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*Academic Research Paper*

## **Tourism Start-ups: fresh evidence by a systematic review**

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**Abstract:** There has been a growing interest in start-up companies and their potential to disrupt traditional industries in recent years. At the same time, the spread of tourism and the new forms of its provision require increasingly innovative and disruptive business ideas. Therefore, it seems appropriate to cross the two topics of start-up and tourism. This paper aims to provide a systematic literature review (SR) on tourism start-ups through a detailed and replicable process for analysis to examine the role and impact of tourism start-ups in the global tourism industry. The review begins by exploring the definition and classification of tourism start-ups, highlighting their distinctive features and entrepreneurial skills. It then delivers the results of a subsequent SR that shows various theoretical and empirical frameworks that indicate the need for further study with on-field research. The review methodology of this work has two preparatory phases. The first phase concerns a generic look at the most evident literature to identify variables to implement a systematic review process through R Studio software. Through this investigation, the authors attempt to provide scholars and practitioners with signs of how start-ups are emerging in the tourist business and input for future research.

**Keywords:** *Tourism, Start-ups, Systematic review, Hospitality, Core competencies, Entrepreneurial ecosystem, Resource, Relations, Skills, Digital technologies, Tourism environment.*

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## 1. Introduction

The spread of travel start-ups has transformed the global travel and tourism industry, offering stakeholders opportunities and problems. Entrepreneurs have seized the opportunity to challenge established tourism models and meet the changing needs of contemporary visitors (Leung, 2019) through the rapid growth of technology and increasing accessibility of travel (Buhalis, 2019). Various elements are changing business models, providing benefits for the future of tourism. Some of these are the advent of social media, event management, and the spread of sustainable tourism (Cook *et al.*, 2018)

The tourism industry is strongly influenced by its environment and stakeholder relationships at multiple levels (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). Entrepreneurship's role in regional, local, and national tourism development is indisputable (Ateljevic, 2017). In this scenario, tourism start-ups are companies that have recently emerged with innovative ideas and business models that aim to revolutionize the way people plan and experience their trips by providing creative solutions, personalized experiences, and different types of accommodation. These companies typically aim to provide unique and customized experiences to travelers, whether through accommodations, activities, or tours.

This growing phenomenon is increasingly capturing the attention of scholars. However, while falling into the entrepreneurship cauldron, the literature on tourism start-ups appears to be unordered, with exciting and essential contributions, but needs to be better placed within a specific trend. This is why a literature review on tourism start-ups appears essential to serve as input for future research on the topic, which has both theoretical and managerial implications.

The studies in the literature that have focused on the development of tourist markets (Aslan *et al.*, 2021; Gursoy *et al.*, 2022) are substantial, but the literature on tourism start-ups appears rather fragmented and needs to be rearranged.

The purposes of this paper are to shed light on the role of tourism start-ups in the tourism market, systematically evaluate the theoretical and empirical development of the influence of this kind of firm in the tourism industry, propose comprehensive insight to identify the specific areas in critical need of further development and provide recommendations for future research aimed at development. Before proceeding to the phases in which the literature review is systemic, a traditional review was carried out to capture the variables on which the main theoretical contributions are based.

## 2. Literature review

In this paper, the authors aim to address the knowledge gap concerning tourism start-ups by offering a systematic review that integrates insights and perspectives originating from reflections on current studies. Recognizing the fragmented nature of existing literature, this review synthesizes key theories and empirical studies to provide a coherent understanding of how tourism start-ups interact with their ecosystems. By examining the multifaceted relationships and interdependencies within entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems, this review seeks to identify critical factors that influence the success (or lack of it) and innovation of tourism start-ups, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development and competitiveness of the

tourism industry.

### 2.1. *Tourism Industry*

Tourism can be considered a multisectoral and multistakeholder industry (Weidenfeld, 2018), which in recent years has been undergoing significant changes due to the rapid development and introduction of disruptive innovations in the digital sphere (Gursoy *et al.*, 2022) that can bring a paradigm shift within the entire market.

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in interest in entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems as a conceptual framework for comprehending and fostering the growth of tourist entrepreneurship. The need and implementation of marketing aimed at tourism, in particular, has undoubtedly contributed to what has been said (HSU, 2002). An overview of the main ideas, theories, and empirical investigations concerning entrepreneurial tourist ecosystems is what this literature review seeks to do. It investigates how stakeholders, tourism hotspots, entrepreneurs, and the larger socioeconomic environment interact to support entrepreneurial activities. The review also covers how different elements and players have shaped the entrepreneurial tourism industry.

It is essential to elaborate on the concept of the tourism ecosystem in academic terms. Numerous studies have highlighted that start-ups do not operate in isolation but are inherently influenced by their surrounding ecosystem. In this work, we primarily focus on start-ups within the tourism sector. (Motoyama *et al.*; 2017; Tripathi *et al.*; 2019; Greco; 2023) By adopting an ecosystem perspective, we can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors that enable or constrain entrepreneurial activities in tourism. This approach also allows us to identify critical leverage points where interventions can be made to foster a more supportive environment for tourism start-ups, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development and competitiveness of the tourism industry.

The concept of entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems emphasizes the dynamic and interconnected nature of entrepreneurial activities within the tourism sector. It considers the interdependencies and relationships among entrepreneurs, support organizations, government agencies, local communities, and tourists (Mason & Harrison, 2015). The entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective provides a holistic framework for understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder entrepreneurship in tourism (Spiegel, 2017). It is essential for the success of entrepreneurial tourist ecosystems that different stakeholders work together. Collaborations among businesspeople, tourism management organizations, academic institutions, local communities, and other parties promote information sharing, innovation, and resource sharing (Isenburg, 2020). A favorable policy and regulatory environment is vital for entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems. Supportive regulations, incentives, and policies that encourage entrepreneurship, innovation, and sustainable practices can enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Dredge *et al.*, 2015). Incubators, accelerators, mentorship programs, and financial resources are all necessary components of a robust support infrastructure for the tourism industry (Hall & Williams, 2018). These resources assist business owners in obtaining the networks, skills, and expertise required to start and expand their companies.

Additionally, cultural and social capital, including trust, shared values, and social networks, play a significant role in fostering entrepreneurship within the tourism field. (Harrison et al., 2010). Strong social capital enhances collaboration and facilitates the flow of information, resources, and opportunities for entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial activities that take place inside a destination's tourism are influenced by its natural and cultural characteristics. Local traditions, heritage, and distinctive landscapes can provide business owners with options in specialized markets. (Cunha et al., 2020). Technological advances and innovation have a transformative impact on entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media enable entrepreneurs to reach and engage with tourists more effectively (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Carignani et al., 2023; Amitrano & Bifulco, 2024). The integration of sustainability principles and responsible tourism practices within entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems is gaining importance. Entrepreneurs are increasingly recognizing the value of eco-friendly and socially responsible business models (Hall & Page, 2016). It might be difficult to assess the effectiveness and impact of the tourism industry on the economic well-being of a country. Key indicators include the number of starting businesses, job creation, revenue generation, innovation, and social and environmental outcomes (Ratten, 2017). Different evaluation frameworks and methodologies have been proposed, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems (Baggio et al., 2020).

The tourism industry is dynamic and has multifaceted networks that connect entrepreneurs and support organizations, governments, and local communities to foster entrepreneurship and innovation within the tourism industry. In this literature review, the key components, contributing factors, and measurement methods of entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems were emphasized. More research is needed to improve our comprehension of the relationships.

The proposed logical thread, which leads to the definition of start-ups, passes through that of tourism ecosystems because tourism start-ups are deeply embedded within and influenced by their surrounding ecosystems. Understanding tourism ecosystems allows for a comprehensive analysis of the interdependencies and interactions among various stakeholders, which is essential for identifying the factors that enable or constrain the success and innovation of tourism start-ups.

## 2.2. *Start-ups*

The number of starting businesses has increased during the past ten years. In recent years, academics have undervalued the significance of the emergence of fresh, innovative businesses, viewing them as merely one aspect of the larger field of entrepreneurship research (Frederiksen & Brem, 2017; Matricano, 2019). Numerous literary works have examined start-up phenomena and attempted to explain what a start-up business is. It is impossible to develop a concise, all-encompassing definition of a start-up. Many authors, including academics, business professionals, investors, etc., focus on the difficulties from various angles that emphasize various components in recognizing a start-up.

We have tried to organize how start-ups are defined according to the Gartner and Katz theoretical framework (1988).

To create a structure that enables the identification of organizations in the early phases of their creation process, we have picked three of the four traits suggested by Gartner and Katz also used by Greco (2023) in the study on start-up ecosystems: a) "Prospective Intention," b) "Resources & Activities", and c) "Relations with the environment".

We propose the main contributions belonging to the three indicated variables:

a) *“Prospective Intention”*

Several of the definitions of start-up firms that are most frequently used in the literature are particularly well suited to the research of this work. A start-up is described as a temporary company that is used to establish a "repeatable and scalable business model" (Blank, 2017). The terms "temporary" and "search" need to be underlined. The difference between a small business and a start-up is that the latter is incapable of achieving this kind of quick size and probably does not even work toward this aim. In this context, the word "scalable business model" refers to a company that may grow exponentially in size (and, as a result, in terms of both customers and revenue).

According to Di Bernardo et al. (2020), a company with a scalable business strategy can expand significantly in size (and, as a result, in its clientele and revenue).

b) *“Resources & Activities”*

The creator of the Lean Start-up method (Ries, 2011) focuses attention on the human factor: "Start-ups are human institutions built to provide a novel product or service under conditions of high uncertainty". It becomes clear that the emphasis is being placed on the word "human institution". More specifically, using this definition as a starting point, it is possible to associate a starting business with what it offers in terms of its good or service, forgetting that a key component of all successful ex-startups is their organizational culture, which contributes to a significant portion of their value. Start-ups are platform-based experiments that examine potential automatizations in both business and daily life and frequently adapt tried-and-true methods to novel processes (Marcon & Ribeiro, 2021).

c) *“Relations with the environment”*

A company can only experience rapid growth if it creates a product that a broad range of customers are interested in and can access and serve the entire large market, according to Paul Graham, an American essayist, developer, start-up founder, and CEO of Y Combinator, one of the most effective start-up accelerators. In contrast to a small company, a start-up has rapid growth and business scalability (Graham, 2012).

Several scholars state that start-ups successfully proliferate exclusively in "ecosystem contexts" composed of strategic actors for their development. (Motoyama & Knowlton, 2017; Tripathi et al., 2019; Greco & Tregua, 2022)

The benchmark for emergency scenarios is the actual start-up, which does not copy or write a

script but instead invents something completely new and compares it to unpredictable conditions by going where no one has gone before.

### 3. Methodology

Due to the conceptual nature of this paper, the authors decided to adopt an SR (Kitchenham, 2004; Watson & Webster, 2020) based on the three drivers identified in the start-up theoretical background (Gartner & Katz, 1988) to understand the ongoing debate. Such a method, widely used in the business management field (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2016; Tian *et al.*, 2018), enables a detailed and replicable process for literature analysis and a valid synthesis of the topic of interest. It allows for careful analysis of past and current papers without bias in the inclusion or exclusion of any literature.

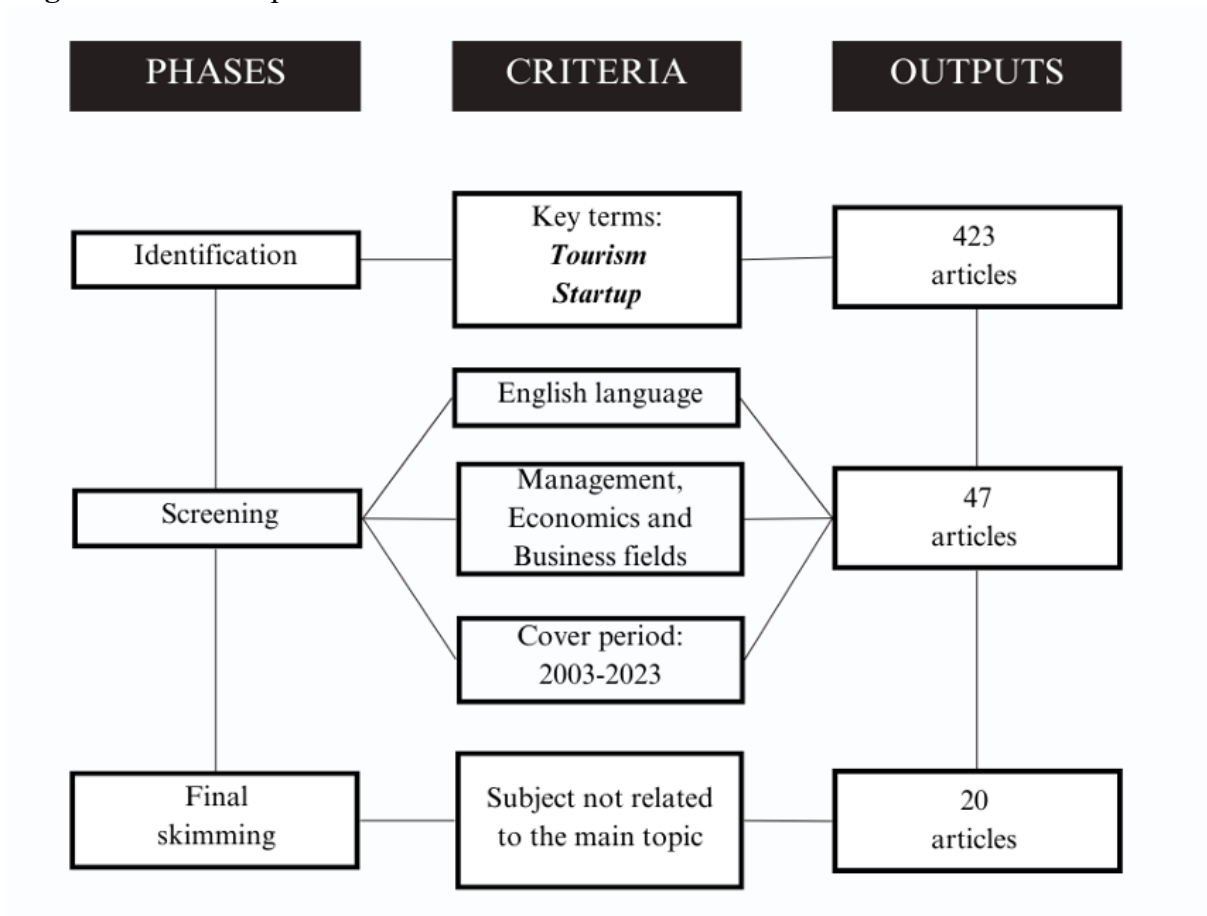
The search process, as shown in Figure 1, was enabled using the RStudio tool and started with the research term "tourism start-up", which was entered into Web of Science, one of the most frequently used databases in the management field (Tian *et al.*, 2018).

To obtain relevant results, SR only included original articles, review articles, book chapters and proceedings papers, whose title, abstract and/or keywords included the aforementioned term "tourism start-up".

The 423 initial results found were filtered through the following criteria: first, we chose to limit the research to works published in the last two decades, the period in which the phenomenon of tourism start-ups has exploded; second, we restricted the analysis to the areas of business, economics and management, to obtain relevant insights in the field of tourism management (Page, 2007); subsequently, to allow the replicability of the review, the research was refined by limiting it only to documents written in the English language (Mele *et al.*, 2023), resulting in 47 articles.

Based on the reading of these papers and following the criteria proposed by Macpherson and Holt (2007), further skimming was carried out to better map the topic of interest. On this basis, 27 articles were excluded because they were not in line with the main topic and the evaluation was limited to 20 articles.

**Figure 1.** Research process in SR.



Source: Author's elaboration.

#### 4. Results

In this section, the authors present an overview of the concept of tourism start-up, embracing the different interpretations provided by the 20 articles analysed and then focusing on the most discussed items related to the topic. The research highlights three main areas of interest: digital technologies, core competencies, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

As shown in Table I, seven of the examined articles focus on the implementation of digital tools and innovative technologies by tourism start-ups to gain a competitive advantage and to enable the creation of new value propositions for the stakeholders involved. Eight out of 20 deal with the skills and attitudes that entrepreneurs possess or acquire to develop a new business in the tourism sector. Last, the lowest percentage of the works (5 out of 20) concerns the entrepreneurial ecosystem within which tourism start-ups develop and the different ways in which the environment influences them.

**Table I.** Key items.

| KEY ITEMS                                    | SOURCES   |
|--|---|
| DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES<br>(Resources)          | Aldebert <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Ammirato <i>et al.</i> , (2022); Bruza, (2021); Bui <i>et al.</i> , (2006); Filieri <i>et al.</i> , (2021); Mariconda, (2016); Mishra & Gupta, (2020).   |
| CORE COMPETENCIES<br>(Prospective intention) | Alsos <i>et al.</i> , (2016); Banki & Ismail, (2015); Baptista <i>et al.</i> , (2022); Eyana <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Fu <i>et al.</i> , (2022); Kallmuenzer <i>et al.</i> , (2021); Presenza <i>et al.</i> , (2020); Slavova & Ivanova, (2019). |
| ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM<br>(Environment)   | Atembe, (2022); Nayak <i>et al.</i> , (2019); Pavlatos, (2021); Schiopu <i>et al.</i> , (2015); Verheul <i>et al.</i> , (2009).   |

*Source:* Author's elaboration.

### *Tourism start-ups*

The tourism industry has undergone significant changes in recent decades, and currently, it can be described as one of the most dynamic sectors with immense potential for economic growth through job creation, poverty alleviation and the reduction of regional disparities. It has seen a rapid increase in the number of start-ups, and the creation of new businesses has occurred in several sectors of this industry, such as travel, accommodation, catering, and entertainment services (Mishra & Gupta, 2020).

The analysis of the articles resulting from the literature review reveals a shared agreement regarding the increasing role that tourism start-ups are coming to acquire in the global scenario and the possibility they have of enacting a regeneration of the sector, necessary after the effects of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They operate in both local and global markets, facing challenges in dynamic environments (Pavlatos, 2021) and interacting with a more autonomous and experienced consumer who no longer has any need for physical intermediaries. As noted by Mariconda (2016), the main goal of tourism start-ups is the comprehension of customer needs that will enable them to develop new business models and innovative services designed to put the customer at the center of the experience.

Several trends due to technological developments have opened new opportunities and have pushed companies to innovate business processes both on demand and supply, enabling in several cases the simultaneous production and consumption (*prosumption*) of tourist services more in line with consumer expectations and needs (Ammirato *et al.*, 2022). Emphasis is reserved for postmodern tourists, who have reached a new level of maturity that leads them to desire cocreation experiences and take on more active roles.



### *Digital technologies and tourism start-ups*

Tourism start-ups are called upon to re-evaluate, rethink and redefine the entire sector through the development of highly innovative processes and the proposal of services reshaped from a customer-oriented perspective.

As innovativeness is one of the main components of start-ups, it is not surprising that a considerable number of the articles analyzed focus on the benefits that the digitization of tourism activities can bring. Mishra and Gupta (2020) pointed out how e-commerce has enabled start-up firms to widen their customer base and provide low-cost services to grow their businesses. The opportunities offered by tools such as mailing lists, online sales channels and social networks have greatly increased the attractiveness of tourism services and made several start-ups able to scale the market and gain international positioning.

According to Aldebert *et al.* (2011), ICT applications have led to major changes in the organization of tourism start-ups and have resulted in an evolution of innovative activities (Greco, 2022). App development is one of the most frequently addressed topics in the literature because of the different technologies that can be involved, such as geolocalization and 3D reproduction of places of interest. As stated by Ammirato (2022), apps can increase sociability, reduce risks, and achieve greater consumer convenience through price comparison and time savings.

Filieri *et al.* (2021) pointed out the role of AI in the tourism sector, which allows the creation of personalized experiences, improving relationships with customers and revenue streams.

### *Core competencies*

Entrepreneurship in tourism research has recently attracted much scholarly attention, reflecting the important role of entrepreneurs and start-ups within the tourism industry in innovation and value creation (Presenza *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry is therefore highly dependent on new enterprises and start-ups both for market growth and to sustain innovation. Several studies have focused on the attitudes, skills and different competencies entrepreneurs need to possess to be able to perform successfully and remain in a highly competitive market such as tourism.

When speaking of entrepreneurial competence, scholars usually refer to those skills that go beyond aptitudes and concern not only the creativity and motivation of an entrepreneur that trigger the production of superior products and services (Greco *et al.*, 2022). Kaur and Bains (2013) also refer to 'technical competence', i.e., the ability to use and adopt technical skills that include research tools or procedures, such as the mastery of work tasks or content.

The study carried out by Alsos *et al.* (2016) seeks to analyse the different logics that individuals may follow when undertaking entrepreneurial processes and creating new tourism businesses, focusing on how the type of identity of the founders may influence their entrepreneurial behaviour during the start-up process.

Kallmuenzer *et al.* (2021) pointed out that tourism start-ups can grow even when their entrepreneurs lack human capital prior to the start of the business. However, founders need to fill their human capital shortages to make their business sustainable and gain a better position in the global tourism market.

Studies by Banki (2015), Slavova (2019) and Eyana (2020) focused on the development of tourism start-ups and small businesses in rural regions and developing countries, highlighting how entrepreneurs' behaviour through which they identify and pursue new opportunities may have a considerable effect on the subsequent performance of their newly established firms. A fundamental role is also played by the attitude of the local population and by national and international policies that can activate education and support programmes for entrepreneurship.

Research conducted by Baptista *et al.* (2022) shows that homogeneity of skills and attitudes plays a significant role in the formation of successful entrepreneurial dyads in the hospitality industry. In this sector, the homogeneity of highly skilled entrepreneurial team members is a key characteristic for start-up sales growth and the creation of high-value services for consumers.

### *Entrepreneurial ecosystem*

The analysis conducted in this paper highlights the considerable interest shown in the literature in the environment in which tourism enterprises and start-ups develop.

Entrepreneurial tourism ecosystems are dynamic, multifaceted networks that link entrepreneurs and support organizations, governments, and local communities to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the tourism industry. Nevertheless, this environment is often extremely competitive, and start-ups need to deploy numerous skills and tools to survive. Pavlatos (2021) stated that there are several professional management tools that entrepreneurs can use to realize their business plans (or entrepreneurial projects) in a highly competitive environment, including the MCS.

Business networks can foster collaboration and knowledge sharing in the tourism sector, facilitating the creation of partnerships (Atambe, 2022). A fundamental role is also played by incubators and accelerators, key institutions of the start-up ecosystem. Schiopu *et al.* (2015) specifically state that the tourism sector may be supported through institutional mechanisms such as governmental agencies or financial bodies or other organizations such as incubators designed to promote new venture creation and better performance, serving as a tool for developing tourism businesses both in peripheral areas and in cities.

Not to be overlooked is the relationship that is established between new tourist start-ups and local stakeholders, especially when economic activities concern areas of cultural or naturalistic interest. According to Nayak (2019), collaboration with local authorities is desirable to understand the needs of the territory and to involve the population in activities that can create advantages not only for entrepreneurs but also for stimulating awareness and participation.

## 5. Implications

This study provides greater insight into the topic of tourism start-ups, highlighting key features that provide a better understanding of the dynamics behind this ecosystem and offering scholars a framework for future developments. Both academics and practitioners, through this analysis, receive insights that show how start-ups are developing in the tourism sector and how this phenomenon is increasingly growing in the tourism industry.

This literature review attempts to extend the existing body of work on tourism start-ups by providing a more integrated framework that highlights the role of key variables such as digital technologies, core entrepreneurial competencies, and the surrounding ecosystem. While previous studies have touched upon these aspects individually (Gursoy et al., 2022), this review synthesizes them, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how these variables interact within the tourism start-up ecosystem.

From a theoretical perspective, the review not only confirms the importance of these elements but also suggests that future research should focus on exploring how they can be combined to foster innovation and sustainable development in tourism. For example, scholars could further investigate how digital technologies, and entrepreneurial competencies synergize to drive customer-oriented innovations, as previously indicated by Mishra and Gupta (2020) and Aldebert et al. (2011).

On the managerial side, this analysis provides clear guidance for entrepreneurs and stakeholders in the tourism industry. Specifically, the findings underscore the importance of engaging with ecosystem logic—incubators, accelerators, and strategic partnerships are critical for the success of tourism start-ups (Tripathi et al., 2019; Pavlatos, 2021). Entrepreneurs should also focus on cultivating essential digital and managerial competencies to leverage new technologies and adapt to market changes. Additionally, the increasing role of sustainability and social responsibility in tourism business models (Hall & Page, 2016) indicates that start-ups must align their strategies with these emerging trends to remain competitive.

In summary, this review seeks to consolidate fragmented insights into a coherent theoretical framework, offering both researchers and practitioners a roadmap for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities within the growing field of tourism start-ups. The implications suggest a clear path for further theoretical exploration and offer practical recommendations for entrepreneurs to enhance their business development strategies within the dynamic and increasingly competitive tourism industry.

## 6. Conclusion

This research offers a systematic review of tourism start-ups, addressing a gap in the current literature by analysing their role and impact on the global tourism industry. The study highlights the importance of digital technologies, entrepreneurial skills, and collaboration with external stakeholders as key factors influencing the success of start-ups in this sector.

The findings provide valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners, illustrating how start-ups are reshaping the tourism landscape by offering innovative, customer-oriented solutions, while operating within complex ecosystems.

The present analysis has shown that little attention has been given to the topic and that there are few contributions that analyse the phenomenon of cultural start-ups as a whole.

The contribution is not free of methodological limitations related to the rapid technological changes within the tourism industry that require ongoing investigation to assess the adaptability of start-ups in responding to these innovations. Moreover, the focus on digital technologies and core competencies leave room for further exploration of other critical elements, such as the sustainability of tourism start-ups and their long-term economic impact.

The use of new technologies in tourism is a consolidated topic; in contrast, the development of tourist start-ups based on logics with high technological and innovative content is an emerging phenomenon that has not yet found a clear place in the literature. It is assumed that with the proliferation of the latter, theoretical and empirical contributions will also grow. This work could provide the necessary inputs for further and more in-depth research in the field.

### **Conflict of interest**

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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