech and visual impairments. Making content accessible to these individuals is crucial for promoting digital inclusivity [57]. The principles of accessibility in UX/UI design emphasise the significance of having content that is easily perceivable, operable, understandable and robust [58]. Including individuals with diverse disabilities throughout every step of a product's development process is crucial [59]. Their personal experiences provide invaluable expertise that cannot be overlooked. Participating in this process has led to the creation of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These guidelines are derived from the insights of users with diverse disabilities and provide a set of criteria for achieving success. Conducting usability testing with users who have different disabilities is essential for identifying and addressing any design flaws [60].

Making tourism experiences accessible to everyone, including PwD, is crucial for promoting digital inclusivity [61]. Ensuring accessibility compliance and standards are established and followed is key to achieving this. The ISO 21902 standard (2021), developed by the International Organisation for Standardisation, is a shining example of a meticulously crafted endeavour. This standard provides comprehensive guidelines for accessible tourism, covering important aspects such as accessible pedestrian routes, effective communication strategies and necessary infrastructure requirements. Tourists with disabilities often encounter difficulties when planning their trips and navigating through destinations, due to the lack of consideration for their specific needs in terms of environment, infrastructure and tourism services. This standard is designed to inspire transformation.

4.2. Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Creation Development

The expert panel's insights on the stakeholder engagement and co-creation framework were invaluable in highlighting the significance of this approach in advancing accessible tourism through sustainable e-commerce and marketing strategies. The panel, without hesitation, initially focused on the vital importance of including PwD in every step of any process. This is in line with Patrick and Hollenbeck's perspective, which holds the importance of firsthand experiences in identifying and addressing accessibility challenges in digital design [62]. This level of involvement goes beyond mere consultation and emphasises meaningful participation.

The expert panel highlighted the significance of fostering collaboration among key stakeholders, including tech developers and UX designers, to promote sustainable e-commerce and digital inclusivity. They pointed out the powerful results that can come from combining technological innovation with thoughtful design principles. This collaboration ensures that the technological solutions are not only advanced but also easily accessible, in accordance with inclusive design principles [63].

Furthermore, one expert stated that it is important to form collaborations with specialists in sustainability and accessibility who have the ability to incorporate ethical and fair practices into digital platforms. Based on the panel's observations, these experts will play a vital role in maintaining legal standards and exemplifying social responsibility. This links to the implantation strategies under sustainable e-commerce practices. Finally, within the stakeholder engagement and co-creation segment, the panel asserted that the general user base can provide valuable feedback. This is because incorporating diverse user experiences into the process of refining digital strategies can yield comprehensive strategies that effectively appeal to a broad range of audiences.

4.3. Implementation Strategies

The expert panel's valuable insights on implementation strategies were crucial in shaping this essential component of our framework. The panel highlighted the significance of strategically deploying technology, particularly by selecting and integrating adaptive technologies. This underscores the role these tools play in improving digital accessibility. The panel emphasised the importance of ongoing technological upgrades and innovations to stay up-to-date with advancements in order to maintain a digital presence that is both accessible and engaging.

The panel strongly supported ethical and equitable practices in the field of inclusive marketing strategies. They identified these values as important in digital marketing and that marketing campaigns should be both effective and socially responsible. In addition, the panel highlighted the importance of focused and inclusive marketing campaigns, acknowledging their success in reaching and engaging a wide range of people.

The panel suggested that promoting ethical and equitable practices in the field of inclusive marketing strategies should be a focus. The significance of these values in digital marketing is underscored, as they guarantee that marketing campaigns are both impactful and socially conscious. Furthermore, the panel emphasized that targeted and inclusive marketing campaigns are effective in reaching and involving a diverse audience.

4.4. Continuous Evaluation and Refinement

The expert panel said that the continuous evaluation and refinement component of the framework is essential for the continued success and relevance of the strategies in accessible tourism and sustainable e-commerce. Collecting and analysing feedback from user experiences and conducting regular audits to ensure accessibility are crucial components of this process. This approach allows for a thorough understanding of user interactions with e-commerce platforms and identifies ways to enhance accessibility so that tourism services remain inclusive and user-friendly. The panel highlighted the importance of ongoing evaluation in adapting to the evolving needs and expectations of diverse users, including those with disabilities. The panel also noted the significance of conducting sustainability impact

assessments alongside evaluations that prioritise the users' needs and preferences. These assessments are used to evaluate the environmental and social impacts of digital platforms and marketing strategies. By carefully monitoring these impacts, relevant stakeholders can make informed decisions that align with their commitment to sustainability, ensuring that their operations make a positive contribution to the environment and society.

The outcomes section of our research framework emphasises the potential benefits and achievements for stakeholders in the tourism industry. Our research suggests that implementing digital platforms that are more inclusive and user-friendly can result in higher levels of user engagement and satisfaction. This enhancement is a direct outcome of stakeholders incorporating adaptive technologies and inclusive design principles, leading to a more pleasurable experience for a diverse group of individuals, including those with disabilities. It is critical to mention that these outcomes are not fixed in practice, but they continuously evolve and improve their processes through consistent evaluation and refinement, which involves conducting regular accessibility audits and gathering user feedback. Ensuring that services remain accessible, user-friendly and aligned with user needs is a key aspect.

Improving accessibility and usability for all users is another anticipated outcome, closely linked to the continuous process of evaluation and enhancement. By consistently evaluating and overcoming obstacles, stakeholders can guarantee the ongoing improvement and availability of their digital services. This process emphasises the importance of being adaptable in order to meet the changing needs of users and keep up with technological advancements.

The extent to which stakeholders are actively involved and collaborate can greatly influence customer loyalty, retention and the overall growth of the organisation. Our research highlights the significance of engaging a diverse group of stakeholders, including PwD, tech developers, UX designers and sustainability experts. This approach promotes a comprehensive understanding of user needs and preferences. This collaborative approach not only fosters the development of more effective and inclusive strategies but also cultivates customer loyalty and creates a foundation for organisational growth.

To achieve the desired outcomes of implementing inclusive and sustainable practices in accessible tourism, it is crucial to continuously evaluate and enhance strategies while also fostering active engagement and collaboration among stakeholders. The interaction of various factors emphasises the ever-changing nature of these results, which can be improved and enriched by incorporating new viewpoints and input throughout the ongoing process of strategy development and implementation.

4.5. Final Conceptual Framework Development

The figure below (see Figure 2) illustrates the final conceptual framework of digital inclusivity and accessible tourism, summarizing our key findings.

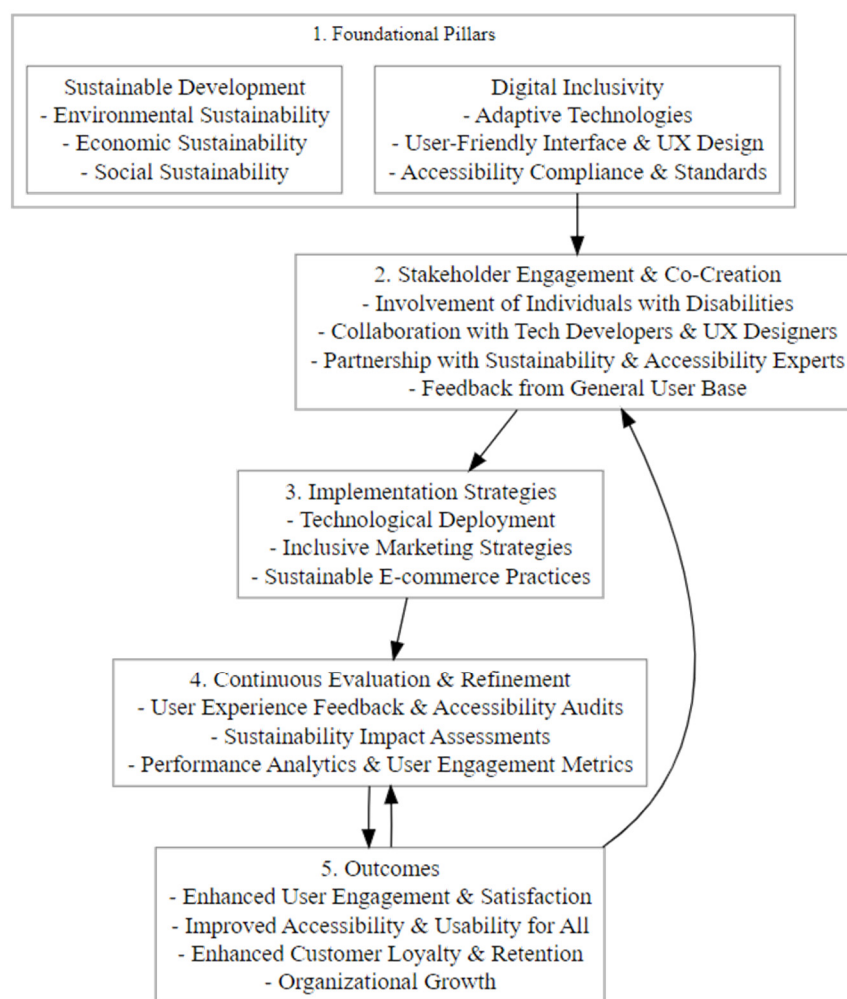


Figure 2. Final conceptual framework of digital inclusivity and accessible tourism (Source: Authors' own, 2023).

5. Conclusions: Contribution, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This conceptual paper, empirically infused with the perspectives of five experts, contributes to the discussion on promoting accessible tourism through sustainable tourism e-commerce and corresponding tourism marketing strategies. Our framework has been developed in a comprehensive manner to comprise an array of critical factors, including stakeholder value co-creation and implementation strategies' technological deployment. It focuses on primary outcomes, such as improved user engagement and organisational growth, while having as foundational pillars the perspectives of digital inclusivity and sustainability. Furthermore, this framework highlights the need for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the user experience, specifically focusing on individuals with "different abilities". The ultimate goal is to achieve satisfaction, enhance loyalty and retention, and foster stakeholder engagement through collaborative efforts throughout the entire process.

This research aligns with and adds valuable knowledge to the growing body of literature that emphasises the importance of digital inclusivity and sustainability in the accessible tourism sector [64]. It further underlines that creating an environment of digital inclusivity for PwD requires a comprehensive managerial approach that involves dedication, creativity, teamwork and co-creation. This is also in line with Loureiro and Nascimento [65], who suggest that co-creation holds great potential in terms of perceived value for consumers, specifically, in our case, for disabled individuals. This perceived value has been found to significantly influence the behavioural intentions of tourists [65]. By prioritizing accessibility in the digital era, the tourism industry can enhance inclusiveness in marketing strategies,

enabling PwD to fully participate in and enjoy travel experiences. This commitment is not only a moral obligation, but it also helps broaden the market reach for tourism e-commerce platforms, resulting in a more inclusive and sustainable tourism industry.

Even more specifically and adding new knowledge to this growing field of research, our study emphasises the significance of utilising e-commerce and marketing strategies to advocate for accessible tourism for individuals with disabilities, in alignment with the objective(s) of digital inclusivity. In fact, and in contrast to the findings of Fisk et al. [66], this constitutes a different perspective. Fisk et al. further elaborate on this discussion by advocating for inclusive service practices that empower all users, particularly those who may be more vulnerable. Their approach seeks to address the digital divide by enhancing individuals' ability to access essential services. The stark difference underscores the significance of implementing thorough digital inclusivity strategies within the tourism sector. It is important to ensure that these strategies prioritise both physical accessibility and the development of digital skills among users. Such prioritisation will help to ensure that everyone has equal access to tourism experiences. This comprehensive analysis deepens our understanding of digital inclusivity, suggesting a cooperative approach that combines our targeted interventions with an emphasis on empowering human capabilities. Such an approach enhances both the scope and the impact of our efforts to address the digital divide in the tourism sector.

The present research's contribution also relates to the significant volume of literature on technological advancements in the hospitality and tourism sector, which is nonetheless lacking and with visible gaps regarding the use of technology for enhancing accessible tourism. This topic is still in its infancy and primarily focused on exploration, thus presenting immense potential for research advancements, wherein this study adds value, setting also scientifically grounded theoretical foundations for future research. More specifically, in our study, we explored the relationship between digital inclusivity and sustainable tourism, particularly focusing on exploring how e-commerce and marketing strategies can enhance accessibility for individuals with disabilities. This initiative aligns with and expands on the central theme of Camilleri's research [67] on the utilisation of technology by SMEs to involve stakeholders, albeit with a distinct sector and stakeholder group in focus: the tourism industry promoting digital inclusivity therein.

In the above context, our research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital technologies affect business communication and promote inclusive and sustainable experiences for all users within the tourism industry. This dual contribution not only enriches the wider academic discussion on the link between technology and societal progress but also elucidates the requisite specific approaches to promoting inclusive tourism.

The findings of this study further add methodological value to future studies, as they identify and group the key points under each element of the developed conceptual framework. This will assist researchers and industry stakeholders in identifying relevant research questions and developing practical solutions to the challenges faced by the industry. In addition, our study provides a uniquely comprehensive framework that combines accessible tourism, sustainability practices and digital inclusion in tourism, thus addressing the afore-identified gap between these three areas of rising importance and scientific attention. Moreover, their integration presents a new outlook on sustainable business models in the digital age, building upon the research of Tlili et al., who explored how emerging technologies can enhance accessible hospitality and tourism services for individuals with disabilities [23]. However, their study did not extensively examine the implications of tourism e-commerce platforms or their alignment with sustainable practices.

Adding to the above, our paper's conceptual underpinnings, combined with Troise and Camilleri's [68] study on digital media in corporate communication, showcase a sophisticated expansion of digital strategy applications. Troise and Camilleri discuss the effectiveness of digital platforms in expanding stakeholder engagement and CSR communication in various sectors, whilst our study focuses on applying these digital

strategies to the tourism industry, with the specific aim of improving accessibility for individuals with disabilities. This comparison highlights the shift from general digital media use to its specific role in promoting inclusivity in the tourism industry and offers a unique perspective on the importance of digital inclusivity in enhancing accessible tourism experiences.

Practically and in terms of executive and planning implications, we observe a tourism industry that is constantly changing and requiring ongoing research and innovation to tackle new challenges and take advantage of opportunities and the future of tourist destinations is inexorably influenced by the trends of sustainability and digitalization. By practically incorporating sustainability principles into digitalization initiatives, and utilising digital technologies to improve sustainable practices, destinations can attain long-term viability, competitiveness and resilience [69]. This expert-driven conceptual research highlights that there is still ample opportunity for exploration, experimentation and improvement of the strategies and approaches that successfully combine sustainability and digital inclusivity in tourism e-commerce platforms. Such moves will help make destinations more accessible and competitive, while also aligning with sustainable goals and equal rights for PwD.

While our study offers a new and differing viewpoint and valuable insights and conceptualization, it is important to also acknowledge its limitations, inherently stemming from its largely theoretical nature. Hence, future research could empirically validate and enhance the suggested strategies by implementing empirical research. More specifically, new research could assess the framework in real industry implementation conditions and accordingly adapt and refine it. Furthermore, the dynamic landscape of digital technology and sustainable practices in tourism necessitates ongoing adjustment and creativity in strategies [70]. Being responsive to new challenges and opportunities is crucial for researchers and practitioners in this field. For example, tech developers and UX experience designers should prioritise moral imagination and consider how technology and process improvement can benefit PwD. This ensures that the benefits of accessible tourism can be harmoniously enjoyed by all segments of society as it continues to grow [41,71]. In addition, gaining a deeper understanding of the obstacles to digital inclusivity in the accessible tourism industry, such as policy and regulatory hurdles, and identifying the most effective practices will greatly improve the sector's ability to provide fair and equal experiences, and support sustainable and accessible tourism development.

In conclusion, our paper does not claim to offer any definitive answers or prescriptions to tourism digital sustainability and inclusion, but rather to define, refine and explicate the topic for better understanding and future empirical testing and development. Towards these aims, we have made valuable additions to the ongoing and intensifying discussion on the topic, we have provided the theoretical substantiation and direction of relevant research, we have comprehensively conceptualised the topic to explicate its multidimensional nature, and we have developed the work from an organisational, sectoral and societal growth perspective. We hope and trust that our findings will inspire, motivate and guide more theoretical and empirical research, as well as industry initiatives, paving the way for a future in tourism that is characterised by inclusivity, digitalization, sustainability and equity.

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