Accessible Tourism in Global Tourist Destinations and Its Relationship with Sustainable Marketing in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: The study explores the concept of accessible tourism in the context of global tourist destinations and analyses its relationship with the principles of sustainable marketing in the digital age. The aim of the study is to outline the main challenges and opportunities related to the integration of accessibility as an integral part of sustainable marketing strategies. The analysis examines good practices from different regions, as well as the role of digital technologies and social media in increasing the visibility, engagement and inclusion of tourists with different needs. The study argues for the need for a global approach that unites the ethical, economic and social aspects of tourism in order to create destinations accessible to all. The conclusions drawn emphasise the importance of digital marketing as a tool not only for promoting, but also for the actual implementation of sustainable and inclusive practices in the tourism sector.

KEYWORDS: Accessible tourism, Digital age, Global tourist destinations, Sustainable marketing, Tourists.

1. General concept and its specific manifestations

Accessible tourism is a concept that aims to make travel and vacations accessible and enjoyable for all categories of the population, regardless of their physical, sensory, cognitive or other limitations. This implies the creation of conditions under which people with special needs, the elderly, families with small children and other categories of citizens are to have the opportunity to move freely and comfortably, to receive the necessary quality access to tourist sites and services.

The concept of accessible tourism includes the following elements[1]:

-accessible infrastructure at all levels, as the concept of accessible tourism considers: macro, meso and micro levels of infrastructure. This implies equal accessibility to such significant facilities as airports, ports, railway corridors, as well as transport infrastructure within cities, intercity transport services, and also within certain resort areas;

-accessible transport, starting from aviation equipment, railway transport, vessels from sea and river transport. This implies the adaptation of means of transport to the needs of people with specific needs, as actions to adapt means of transport have to be implemented at the stage of their design;

-accessibility of tourist sites. A high degree of adaptability of existing and newly built tourist sites is assumed, such as: hotels, restaurants, sites of cultural, culinary, event, sports, religious and other types of specialised tourist activities, to the needs of people with special needs;

-accessibility of information about tourist sites and opportunities for tourists with special needs. Not all types of information are equally accessible to people with special needs, especially certain categories of them. Therefore, tourist companies should make maximum efforts to expand information access, use different channels for transmitting information, and it is essential to use such channels that are within the framework of accessibility for people with specific needs;

-the introduction of specialised tourist products that take into account the needs of people with special needs, and these tourist products can be integrated with traditional ones, or have an exclusive nature, referring only to certain categories of tourists. Although the first approach is preferable, in view of the adaptation of infrastructure and transport to the needs of these groups of tourists, the second option is also suitable, especially in cases where the first would not be possible or would limit the rights of traditional groups of tourists;

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[1] Nestorenko O., Ostopolets I. Modern technologies for solving actual society's problems. Katowice: Publishing House of University of Technology, 2022

-training and raising awareness; The training process is one of the main processes that has to take place in the preparation of the staff of tourist companies, when introducing the concept of accessible tourism. The main function of additional training is to provide the necessary knowledge to the staff about the peculiarities of working with tourists with special needs. In this case, maintaining the relevant knowledge should be organised as systematically as it is in terms of knowledge and practical opportunities in other areas of tourist activity. Training in this regard should concern all levels of tourist staff, and in this regard, the management of the relevant tourist sites should not be excluded. No less important is the importance of raising awareness, considered in the broadest sense. This includes staff, traditional tourists, as well as tourists with special needs. It has long been known that the main problems that can arise between individual groups of tourists or tourists and management are based precisely on the insufficient awareness of these groups and the lack of adequate measures for joint recreation [2].

The goals set by the implementation of the concept of accessible tourism are quite ambitious. Among the main ones are:

-expansion of rights and opportunities, including the possibility of new social categories to receive accessible and full-fledged tourist services. This applies to both persons with limited opportunities and persons who have similar limitations based on their social status. Thus, the opportunity to receive adequate tourist services is available to persons from higher age categories, large families, as well as a number of other groups who, under the existing model of tourist services, were seriously limited in their opportunities;

-social integration. The opportunities for the specified categories to benefit from full-fledged tourist services create conditions for a significantly wider scope of social integration, the normal and accepted functioning in a given society of groups that were "excluded" from social processes due to the limitations that existed in them. In turn, the expansion of the social base gives additional impetus to social processes, creates conditions for more effective consolidation and, accordingly, an increase in the general well-being of society as a whole;

-economic progress. Accessible tourism envisages the inclusion of new, sufficiently large, categories of consumers in the tourism market, as well as in other sectors of exchange. This leads to a serious increase in economic activity, and as a result, economic progress of both the relevant regions and the host countries as a whole. Moreover: the possibility of a full life, which also implies access to tourist services, also gives impetus to the relevant categories in the countries and regions from which the relevant tourists have arrived.[3]

It should be noted that these economic results occur after a certain period of implementation of the concept of accessible tourism. But the application of this concept has a significantly more immediate effect on the economy, especially in the regions where it is developed. Such effects are associated with the activation of a significantly wider range of regional economic entities, compared to the practice of traditional tourism. This is also associated with additional activities for environmental adaptation, the provision of accessible transport, the provision of accessibility to cultural tourism sites and a number of others;

-development of sustainable tourism. The concept of accessible tourism can be considered as one of the elements of sustainable tourism. The interaction between the two models is natural and arises from their very essence. Thus, the implementation of the concept of sustainable tourism implies maximum participation in tourism activities of different groups of the population, which is also part of the concept of accessible tourism. The inclusion of significantly wider groups of consumers in the tourism process provides additional arguments to public authorities with a view to implementing the concept of sustainable development. But the concept of sustainable development is also directly influenced by accessible tourism. Adapting tourist sites to the requirements of both concepts becomes more complicated both technically and economically. However, this process is still quite economically efficient, given the significantly wider range of social groups that can use the relevant tourist destinations.

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[2] Advancing Accessible Tourism for Destinations Companies end People. Compendium of Good Practices International Conference on Accessible Tourism, San Marino, 2024

[3] Almusaed Amjad, Almssad Asaad, Yitmen Ibrahim, Wallhagen Marita, Yang Ying-Fei, Iyer-Raniga Usha (eds.) Urban Sustainability Integrative Approaches: Architectural Design, Technological Innovations and Social Dynamics in Global Contexts. ITexLi, 2024.

2. European regulatory practices in implementing the concept of accessible tourism

In the world practice of tourism, the leaders in implementing the concept of accessible tourism are the EU countries. This is not just a "fashionable" option for developing relations in the tourism field, but a systematic approach based on relevant regulatory documents affecting all spheres of tourism activity.

One of the important elements of regulatory support for the adoption and implementation of the concept of accessible tourism is the application of the ISO 21902:2021 standard in tourism practice.

The standard examines the entire tourism system and related services, as well as the recommendations that should be followed to achieve accessible tourism that is to cover the maximum number of tourists.

Thanks to this standard, the European tourism sector receives a single guideline for creating a unified environment for tourists of all categories, including people with special needs and tourists with limited mobility. The ISO 21902:2021 standard was developed to ensure accessibility at all stages of the tourist journey - from planning the journey, through providing accessible transport, to the participation of all categories of tourists in the entertainment and educational and cognitive elements of the tourist journey.

The standard specifies:

-the general principles of accessible tourism, including respect for human rights and respect for diversity;

-recommendations for businesses and service providers - hotels, tour operators, restaurants, museums and others;

-requirements for infrastructure and communications, starting from the information provided on tour operator websites, through the adaptation of the interior of tourist sites and their environment, to the training of staff for working with tourists with special needs;

-instructions for public authorities, as well as partners involved in the activities of tourist enterprises. The recommendations given by the standard are applied by both state and local government authorities.

The standard cannot be considered as a general document, but as one that implies practical application of the recommendations given in it. This practical application is expressed in the following:

-hotels and other tourist accommodation facilities use the standard for self-assessment of the accessibility system and implementation of certain improvements to the interior of buildings, as well as the territory adjacent to them. The standard also includes specific recommendations for staff training, with a view to accepting tourists with special needs;

-tour operators and transport companies; Recommendations are given for the development of products and routes that take into account the needs of people with specific needs. Particular attention is paid to the accessibility of all types of transport, especially air, sea and rail transport. Recommendations are also given for linking the accessibility of transport with the accessibility of the relevant tourist infrastructure;

-local authorities; These authorities should use the recommendations of ISO 21902 when designing sidewalks, pedestrian areas, parks, as well as other places of mass presence of people, especially when it comes to tourist purposes. This is also validly true for the development models used in public transport. Special attention should also be paid to people with reduced vision and hearing.

It should be noted that the implementation of the ISO 21902 standard should not be seen solely as a burden placed on the tourism business and public administration bodies. There are also a number of advantages in implementing the standard, in particular:

-expanding the target audience by opening up a vast market for travel for people with special needs;

-increasing competitiveness, especially on the European market, where attention to the social responsibility of business is constantly growing;

-reducing the risk of legal disputes, as the implementation of the standard helps to comply with the general European norms of non-discrimination;

-improving the image. Socially oriented companies and regions are significantly more often featured in European media reports, as well as in comments on social networks. This, in turn, makes such companies and the region[4].

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[4] How to apply ISO Standard 21902: Accessible tourism for all – Recommendations for tour operators, travel agencies and travel agents Via Libre, 2024

The AccessibleEU platform for demonstrating good practices is of great importance for the development of accessible tourism in Europe. This is a key EU initiative aimed at increasing the accessibility of European tourism for people with disabilities. AccessibleEU was created within the framework of the EU Human Rights Strategy for the period 2021-2030. It brings together a network of experts, government authorities, representatives of business structures and non-governmental organisations, with the main goal being to implement the idea of accessibility in all areas of life, including in the field of tourism.

Among the key tasks of AccessibleEU are:

-providing support and assistance to national and regional authorities in the process of implementing the principle of accessibility;

-assistance in training and improving the qualifications of staff and management in the tourism industry;

-creating and distributing guides for the design of sites and services with a high degree of accessibility;

-developing partnerships between the state, business, local communities and the non-governmental sector.

In recent years, in the EU, significant forms of application of AccessibleEU have begun to emerge. This is expressed in the following:

-accessibility audits of tourist sites. Local authorities, as well as owners of tourist sites and infrastructure, invite AccessibleEU experts to assess hotels, restaurants, museums, beaches, entertainment venues, etc., in order to assess the accessibility of the relevant sites;

-staff training. Relevant courses are held for tourism workers to master the knowledge they are to need when communicating with tourists with limited opportunities, as well as for the correct use of special technical means to assist these tourists;

-recommendations from AccessibleEU, with the aim of creating such digital, information products that are suitable and convenient for different categories of people with specific needs. The ultimate goal of such practices is to maximise the expansion of the categories of people with limited needs, who have access to adequate and understandable information for certain limitations. Particular attention is paid to the creation of products for potential tourists who have hearing and vision limitations;

-marketing and sales promotion. The serious potential that people with special needs have also requires the development of appropriate marketing approaches. The peculiarities of marketing models are related not only to working with specific potential tourists (as is the case with traditional tourist products), but also with the families of these individuals or people who provide direct care for them. The "core" of marketing solutions should be based not only on consumer choice, but also on certain social functions that tourism companies perform. This is essential when branding the relevant destinations or tourist activity sites.

AccessibleEU also has another significant function. Thanks to this platform, a unification of efforts related to the synchronisation of the actions of individual standards that regulate the accessibility of tourist destinations is achieved. In particular, this applies to the two standards: EN 301549 and ISO 21902:2021, as well as to the European Accessibility Act.[5]

In the conditions of the modern development of information and communication technologies, every idea that is implemented in society has to be coordinated with the process of providing information to the relevant groups.

The tourism industry is among the areas in which information provision is the basis for the choice of potential users, and therefore the importance of information in this case is even greater than in other areas.

In this sense, the introduction of the idea of accessible tourism is no exception. For the full implementation of this idea and the specific concepts that are related to it, it is necessary to standardise information, which for people with specific needs is significantly more important than for other categories of potential tourists.[6]

In this regard, the importance of information standardisation in the context of the concept of accessible tourism acquires significant importance. The regulation is implemented through the application of the EN 301549 standard.

EN 301549 is a European standard adopted by the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI), the European Standardisation Institute (CEN) and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardisation (CENELEC). It aims to ensure compliance of digital products and services with accessibility criteria applied to people with specific needs.

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[5] European Accessibility Act, https://commission.europa.eu

[6] Çelte Evrim. Handbook of Research on Smart Technology Applications in the Tourism Industry. Business Science Reference, 2020.

The standard covers: websites and mobile applications, electronic documents, self-service terminals and multimedia context.

The EN 301549 standard is based on the principles of WCAG 2.1 and is closely linked to EU legislation. In particular, these are: the Web Accessibility Directive (EU) 2016/2102 and the European Accessibility Act (Directive (EU) 2019/882).

The implementation of the EN 301549 standard gives tourism companies certain advantages, which are expressed in the following:

-social responsibility and compliance with the legislation. By complying with the standard, tourism companies are to certainly be within the legal scope of the legislation on non-discrimination and accessibility;

-expansion of the market. People with specific needs in Europe constitute a serious segment of the market. According to estimates by institutions involved in the demography of the Union, more than 90 million Europeans have certain health or mental problems. With a high degree of accessibility, tourism companies can be expected to attract them as consumers;

-improvement of the quality of service. The accessibility practice provided for in the standard often seriously improves the comfort and quality of service for all tourists, and this is achieved through better navigation and a significantly improved structure of tourism sites;

-serious improvement of the company's image. Tour operators and hotels that monitor their digital accessibility build a positive reputation and show a commitment to seeking and finding original solutions.

When implementing the standard in the practice of tourism companies, certain practical steps have to be followed. These include:

-checking existing digital resources for compliance with the standard;

-training employees, in the process of which they teach both general and purely practical digital habits;

-using professional solutions for the development and adaptation of websites and mobile applications;

-testing service support with the participation of people with specific needs;

-constantly updating content and technologies in accordance with current editions of the standard and WCAG [7].

The development of the concept of accessibility, and especially its application in the field of tourism, is not possible without the implementation of special measures in the field of transport. Of particular importance is the observance of the principles of accessibility in air transport, since it is in this type of transport that effective alternatives cannot be proposed in practice. On this basis, an essential element are the new protocols of IATA - the International Air Transport Association, related to the expansion of the degree of accessibility for people with specific needs.

According to recent initiatives, IATA introduces standardised procedures and recommendations for airlines and airports aimed at improving the quality and comfort of travel for people with specific needs. I am to consider the main ones among these protocols:

A single standard for identifying passenger needs. One of the significant difficulties that existed in the past was the lack of consistency of codes and formats for transmitting information about the special needs of passengers between airlines, airports and travel agents. The new IATA protocol uses an improved version of the SSR (Special Service Request) standard, which allows for significantly more accurate transmission of data about the type of restrictions and the assistance required by the passenger. This reduces the likelihood of errors and lack of understanding, which in turn increases the safety and comfort of travel.[8].

Review of wheelchair loading and unloading procedures. The new protocol focuses on standardising the processes of loading and unloading wheelchairs, considering both electric and muscle-powered wheelchairs (hand wheelchairs). Requirements for the packaging and marking of wheelchairs have been clarified, in order to avoid damage to expensive equipment. IATA recommends that airlines and airports conduct special training for employees who are to be responsible for servicing passengers with special needs in working with wheelchairs of different types.

Improving communication with passengers at all stages of the journey. IATA is currently implementing new protocols that oblige airlines to provide information in advance to passengers with special needs about all elements of the journey that are to be

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[7] EN 301549:2021. Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services. https://accessible-eu-centre.ec.europa.eu/content-corner/

[8] Air Travel Accessibility. https://www.iata.org/en/

significant for them, based on their limited capabilities. In particular, this concerns the routes for movement within airports, the services to which the passengers concerned are entitled, as well as the amenities available during their journey. This is of particular importance for passengers with cognitive or sensory impairments, for whom clear, understandable and timely information is a matter of possibility for the journey to be carried out.

Despite the importance of technical means to ensure the service of passengers with special needs, the most essential is the importance of training the staff, and not only specialised staff, but also ground and flight crew to work with this category of passengers. Training programs are aimed at creating and developing habits that are to enable trouble-free communication with passengers with various types of limitations, including the so-called invisible disabilities, i.e. passengers with certain mental difficulties, such as autism and dementia.

Traditionally, in civil aviation, special attention is paid to security and the creation of protocols activated in emergency situations. The new IATA protocols provide for the updating of the instructions for working with passengers with limited capabilities in emergency situations. Airlines and aviation operators are required to conduct exercises and train personnel, in which the evacuation of passengers with limited mobility plays a significant role, as well as working out the main points in the interaction of passengers with mental problems in crisis situations.

Creating conditions for a high degree of accessibility of the elements of the digital environment both on board aircraft and in the ground infrastructure. The new protocols require a significantly higher degree of accessibility of the digital environment, which in particular provides for: better physical accessibility of the environment, simplified algorithms for the operation of individual devices and systems, expansion of the language database and a number of other activities that are to enable persons with special needs to fully use the entire infrastructure of airports and aircraft fleet[9].

Monitoring and feedback. An essential element of the new protocols of airlines and airports. Systems are being introduced for constant monitoring of the quality parameters of services, the satisfaction of passengers with special needs, as well as constant improvement of the quality of services for these categories of passengers. Cases of incorrect service for these categories of passengers are reported to various levels of company management, including senior management, with a view to improving the work with the specified category of passengers[10].

3. Good practices in implementing the concept of accessible tourism

The following section is to examine practices in some European countries. The main elements of both the environment and the tourism business itself are analysed, yielding results in implementing the concept of accessible tourism.

a) France's best practices in ensuring accessible tourism.

France, as one of the most serious tourist destinations in the world, pays special attention to the accessibility of tourism, including for people with specific needs. Over the past two decades, the country has been actively developing a tourism policy that combines national standards, regional initiatives and intersectoral cooperation and is aimed at ensuring an accessible environment and accessible tourist services. France's practice in this regard consists of the following elements:

-national Tourisme & Handicap label. This label was created by the French Ministry of Tourism and is awarded to tourist sites that meet the accessibility criteria relating to four main types of disability: hearing, visual, motor and mental. Today, over 350 sites in the country are proud owners of this sign, providing standardised and verifiable accessibility criteria;

- accessible urban infrastructure. The city halls of major French cities make continuous efforts to equip both transport and the urban environment with technical means to ensure accessibility in practically all parts of the cities. Sound and visual systems are being implemented on a massive scale to ensure comfortable and independent movement of people with various specific needs. Many transport systems, such as train stations, for example, have specialised services whose function is to provide the necessary support to people with specific needs;

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[9] International Air Transport Association (2024), AirTravelAccessibilityforPassengerswith
Disabilities',IATA,Montreal,availableat:https://www.iata.org/en/iata-repository/pressroom/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-accessibility/
[10] Global aviation industry to create accessibility standards. https://www.travelnews.co.za/article/

- training and certification of personnel. French business and local authorities take the training of personnel working in the field of tourism extremely seriously. Special training programs are being developed aimed at developing competencies in working with tourists with special needs. This applies to museum employees, hotel employees, guides, as well as transport workers;

- ensuring accessibility of cultural events and sites. French theaters, museums and historical monuments strive to ensure full accessibility. For example, the Louvre provides sign language tours and creates adapted routes. Many festivals and cultural events held in the country provide accessibility zones, where all technical means and the necessary personnel are guaranteed to ensure practically full accessibility of the relevant events;

- development of digital solutions. Various interactive maps, mobile applications and online platforms are being created that contain information about the level of accessibility of various tourist sites. One example of this is the handicap.fr portal, where tourists can plan their trip in advance, and for tourists with special needs, appropriate conditions are being created so that they can fully visit the relevant tourist sites;

- active work is being done on introducing innovations in tourist products and destinations. Conditions are being created so that traditional visits become accessible to people with special needs. As an example, one can point out the adaptation of some of the wineries offering original varieties of wine, in order to enable people with mobility difficulties to visit the relevant sites. This also applies to the various sea and river vessels, also equipped with technical means to enable them to be used by people with special needs. The provision of services for the aforementioned categories of tourists in the Alps is also actively developing, where they can work quite successfully with parasports coaches;

-international cooperation and regulatory framework. France is actively participating in the implementation of the ISO 21902:2021 standard, implementing a significant part of the recommendations. The relevant state structures are collecting and analysing information on the practical application of the accessible tourism model, with many examples being adapted to French practice.

The national regulatory framework is also of great importance. Its function is to assist tour operators in further improving the systems that enable tourist services to be used by people with special needs. As an example of an adequate legal framework, the Equal Rights and Opportunities Act can be cited. It establishes the right to an accessible environment as one of the fundamental rights of a person.

b) Italy's best practices in ensuring accessible tourism.

Italy is one of the most popular tourist destinations, where the government and the tourism industry are paying increasing attention to accessibility, striving to create an acceptable environment for tourists with specific needs. Among the main guidelines for ensuring an accessible environment in Italy are the following:

-physical accessibility of tourist sites. Italian practice provides for a gradual movement from the main to the peripheral tourist sites, as state investments, as well as the activities of public-private partnerships in the country, are of great importance for the development of the accessible environment. Several major tourist attractions can be considered as examples. Thus, the Colosseum in Rome is equipped with the necessary lifts, providing accessibility to each of the elements of this historical site for people with limited mobility. Sensitive maps are also provided, allowing accessibility to the site for the blind. The Uffizi in Florence also provides easy accessibility to the sites, as well as full opportunities for presenting historical data for tourists with visual impairments. The Milan Cathedral is similarly equipped, providing a wide area of accessibility and a tactile map of the cathedral;

- museums and exhibitions with guaranteed access. Examples in this regard include: the National Museum of Cinematography in Turin, as well as the MAXXI Museum in Rome. They offer multi-sensory exhibitions, as well as separate exhibitions for tourists with impaired vision and hearing. Currently, work is underway on projects that are to use augmented and virtual reality, enabling a wider presence of people with special needs;

- accessible beach recreation. Italy's national project "Beaches for All" can be defined as one of the leading examples in the world in providing a high degree of accessibility to the beach. The beaches are equipped with special paths, showers and amphibious chairs. The beaches in Rimini and Senegalia have specially trained staff, whose function is to provide a wide range of complementary services to tourists with special needs. In some regions of Italy, such as Emilia-Romagna, free transport is provided for tourists with reduced mobility;

-transport accessibility. An essential task of the Italian central and local authorities is to provide accessible transport, in addition to additional services for tourists. This applies mainly to urban transport (it is in the cities of the country that the main

tourist sites are concentrated), as practically all means of transport are not only accessible to passengers with reduced mobility, but also include a wide range of information tools to familiarise them with the route, the frequency of movement and other necessary information. The taxi service with special ramps for passengers with reduced mobility is also widely developed. The country's railways are not far behind. The special service "Assistance disabili" involves assistance in boarding passengers with special needs, their accompaniment and their travel in specially equipped carriages, allowing them access to all services that other passengers use;

-digital technologies and information; In modern conditions, tourism has to be accompanied by an appropriate "information field". The importance of information for people with special needs is even greater than for other categories of tourists. In the practice of tourism in Italy, these are online maps and mobile applications such as *EasyWay* and *ViaggiAccessibili* helping in planning routes and booking certain tourist services. The relevant digital products allow for use by people with special needs, using Braille, videos with sign language translation, as well as audio guides;

-legislative framework and national initiatives. In various laws and regulations of Italy, equal access to tourism services is declared, and at the same time, specific mechanisms have been created and adapted to modern conditions, including the rights and obligations of the parties to ensure the imperative legislative norms. The dispositive norms have specific dimensions, and are accompanied by interpretative decisions and mechanisms described in the relevant legislative acts. Of interest is also the practice of Italy related to legislative regulation in the process of modernisation and equipment of ancient buildings, as well as the adaptation of infrastructure to the requirements related to tourists with special needs. Of interest are regulatory mechanisms that are not only fiscal in nature, but also support business structures in the presence of investments in an accessible environment.

Of the national initiatives, the *Italia per Tutti* platform is of great importance for the accessibility of tourism in Italy, including both accessible sites on the territory of the country and a detailed description of what additional services tourists with special needs can expect;

-education and training of personnel. In many regions of Italy, training is carried out to prepare tourism staff to work with people with special needs. This concerns both the staff of tourism companies and numerous volunteers and tour guides in the different regions of the country. The training is aimed at acquiring technical competencies, for instance, learning a sign language, and is characterised by its behavioural nature so that habits are acquired to communicate with people with special needs, as well as assist them in possible adverse situations that may arise during a tourist trip.

c) Best practices of Greece in ensuring accessible tourism.

Greece is one of the most popular destinations in the world, which is one of the reasons why the country is considering the possibilities for the development of accessible tourism, so that it does not lag behind the leading countries in this regard. In response to this need, in recent years, state authorities, local authorities, private companies and the non-governmental sector have undertaken coordinated efforts to increase the accessibility of most tourist destinations and routes. The main features of accessibility in the tourism industry of Greece have the following characteristics:

-accessibility of popular attractions. The majority of the country's tourist sites, despite their ancient origin, are equipped with the necessary technical means that allow these sites to be visited by people with limited abilities. A striking example in this regard is the Necropolis in Athens, where modern lifts and devices that allow tourists in wheelchairs to visit are installed;

-accessible beaches and seaside holidays. Greece is actively developing the SEATRAC project, implying autonomous access to the coastal strip for people with limited mobility. Special mechanisms provide the opportunity to move both along the beach itself and in the coastal sea. Such equipment is installed in Greece in more than 140 places, including such popular resorts as Crete, Rhodes and Lefkada. The necessary infrastructure has also been built on the beach strip, providing access to both tourists with limited mobility and the blind and hearing impaired;

-development of accessible tourist routes. Tourism companies in Greece consider as an essential element of accessibility the creation of tourist routes that are adapted not only to tourists with reduced mobility (in most cases they are already adapted to their needs), but also to make these routes accessible to people with other limitations - tourist routes have voice guidance with multilingual translation, tactile signs and a number of other technical means that are also sufficiently adapted to people with special needs;

- accessible hotels and means of transport. Many hotels in Greece are certified according to the ISO 21902 standard, offering rooms and congress halls that are fully equipped to receive guests with special needs. The number of means of transport that are equipped and can be used by people with special needs is constantly increasing. In settlements with a high concentration of tourist

sites, specialised companies operate that provide services for people with special needs, and the range of services offered is constantly increasing;

- finding digital solutions and information support for tourism. For Greek tourism, the full and adequate provision of information for tourism is one of the main priorities. The Visit Greece platform has been developed, listing accessible routes, hotels, as well as cultural events for people with special needs to participate. Applications have also been developed for tourists to plan their trip in advance, and tourists with special needs are provided with comprehensive support, allowing them to use all elements of tourist services. It is also possible to plan a trip with individual parameters, depending on the needs of tourists;

-staff training. Staff training is carried out on an ongoing basis in a number of Greek hotels. Not only the staff who have direct interaction with tourists are subject to training, but also the support staff, vehicle drivers, maintenance staff, as well as the management of many hotels. The essence of the training is not only acquisition of primary skills for working with tourists with special needs, but also a continuous expansion of the level of training, allowing working with a wide range of this category of tourists. More and more hotels are creating groups of staff who are ready not only to serve tourists, but also to provide assistance during visits to historical landmarks and other activities that may be of interest[11].

4. Implementation of the concept of accessible tourism in Bulgaria - status and prospects

The tourism industry in Bulgaria is one of the oldest in Europe, and along with this, all innovations in tourism activities do not go unnoticed in our practice. The concept of accessible tourism is no exception.

More and more hotels both on the Black Sea coast and in the interior of the country, even at the design stage, are providing opportunities for people with special needs to use the hotels. The preparation of legislative and certification requirements for accessibility is being implemented, albeit slowly, including in various tourist and cultural sites. In many cases, modern technologies are being applied, allowing tourists to get acquainted with the historical heritage of the country through the use of modern digital technologies.

There are also numerous specialists in Bulgaria to assist tourists with special needs during their stay in the country.

In many cities in the country, public transport has the technical capacity to serve people with limited mobility, and in a number of cities, such as Sofia and Plovdiv, there is also a built infrastructure that expands the accessibility of cities.

Along with this, it should be taken into account that the implementation of the concept of accessible tourism requires, first of all, systematic and coherent actions between different institutions, as well as between different branches of government, both at the local and national levels. This is currently one of the main obstacles to the full implementation of the concept of accessible tourism. The lack of coherence of actions at the national level is expressed in the absence of synchronisation between the concepts for the development of the tourism sector and the real legislative base that would stimulate the modern development of tourism. This applies both to the current fiscal model and to the adaptation of such essential elements directly related to tourism activity, such as the various types of transport.

At the local level, the incoherence of actions is expressed in the lack of a single concept that would include modern approaches in tourism, including the development of the concept of accessible tourism. Different institutions, instead of integrating the efforts in this direction of business, the non-governmental sector and local social groups, introduce additional difficulties, creating obstacles to innovative approaches in this direction.

There are also certain problems in the process of training personnel. As can be seen from the above, this is one of the most significant aspects of adapting tourism activities to the requirements of the concept of accessible tourism. Training in this area is carried out only in higher educational institutions: at the same time, the practical area of application is relatively small, while the trainees undergo extremely insufficient practice in applying their knowledge.

Business is little interested in training personnel in this direction, including the impossibility of fully implementing such a concept in Bulgarian conditions. Thus, even the training received by the staff gradually fades in the minds of employees, and the lack of practical experience further reduces its practical significance in the actual service of tourists with special needs.

Despite the existing difficulties, the need to introduce the concept of accessible tourism is increasing, and the need for our tourism to compete with such serious tourist destinations requires the implementation of practical steps in this direction.

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[11] PathsofGreece (2024), The Social Co-operative EntreprisePathsofGreece, availableat: https://www.pathsofgreece.gr/en/team/

It should be noted that the implementation of the concept of accessible tourism is to make it possible to significantly increase the competitiveness of such areas of tourism as medical, balneological and spa tourism in Bulgaria.

The main actions that need to be taken can be briefly described as follows:

- introduction of a single concept of accessibility, integrating all aspects of this category, including transport, infrastructure construction, correction and adaptation of building codes, especially in the field of tourism, as well as measures at the local government level, to be introduced in the relevant local regulatory acts. Moreover, the concept should not be abstract and unregulated in time. Specific deadlines for actions should be indicated, setting goals in each of the areas of application;

- an extremely important aspect is the coordination of the legislative base of tourism activity, in which the concept of accessibility should be embedded as one of its essential characteristics. It is necessary to avoid conflicts of norms contained in various regulatory documents, and the main goal should be the practical implementation of actions to introduce the concept of accessibility. Both the existing and new legal framework should be carefully analysed not only in higher-level regulatory acts, but also in various subordinate regulations. Only in this way can real conditions be created so that businesses can become interested in implementing such a concept;

-of vital importance is the adaptation of fiscal policy to the needs of the concept of accessibility; Economic entities that practically implement its elements have to receive reliable guarantees that they are to be able to use certain preferences for a sufficiently long time and the policy in this regard is to not be subject to the momentary conjuncture;

-the interaction of structures should be implemented by creating targeted, inter-institutional working groups that would allow integrating the efforts of various departments in increasing the accessibility of cultural, sports, natural and other objects. In all these cases, conditions have to be created that allow the tourism development of the relevant sites or events. In this case, the working groups have to continue their work on a permanent basis, periodically reporting to the relevant departments;

- the actual introduction of cooperation between public authorities and private business is also of great importance for the implementation of the concept of accessible tourism; The currently existing legislation in the field of public-private partnerships is modern and meets the existing standards in the EU in this regard. The difficulties that arise are mainly related to the practical implementation of these mechanisms, requiring higher initiative on the part of public authorities and a desire for a higher degree of cooperation with business. In any case, the economic effect of introducing the concept into practice is to be significantly greater than the costs that have to be incurred in this process;

- the activity of local authorities has to be significantly increased in structuring needs and inclusion as a significant element of the accessibility development process; Such areas as transport system construction in individual settlements and between settlements, adapted to the needs of the concept of accessibility, adaptation of the urban or resort environment to these needs, should become a priority for local authorities. The results, as practice shows, are to be sufficient for the economic prosperity of the relevant local structures;

-an important aspect of the implementation of the concept of accessible tourism is the strengthening of international tourism cooperation in this direction. Such aspects as the development of accessible tourist routes, meetings and seminars on the training of personnel for joint projects, the development of transnational, regional accessible routes, can have an extremely positive effect on the development of accessible tourism in our country.

On the other hand, in the academic literature and in practice, the traditional marketing concept focuses on meeting the current needs of both target customers and on the short-term sales and growth of the company. These two goals can be achieved by engaging customers and providing what they want at a given time. Sometimes, however, marketing does not serve the best future interest of either customers or the business, as it creates too much materialism and too little social goods. Marketing has been criticised for being a driver of unsustainable outcomes. Unsustainable overconsumption and overselling of private goods leads to social costs that can include air pollution, resource scarcity, environmental degradation, population growth, world hunger, and poverty. Marketing, through its consumption-oriented practices, may have encouraged unsustainable production and consumption practices. The challenge today is to stop or reverse this unsustainable production and consumption. Under such conditions, the traditional marketing concept has proven to be an inappropriate philosophy (Crompton, Alexander, Shrubsole, 2011). Some companies still use questionable marketing practices that may cause future harm to the environment or society. These practices are not in line with sustainable marketing and are not to lead to customer value and satisfaction nor to create sustainable customer

relationships. Marketing has been accused of harming consumers through high prices, deceptive practices, high-pressure sales, unsafe products, poor service to disadvantaged consumers and planned obsolescence (Kotler, Armstrong, 2017).

Building business models to combine socially responsible business behaviour with policies to expand markets and shape green consumption is extremely difficult, but it is increasingly becoming mandatory in the search for sustainable development and the implementation of sustainable marketing strategies linked to care for the environment and society. (Ilieva, D. 2023)

High prices are mainly due to high distribution costs, advertising, sales promotion, excessive markups and packaging, add ingmainly psychological rather than functional value. On the other hand, some consumers are willing to pay more for high-quality products that provide them with this psychological value. Other questionable marketing practices include deceptive practices that lead consumers to think that they are to receive more value than they actually receive. These deceptive practices can be used in promotion, packaging and pricing. Some practices may include misrepresenting product features, using misleading labels or terms, or falsely reducing the price. By using such practices, companies are to lose consumers who did not receive what they expected. By using high-pressure sales practices, consumers are forced to buy products that they did not actually want. Critics also complain that marketing promotes products that are of low quality, do not perform well, or are sometimes even harmful and dangerous. Sometimes companies refuse to open or expand more stores to underserved communities because they do not want to focus on low-income areas (Kotler, Armstrong, 2017). Another criticism includes the practice of some companies of planned obsolescence of products. This is a business strategy in which obsolescence is planned and built into the product from its early conception. The effect of this strategy is that such products have a limited life, they become unserviceable or unprofitable to repair, and the consumer feels the need to purchase new products and services that the manufacturer offers as replacements for the old ones (Hindle, 2008; Slade., 2006). Methods that support the strategy of planned obsolescence are also used in services: lack of possibility of repairing the product outside authorised repair shops due to the need to use specialised tools; expensive spare parts consisting of large modules; frequent changes of product components (Hamrol, Najlepszy, 2013). Today, as green markets expand, more companies are announcing the environmental sustainability of their products and practices. More companies have sections of their websites dedicated to disclosing environmental and social policies and performance. Green advertising has tripled since 2006 (Delmas, Burbano, 2011). Some studies have shown that there is a gap between consumer purchasing behaviour and consumer concern for the environment. Even if consumers express positive attitudes towards the environment, they may have trouble translating these attitudes into positive behaviour (Mataracı & Kurtuluş, 2020).

Along with the increasing number of green products and claims, the phenomenon of greenwashing is also becoming a significant problem. Greenwashing is characterised as (Lyon, Maxwell, 2011) "the selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information about these aspects, so as to create an overly positive corporate image". This image is misleading and deceives customers, because the claims about the company's environmental performance or the environmental benefits of a product or service are simply false. A company that uses a greenwashing strategy engages in two behaviours at the same time: poor environmental performance and positive communication about its environmental performance (Delmas, Burbano, 2011). Consumers are intentionally misled by being sent false or incomplete marketing messages containing information about the company's environmental concerns, when, apart from the green label, the products have little to do with ecology. Companies using greenwashing strategies typically spend more on promoting supposedly green products and actions than on changing the production process and following sustainability rules. Greenwashing is clearly unethical, as organisations take advantage of consumers' environmental sensitivities.

The transformative implementation and management of digitalisation requires more than just public authorities offering smart incentives or even a full mix of regulatory, financial or information-based instruments. It requires a so-called Digital Green Deal.

Above all, the Digital Green Deal needs to be tied to a broad vision of the role that digital technologies play in the prospects for people around the world to realise a decent life within the framework of a safe functioning of humanity (Digitalisation for Sustainability (D4S), 2022). This vision needs to recognise environmental challenges as cross-sectoral issues and include issues of equity and justice. They should also be flexible in their local and cultural interpretations, allowing for cultural diversity as well as variations at different geographical scales.

For example, equity of access to digital green solutions should be taken into account, especially when considering global implementations of technologies in low-income countries. At the same time, the vision should integrate and take into account

internationally agreed policy objectives, such as sustainable development, the development goals, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and other framework conventions. The development of such a vision should engage citizens and civil society, but also the private sector – in all its diversity (company size and business models) – as a key partner in

Based on this vision, the Digital Green Deal aims to ensure coherence between sustainability policy and digital policy initiatives.

This requires the identification and integration of three goals (Fig. 1).
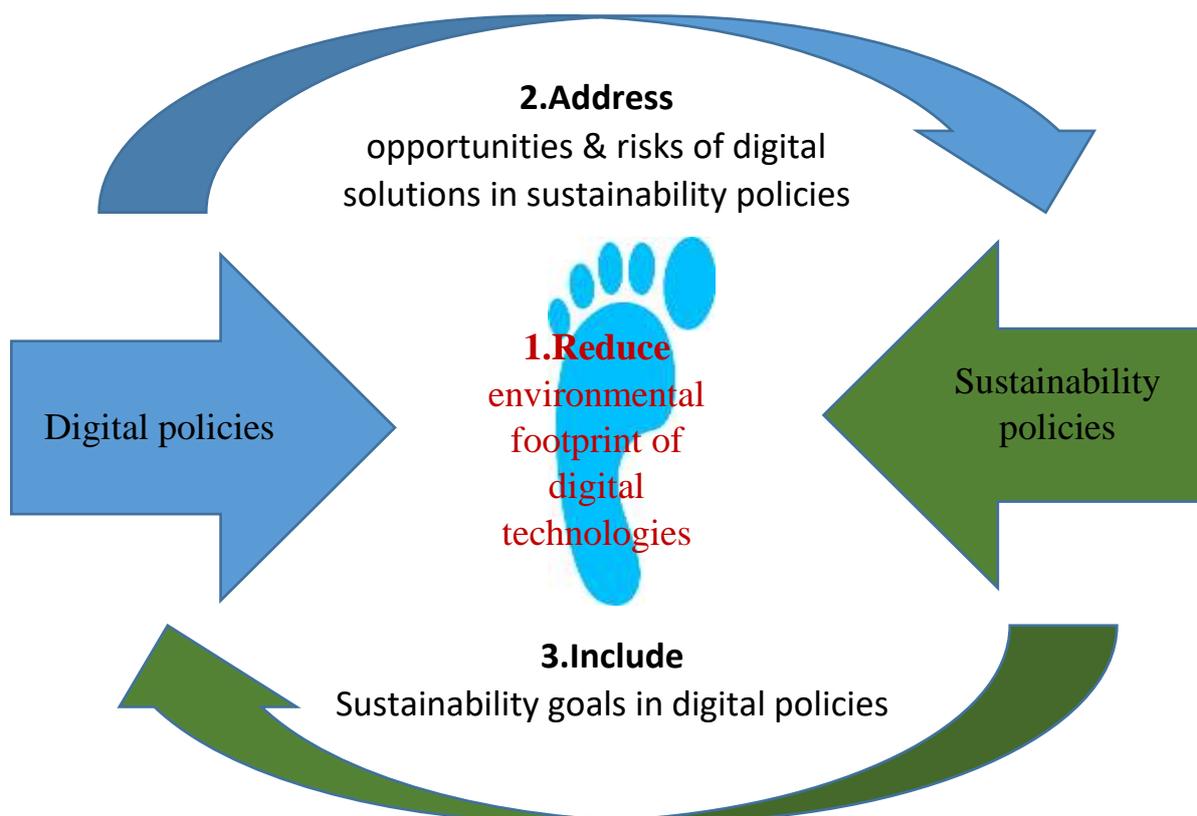
Fig. 1. Three aims to ensure policy coherence between sustainability and digital policies.
Source: Dencik , L. , Diez, T., Ferreboeuf, H., Jankowski, P., Hankey, S., Hilbeck, A., Hilty, L.M., Hojer, M., Kleine, D., Lange, S., Pohl, J., Reisch, L. , Ryghaug, M., Schwanen, T., Staab, P., 2023/

The first is that policies need to reduce the environmental footprint resulting from the impacts of digital technologies throughout their life cycle. For example, design directives can lead to the establishment of environmental standards for hardware manufacturing, requiring manufacturers to increase the share of recycled materials and reuse.

Hardware companies can also be incentivised to change their business models from sales to rental (device as a service).

To reduce impacts during the use phase, policies need to be clear and ambitious.

Second, sustainability policies need to encourage the development and implementation of digital solutions that aim to drive real transformations in delivery and distribution systems, while minimising the use of environmentally counterproductive digital innovations. Digital opportunities and risks need to be addressed in a cross-sectoral manner, for example in legislation on the circular economy, value chain management and corporate accountability requirements. Opportunities and risks should also be addressed by sectoral policies, thus promoting transformations for sustainability in energy, mobility, agriculture, construction/housing, industry and consumption of goods and services, while not postponing social issues.

Overall, governance should ensure that the digitalised solution provides added value compared to the non-digital solution.

Furthermore, risks of digital disruption, caused either by unpredictable environmental events or by malicious actors (e.g. cybersecurity attacks), should be assessed and countermeasures configured.

Third, digital policies should include elements that serve sustainability objectives. For example, most platform markets lack production.

It is particularly important to have policies on data governance, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, digital finance, cryptocurrencies and others. These should include legislation that promotes sustainability objectives.

Decision-makers aiming for ambitious policy initiatives regarding the second and third objectives of such a digital green deal have to be aware of this governance and the increasing role of technology and the fact that not always the transformation of sustainability leads to changes in production and consumption (Dencik, L., Diez, T., Ferreboeuf, H., Jankowski, P., Hankey, S., Hilbeck, A., Hilty, L.M., Hojer, M., Kleine, D., Lange, S., Pohl, J., Reisch, L., Ryghaug, M., Schwanen, T., Staab, P., 2023)

In a narrower sense, the role of a properly constructed sustainable marketing strategy in the context of the ever-increasing role of digitalisation is of particular importance. This is also evidenced by statistics:
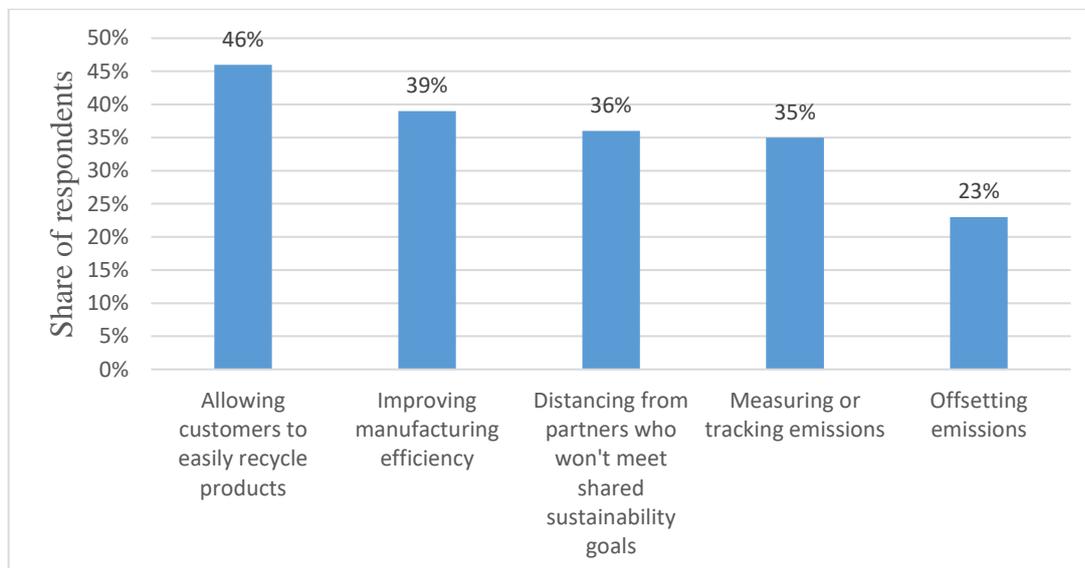

Fig.№ 2 Carbon footprint of Amazon from 2018 to 2021, by type of emissions (in million metric tons CO₂e) Amazon`s corporate carbon footprint 2018-2021, by type of emissions

Source: DIGITAL & TRENDS Sustainability in e-commerce, https://www-statista-com. study/102849/sustainability-in-e-commerce /

The online marketplace Amazon assessed its worldwide carbon footprint by releasing data on the the amounts of emissions generated by its operational activities between 2018 and 2021. The total footprint of the marketplace increased over the period considered, reaching 71.54 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2021.
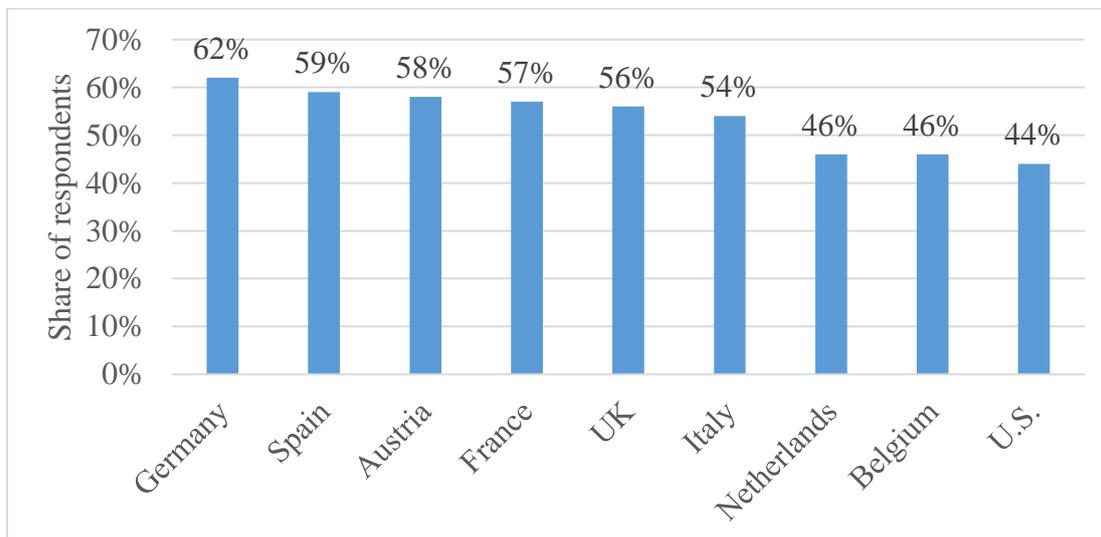
Fig.№ 3 Share of consumers thinking e-commerce is a problem for the environment in 2022, by country Consumers concerned about online shopping sustainability 2022, by country

Source: DIGITAL & TRENDS Sustainability in e-commerce, https://www-statista-com. study/102849/sustainability-in-e-commerce /

A survey from 2022 indicated that European consumers were more concerned about the environmental footprint of e-commerce than U.S. shoppers. Over six in ten German respondents believed online shopping to be a problem for the environment and 59 percent of Spanish consumers had the same opinion, followed by Austrian and French shoppers at 58 and 57 percent, respectively.
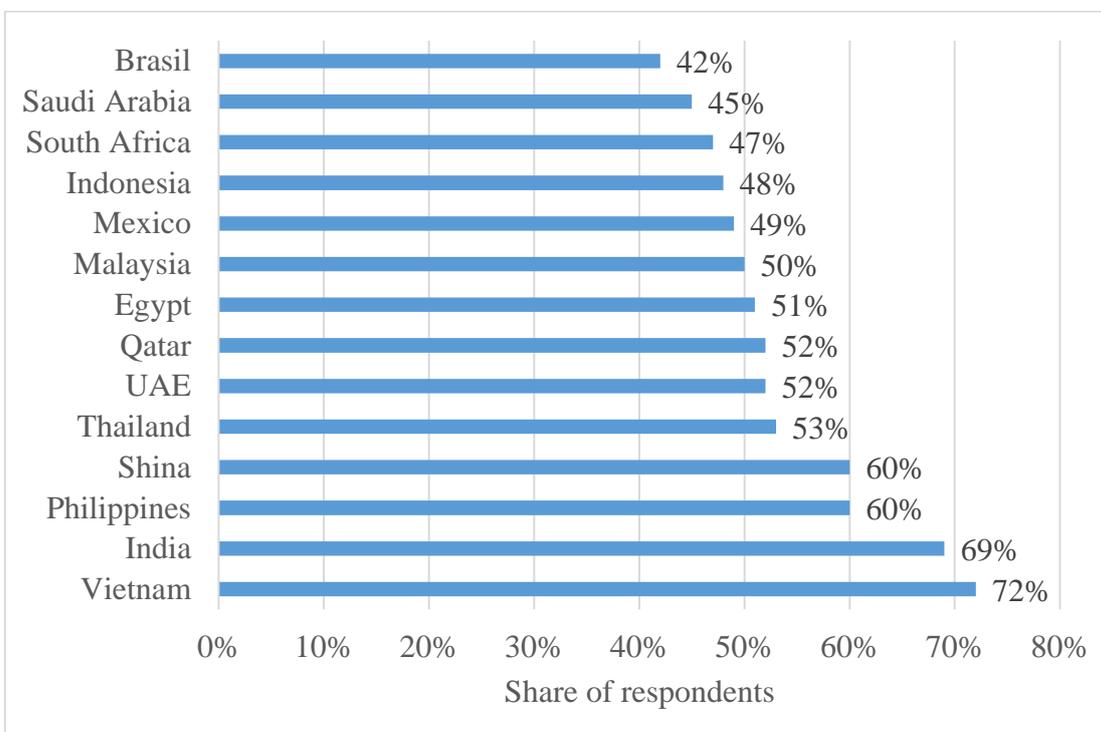

Fig.№ 4 Share of online shoppers buying eco-friendly and sustainable products worldwide in 2021, by country Online shoppers buying eco-friendly products 2021, by country

Source: DIGITAL & TRENDS Sustainability in e-commerce, https://www-statista-com. study/102849/sustainability-in-e-commerce /

In 2021, online shoppers in Vietnam showed the highest environmental awareness compared to 25 other countries worldwide. According to a global survey, 72 percent of online shoppers living in this Southeast Asian country reported very often or always buying eco-friendly products. India ranked second, with 69 percent of online shoppers registering this purchasing habit, while the Philippines and China followed with 60 percent each.

Achieving sustainable marketing behaviour requires a change in the core marketing management of those who implement, approve, support and purposefully implement marketing activities (Crompton, Alexander, Shrubsole, 2011). The idea of sustainability has to move into the marketing mainstream. The concept of sustainable marketing has emerged as both a trend in academic research and as an important business problem that can be a source of competitive advantage and is becoming a necessity. Sustainable marketing is timeless because it provides solutions to people's needs that are environmentally friendly, technically viable and economically competitive, and relationship-based (Peattie, Belz, 2010). Even the stability of our global market system depends on responsible behaviour, sustainable business models and proactive management of the impact of business on society (Smith, Lenssen, 2009).

In conclusion, digitalisation has a significant impact on the interaction between government, business and consumers, because it encourages them to reorganise their overall behaviour through its prism. In fact, over the past decade, the world has witnessed a rapid growth in the distribution and use of digital technologies, becoming an internal dimension of the aspiration of companies to contribute to a more inclusive, competitive and, above all, sustainable economy and society. These goals can be achieved with a targeted marketing strategy.

There is also a challenge regarding the extent to which the impact of digitalisation is to affect the overall sustainable competitiveness at the national level. It is an indisputable fact that digitalisation has led to great results for individual companies worldwide. This trend is to develop and in the future, digitalisation is to acquire significant dimensions and importance for overall sustainable development and in particular the creation and implementation of sustainable marketing strategies.

In both theory and practice, the main objective is to focus the latest research on marketing theories, methods and results that seek to make tourist destinations better places to live and better places to visit.

Sustainable marketing in tourism can explore two fundamental approaches, that of market development using market segmentation and that of sustainable product development. It is realistic to examine the implementation of sustainable marketing, presenting evidence of the motivations, mechanisms and barriers that businesses encounter, and of the successes in changing consumer behaviour and pursuing sustainability goals.

Important attention should be paid to the methodologies of sustainable tourism marketing, the breadth and complexity of the topic, as well as the numerous innovations. For the research to be realistic and truly broader, it is necessary to fully understand what contextual aspects influence these pro-sustainable interventions to achieve what outcomes in other settings, to validate some of the exploratory studies and to establish the feasibility of scaling up pilot studies for more general use.

According to Lee [2001], the concept of sustainable tourism destination arose from the need to develop sustainable tourism in destinations. There is no generally accepted definition of "sustainable tourism destinations" because each destination has unique characteristics. Therefore, sustainable development of a destination is different [Lee, 2001]. According to UNWTO [2005], sustainable tourism can be defined as "tourism that takes full account of its future and present economic, environmental and social impacts, addressing the needs of businesses, visitors, local people and the environment".

In practice, tourism impacts in two ways:

Impacts on the natural environment:

• Water pollution through sewage or dumping;

• Noise pollution from tourist activities;

• Soil compaction causing increased runoff;

• Air pollution from vehicle emissions;

• Increased risk of landslides;

• Depletion of water supplies for golf courses or swimming pools;

• Damage to topography through development;

• Depletion of non-renewable fuel reserves;

• Overexploitation of biological resources;

• Depletion of mineral resources for construction;

• Damage to vegetation by foot and vehicles;

• Change in land use for agriculture;

• Deforestation through firewood collection;

• Contrast between tourist and traditional structures;

• Change in character through development;

• Overcrowding or upgrading of infrastructure;

• Beautification or decoration;

• Increased number of people;

• Increased damage to historic sites through pollution.

In a broader perspective, the problems of tourism marketing are becoming more and more clearly visible, and in fact, new marketing research in tourism needs to be carefully conducted.

An encouraging fact is that stakeholders are continuously exploring tourism marketing from different perspectives, contributing to its significant growth.

First, short videos, live broadcasts, and social media (such as TikTok, WeChat, and Douyin) have become new tools for tourism marketing; in-depth participation and frequent interactions between tourism consumers and tourism service providers increase the profits of tourism enterprises [Büyükozkan, Ergün, 2011; Chen et al., 2023].

Second, new technologies have been used to improve tourism marketing results; for example, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), artificial intelligence (AI), and metaverses help stakeholders make tourism marketing campaigns more effective [Chang, 2022].

Third, tourists' knowledge and experiences are strongly emphasised during the application of tourism marketing; marketers continue to create good, convenient, and positive tourism experiences for tourists, improving tourism marketing results [Jiang et al., 2022; Moreno-Lobato et al., 2023; Streimikiene and Korneeva, 2020].

Fourth, tourism marketing takes into account business ethics and sustainability; in addition to the contribution of tourism marketing to the local economy, stakeholders also consider how tourism marketing can protect tourism-related resources and the environment to achieve environmental and social sustainability [Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2020].

In turn, sustainable marketing has attracted increasing attention from scholars and professionals, prompting them to study the detailed development of tourism marketing more accurately and comprehensively.

The application of sustainable marketing is vital because it has a positive impact on the environment.

First, tourism marketing activities of natural tourism destinations can attract more tourists and generate more profits, indirectly protecting the natural ecology. For example, tourism marketing activities in natural scenic spots (such as botanical gardens, wildlife sanctuaries, and nature parks) increase the income of these places that can be used to develop promotional materials about plant characteristics and environmental protection, helping to protect the ecological environment and promote the diversity of local plants [Ahmed et al., 2020; Ammar, 2021, 2022b].

Second, tourism marketing activities on artificial attractions can also contribute to the local environment. For example, tourism marketing of environmentally friendly artificial attractions (such as mushroom communities, artificial lakes, and artificial protected areas) attracts more tourists and teaches them how to protect the local environment through human participation [Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2023; Shi, S.H., Yu, K.J., 2021]. Third, tourism marketing research contributes to a better environment. Scholars have studied the interactions between tourism marketing and environmental elements (such as air, climate, and water management), promoting a stable and coordinated development of natural ecosystems and accelerating the improvement of environmental protection policies or laws [Geng et al., 2020].

Fourth, eco-tourism is becoming increasingly popular among tourists, making the social economy, ecological environment, and tourism industry more favorable and coordinated [Ammar, 2022; Zhang and Jung, 2023]; therefore, eco-tourism marketing benefits stakeholders from both ecological and economic perspectives.

In the context of global transformations and increased digitalisation, accessible tourism is emerging as a key component of the sustainable development of tourist destinations. This study highlights the need for a systematic and integrated approach, in which accessibility is not considered an additional service, but as a core element of the tourism offering. In this context, sustainable

marketing plays a crucial role in creating inclusive and socially responsible strategies that meet the needs of all groups of tourists, including people with disabilities, elderly travelers and families with young children. The digital era offers a wide range of tools for communication, personalisation and consumer engagement, significantly facilitating the process of information and decision-making when travelling. Building innovative and accessible tourism solutions requires cooperation between the public and private sectors, as well as between local communities and global marketing platforms. Only through synergy between sustainability, digitalisation and social responsibility can long-term success and inclusive development in the global tourism sector be achieved.

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