Chapter 9
Competitiveness Factors of Accessible Tourism E-Travel Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to detect the differentiating factors of the accessible e-travel agencies that enable them to be competitive in the market and, therefore, to promote the development of accessible products in the tourism sector. With this objective, an analysis of 14 accessible travel agencies' websites has been carried out. The analysis was guided by theoretical frameworks of competitiveness and accessible tourism. Taking into account the specific needs of people with disabilities, accessible e-travel agencies offer a wide range of specialized and tailor-made products and services with great quality while finding efficiency formulas to contain prices: being receptive in a specific destination; having a network of contacts in different parts of the world that can verify the specific requirements of the client; or being specialized in a specific destination/s, offering tourist packages that have previously been tested by other people with the disability for which it is offered.

1. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities account for approximately 15% of the world's population (WHO, 2020) and accessible tourism has many benefits for these individuals (Agovino *et al*., 2017; Daniels, Rodgers & Wiggins, 2005; Eichhorn, Miller & Tribe, 2013; Kastenholz, Eusébio & Figueiredo, 2015; Moura, Kastenholz & Pereira 2018; Pagán, 2015) and also for the tourism economy (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Domínguez, Fraiz & Alén, 2013). Nevertheless, when travelling, the requirements of people with disabilities are not always met correctly by tourism companies and, particularly, by travel agen-

cies (Agovino *et al*., 2017; Altinay *et al*., 2016; Bi, Card & Cole, 2007; Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; McKercher *et al*., 2003; UNWTO, 2016). Likewise, a lack of knowledge of the tourism sector about the needs of people with disabilities is detected (Bizjak, Knežević & Cvetrežnik, 2011; Buhalis *et al*., 2005; Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2011; Loi & Kong, 2017; McKercher & Darcy, 2018). Due to the lack of accessible tourism facilities and services, people with disabilities are cautious when planning their trip and principally gather information from the internet and through "word of mouth" (Ray & Ryder, 2003). Furthermore, accessible information found *online* is mostly generic and non-specific and does not always support assistive technologies (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2013). This is one of the reasons why many people with disabilities decide to participate in tourist trips organised by associations (Bi *et al*., 2007; Blichfeld & Nicholaisen, 2011).

Traditionally, people with disabilities have not trusted the information provided by conventional travel agencies (McKercher *et al*., 2003). However, the emergence of the Internet has altered the tourism market and represented a challenge for travel agencies which have been obliged to reinvent themselves in order to survive. Some authors (Abrate *et al.*, 2019; Aguiar-Quintana, Moreno-Gil & Picazo-Peral, 2016; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Lacalle, 2013; Tsang, Lai & Law, 2010; Zhang *et al*., 2006) highlight the importance and need to research the different survival strategies implemented by traditional travel agencies. Along these lines, in recent years, travel agencies specialised in accessible tourism have been described as 'the golden key in the future' (Özogul & Baran, 2016). This means that targeting individuals with accessibility needs is one of the keys for the survival of the travel agencies in the future, "providing appropriate product/service by targeting the individuals with accessibility needs together with a correct approach and strategy, the specialized travel agencies will be able to have a competitive advantage" (Özogul & Baran, 2016). In fact, accessible tourism travel agencies are indeed emerging. They seem to offer a large number of specialised products adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, thereby demonstrating that there are numerous opportunities for value creation in the travel agency sector. It should be noted that there is a profound lack of research on e-travel agencies in the field of accessible tourism and, specifically, on their competitiveness factors in the age of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Agencies specialised in accessible tourism play a potentially fundamental role in creating value for travellers with special needs, as a "good travel agent" can greatly facilitate travel (McKercher *et al*., 2003).

In order to obtain in-depth information about the characteristics of accessible e-travel agencies, an analysis of the information on the offer published on the accessible travel agencies' websites has been carried out. Websites constitute a valuable marketing tool, useful to both suppliers and consumers in disseminating information, communication and online purchasing (Buhalis & Law, 2008). This study seeks to detect the differentiating factors of the accessible e-travel agencies that enable them to be com-petitive in the market (Abrate *et al*., 2019; Aguiar-Quintana, Moreno-Gil & Picazo-Peral, 2016; Tsang, Lai & Law, 2010; Zhang *et al*., 2006) and, therefore, to promote the development of accessible products in the tourism sector.

This chapter begins by providing information about the online requirements of people with disabilities in the context of ICTs (section 2.1). It then describes the competitive factors of online/traditional travel agencies, how the emergence of ICTs has forced them to become more competitive and how are they addressing the market segment of people with disabilities (section 2.2). Section 3 outlines the data collec-tion and analysis process and defines the categories and sub-categories used, and section 4 presents the results and discusses them in relation to the literature. The conclusions of the study are drawn in section 5.

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