



## YOUTH, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND TOURISM IN PERIPHERAL AREAS

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### Abstract

**Purpose.** The present study analyses the role of young people in entrepreneurship and tourism in peripheral Italian areas, with a particular focus on the Marche region. The objective of the study is to understand the degree of attachment of young people to the territory, their perceptions of local resources, and the barriers that hinder their active involvement in the tourism and entrepreneurial development of these areas.

**Design/methodology/approach.** The research is grounded in a quantitative survey conducted through a structured questionnaire, administered to a sample of 313 young individuals (aged 18-35) residing in the Basso Appennino Pesarese and Ancona area (ABPA). The analysis explores four key areas: development priorities, mobility models, community involvement, and the enhancement of the local tourism offer.

**Findings.** The results of the study demonstrate the pivotal function of tourism and services in the economic development of peripheral regions. There is a notable interest among young people in the advancement of these areas. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals critical concerns pertaining to mobility, inadequate infrastructure, and a paucity of cultural events and networking prospects. The aspiration to reside in these areas is frequently impeded by the perception of limited employment and business prospects.

**Practical and Social implications.** The study provides valuable indications for the formulation of public policies and the development of local strategies, suggesting actions to enhance infrastructure, promote youth entrepreneurship and integrate local communities and tourism. The strengthening of social networks and the active involvement of young people are identified as pivotal elements for the economic and social sustainability of peripheral regions.

**Originality of the study.** The present paper makes a contribution to the ongoing debate on the development of peripheral areas. It achieves this by highlighting the active role of young people in the local economy, as demonstrated through tourism and entrepreneurship. The empirical analysis it presents offers novel perspectives for understanding territorial dynamics in marginal contexts.

## 1. Introduction

In Italy, tourism has traditionally been concentrated in a few iconic areas, such as major art cities (Rome, Florence, Venice) and renowned seaside destinations (Amalfi Coast, Sardinia, Cinque Terre). However, this concentration frequently causes issues of overcrowding and environmental impact while creating significant disparities between central regions and more peripheral areas (PAs), which risk exclusion from tourist flows and losing strategic resources for their development.

PAs - often overlooked compared to more famous destinations - represent a fundamental component of Italy's tourism landscape. These areas, characterized by historic villages, unspoiled natural landscapes, and authentic cultural traditions, provide an invaluable heritage, deserving of attention and enhancement. They have been identified as key drivers for regional and national development, being potentially fertile ground for entrepreneurial growth (Barca et al., 2014; Roundy, 2019; Scott, 2006). Specifically, economic studies on the entrepreneurial ecosystems of small towns associate PAs with large metropolitan areas, as they can leverage their available resources, local networks, and the benefits of community-driven actions supporting entrepreneurship (Wiggins and Proctor, 2001; Barca et al., 2014; Pezzi and Urso, 2016; Prashantham and Battacharyya, 2020; Roundy, 2019).

These areas hold immense potential for sustainable and authentic tourism by promoting unique experiences connected to nature, local traditions, and gastronomic initiatives. In this respect, tourism can serve as a catalyst for social and economic regeneration, addressing challenges such as depopulation and unemployment.

Realizing this potential requires collaborative efforts from institutions, local communities, and tourism operators. Investments in infrastructure, marketing, and community engagement are essential, with particular attention to involving youth as key-drivers of innovation and entrepreneurship. Young people, indeed, due to their creativity and innovation ability, can become promoters of sustainable and attractive solutions for tourism development. Hence, they should be encouraged to participate in entrepreneurial initiatives capable of enhancing the artistic, cultural, gastronomic, and natural capital characterizing these areas.

To achieve this, it is necessary to investigate not only the economic and entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by young people living in PAs, but also their attachment to the territory, perceptions of local resources, primary needs, and interest in promoting tourism development.

The aim of this study is to explore these aspects to understand what can improve young people's attachment to PAs and direct involvement in their economic, social, and tourism development. Specifically, the study seeks

to investigate: (i) the perceptions of young people regarding the cultural, natural, and social heritage of PAs, as well as their level of attachment to the territory; (ii) their interest and willingness to engage in entrepreneurial initiatives related to tourism and local traditions; and (iii) the perceived deficiencies in essential and collective services (e.g., infrastructure, transportation, business support, digital connectivity) that hinder retention and active engagement.

The study relies on a survey based on a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 313 individuals aged 18-35 living in a selected area of the Marche region. This area meets the typical criteria for defining a PA, as it is significantly distant from the main centers offering essential services such as education, healthcare, and mobility; characterized by the presence of significant environmental and cultural resources; and shaped by a heterogeneous landscape, resulting from the natural and anthropogenic dynamics influencing it over time (Barca et al., 2014).

The research has significant implications both from a scientific perspective and for managerial and policy considerations. On the one hand, it actively contributes to the scientific debate on the development and strengthening of PAs - topics increasingly central to political and social discourse - by elucidating opportunities and limitations associated with living in such areas, as well as the real entrepreneurial and tourism opportunities they present. On the other hand, it offers valuable insights for designing policies aimed at stimulating youth entrepreneurship and fostering the engagement of younger generations in the revitalization and economic, social, and tourism-related renewal of PAs.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section two reviews the literature on young people, peripheral areas, and tourism while in Section three, the research methodology is outlined. Section four presents the survey results. Finally, the fifth and sixth sections are dedicated to the discussion and conclusion, respectively.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Young people and PAs: challenges and opportunities*

Peripheral Areas (PAs) are “spaces and places” characterized by greater backwardness and a lower level of development compared to what typically defines a modern society (Korsgaard, 2015a). They have been variously defined in the literature (e.g., “remote areas”: Ardener, 2012; “inner areas”: Barca et al., 2014; Servillo et al., 2017; “rural areas”: OECD, 2006, 2019; Pugh and Dubois, 2021; Woods and McDonagh, 2011) and analyzed across multiple disciplinary fields (Pezzi and Urso, 2016; Pugh and Dubois, 2021). From

a sociological perspective, research has mainly focused on issues of exclusion and social marginalization resulting from geographic peripherality (Herrschel, 2017). In contrast, the economic perspective often highlights the dual nature of PAs, emphasizing both the limited economic opportunities in terms of innovation and access to essential resources such as technology, capital, and labor (Prashantham and Bhattacharyya, 2020) and their potential to serve as triggers of regional and national development by fostering entrepreneurship (Barca et al., 2014; Roundy, 2019; Scott, 2006).

Despite their potential, PAs have long suffered the effects of urbanization, which since the 19th century has led to an increasing abandonment of rural municipalities and historic villages, resulting in severe consequences, including service reduction, financial distress, and social degradation. Recent data on Italian demographic dynamics estimates an overall population decline by 2030 (from 58.9 to 57.9 million) and confirms that depopulation will primarily affect the country's smaller urban areas, predicting an 80% population drop in rural municipalities (ISTAT, 2023). Notably, in the Marche region, this trend mirrors national dynamics, with the inland areas (e.g., Urbino: -8.1%, Ascoli Piceno: -7.6%, Macerata: -4.5%) experiencing greater population decline compared to coastal cities such as Ancona (-2.8%), Fano (-2.2%), and San Benedetto del Tronto (-0.7%).

This phenomenon is largely due to ongoing social, economic, and technological changes, causing the emergence of new values, expectations, and consumption models, particularly among younger generations. Today's youth are increasingly informed, guided by interests such as sustainability and social participation, and oriented towards mobility as an opportunity to acquire essential skills, experience different cultures, engage actively in society, and improve career prospects (Borojević et al., 2023). These trends reflect new lifestyle habits and reduce the attractiveness of PAs, leading to resident outmigration, youth unemployment, and a lack of entrepreneurial activity.

Nonetheless, entrepreneurship could play a key role in fostering the economic growth of PAs (Korsgaard et al., 2015b), even in a context of increasing global competition (Woods and McDonagh, 2011) and economic crisis (Sánchez-Zamora et al., 2014; Sánchez-Zamora and Gallardo-Cobos, 2020).

The central role of entrepreneurship in regional development processes has been recognized in the literature (Reid, 1987; Gladwin et al., 1989; Malnecki, 1993; Huggins and Thompson, 2015; Korsgaard et al, 2015a; Korsgaard et al, 2015b; Bacq et al., 2022; Travasi and Mutignani, 2023). On "rural" entrepreneurship, an important contribution comes from Korsgaard et al. (2015b), emphasising the role that place has on the organisational structure of the enterprise and its role at the local level. Unlike space, a mere set of resources in the profit-making process, place also includes strong social and cultural components that are intertwined with the organisational structure and modus operandi of the firm itself, making its activities unique and not

replicable in other territories (Korsgaard et al, 2015b; Zamagni and Venturi, 2017; Wright et al., 2022). The territory in turn receives benefits from this link in terms of economic development, increased resilience, and containment of depopulation.

As a result of this, the entrepreneurial potential of PAs lies in the valorization of “untapped territorial capital” (Barca et al., 2014), including both material and immaterial factors such as:

- Historical and artistic heritage: from north to south, Adriatic to Tyrrhenian, every part of Italy boasts unique historical significance. Beyond famous urban centers, many small settlements (villages, castles, abbeys) hold high artistic and cultural value.
- Semi-natural systems: Unused agricultural and forest land is a vital resource not only for primary industries but also for tourism, as seen in agritourism and nature reserves.
- Territorial and community stewardship: Preserving artistic and natural capital requires involving local populations as custodians of their territory, rather than relying solely on sporadic public interventions.
- Craftsmanship and artisanal know-how: Artisanal excellence flourishes in PAs, often featuring specialized small districts and brands of European relevance.

This territorial capital provides a foundation for new entrepreneurial initiatives capable of revitalizing PAs. Furthermore, recent studies identify promising opportunities for demographic recovery in these areas. The urban migration trend has slowed in recent years, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which spurred population relocation and a reassessment of the better lifestyle that PAs can offer (Teti, 2022).

The younger generations appear to hold the greatest potential for these areas, showing resilience in seeking opportunities locally rather than migrating to metropolitan centers or abroad (Teti, 2017; 2022; Barbera et al., 2022). Their efforts to reduce disparities with dynamic centers through personal initiatives and institutional dialogue (Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020) highlight the possibility of revitalizing PAs.

A recent Italian study (Barbera and De Rossi, 2021) revealed the emergence of a new perception of these territories by the young population. They are increasingly capable of providing a simple lifestyle, closer to nature and community, thereby rekindling the desire to remain or return to live in inner areas. The majority of them wish to stay and develop their personal and professional lives there. Specifically, 67% of respondents expressed a desire to remain in their current territory, 70% completed their education there, and 65% entered the workforce locally. Young people strongly believe in the importance of continuing to plan their futures in these areas. Among the primary reasons, there is a strong connection to the community (65%), the opportunity for more meaningful social interactions

(68%), and a higher quality of life (79%). Therefore, what emerges is a renewed vision of PAs among younger generations, driven by a heightened sensitivity to social and relational dynamics. This perspective fuels their desire to remain in their places of origin and to channel their skills into enhancing and revitalizing these territories.

However, successfully engaging youth in the entrepreneurial revitalization of PAs is a complex process depending on several interconnected dynamics including fostering youth engagement in local economies and strengthening public-private collaboration. These aspects are essential for supporting long-term employment opportunities and creating resilient networks that provide businesses, particularly start-ups, with access to critical resources and innovation pathways (Roundy, 2019). A pivotal factor in this process is improving services for residents. The decline of PAs is both a cause and consequence of reduced public services and economic degradation. Reversing this trend is essential to sustain the recent slowdown in urban migration and prevent renewed outflows toward major urban centers. In fact, enhancing public services can improve quality of life, define a settlement's identity, and boost its external appeal. Therefore, addressing primary (e.g., mobility, utilities) and secondary needs (e.g., administrative, cultural, recreational services) is essential for fostering youth attachment to their territories and strengthening their role in promoting local economy and tourism revitalization (Vendemmia and Lanza, 2022).

## *2.2 The tourism offering of PAs: A focus on the Marche Region*

From a theoretical perspective, PAs have been variously defined and interpreted, resulting in blurred boundaries and making their precise identification challenging. A possible geographic-spatial delimitation can be established by referring to the so-called "inner areas", which are significantly distant from major centers providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and mobility. These areas are also distinguished by their rich environmental and cultural resources and by landscapes shaped over time by both natural and human influences (Barca et al., 2014).

The identification criterion for these areas is exclusively based on services' availability. Specifically, a municipality is classified as a "hub" if it simultaneously meets the following conditions: (i) it offers a comprehensive range of secondary education (including at least one scientific or classical high school and at least one technical or vocational institute); (ii) it has at least one hospital with a first-level emergency department; and (iii) it has at least a "silver-tier" railway station. Surrounding these hubs are other municipalities, categorized based on their travel time to the nearest hub.

The significance of these areas within the Italian context is considerable.

Nearly 4,000 municipalities - approximately half of the total - fall within inner areas. These territories cover about 60% of the national land area and are home to approximately 13.4 million people, or around 22% of the resident population in 2021.

As for the Marche region, on which this study focuses, it has a high percentage of municipalities classified as inner areas (46.3% of the total), accounting for 17.5% of the region's population. The Marche region was among the first to adopt the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), launched in 2014 by the Ministry for Territorial Cohesion. One of these areas is particularly relevant for its extension, namely "Appennino Basso Pesarese e Anconetano" (ABPA). It was among the first three areas to be established in the Marche Region during the 2014-2020 period. Covering an approximate total area of 1,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it encompasses parts of the provinces of Pesaro-Urbino and Ancona. Specifically, ABPA includes ten municipalities: Acqualagna, Apecchio, Cagli, Cantiano, Piobbico, Frontone, Serra Sant'Abbondio, Pergola, Arcevia, and Sassoferrato.

This area is a highly attractive tourist destination, offering a rich combination of historical, cultural, gastronomic, and natural assets. Despite a contraction in hospitality infrastructure between 2019 and 2022 - marked by a decline of approximately 100 beds in hotels and over 1,000 in non-hotel accommodations - the area has experienced a notable increase in tourist arrivals (+32%) and total overnight stays (+30%). This growth has been driven by a rising preference for domestic destinations, targeted promotional initiatives, and a significant expansion of professionally managed rental accommodations (from 35 to 68 units). Additionally, international tourism has fully recovered, with foreign arrivals in 2022 surpassing pre-pandemic levels (Osservatorio del Turismo, 2024).

Culturally, this area boasts a wealth of historic sites, museums, and religious landmarks. Acqualagna is renowned for its Truffle Museum, Arcevia for its network of medieval castles, and Cagli for its rich religious heritage. Cantiano highlights the historical Via Flaminia, while Sassoferrato and Serra Sant'Abbondio offer notable ancient and religious sites. Coordinated efforts to integrate these attractions through structured itineraries could enhance the region's appeal, offering visitors immersive and diverse experiences.

A vibrant calendar of cultural and gastronomic events further strengthens the region's tourist attractiveness. Historical reenactments, such as the Palio del Re in Acqualagna and the Palio della Rocca in Serra Sant'Abbondio, alongside major religious celebrations like La Turba in Cantiano, preserve local traditions while fostering social cohesion. At the same time, food festivals, including the National White Truffle Fair and the Alogastronomy Festival in Apecchio, promote regional specialties and stimulate the local economy. These events not only extend the tourism season but also drive economic benefits in hospitality, dining, and artisanal crafts.

Finally, the area's natural landscapes further enrich its tourism offering, with diverse outdoor activities ranging from hiking (notably in the Gola del Furlo Natural Reserve, featuring ten scenic trails) to rock climbing (Monte di Montiego), canyoning (Forra del Presale, along the Candigliano River), and speleology (Monte Petrano and Monte Montiego protected areas). These activities attract nature enthusiasts while supporting sustainable tourism and environmental conservation.

By leveraging its diverse cultural heritage, dynamic event programming, and extensive outdoor opportunities, the ABPA region provides excellent possibilities for entrepreneurial initiatives and interventions aimed at strengthening its position as a premier destination, which offers visitors an authentic and multifaceted experience while fostering economic growth and environmental stewardship.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Instrument and data collection*

Data for this study have been collected through a self-administered questionnaire distributed over the timeframe January-October 2024.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections. The first concerns the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second explores the expectations and employment prospects of the peripheral area (i.e. ABPA), focusing on activities that could contribute to its development. The third deals with habits, services, and mobility within the area. The fourth section examines community ties and participation in local activities and initiatives. Finally, the fifth section focuses on tourism, analysing the activities and services that can promote the growth of the PA and increase its attractiveness. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale of importance and/or agreement.

In order to validate the survey, the questionnaire was submitted to a pilot sample consisting of 10 randomly selected young residents of the ABPA area for each generational cohort. This process enabled us to verify the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. Overall, 33 responses were collected. The feedback obtained led to only minor adjustments in the questionnaire design. After incorporating these changes, the final version was distributed to young people living in the peripheral area.

The Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method was used for data collection, enabling an online distribution of the questionnaire. The channels employed were social networks and instant messaging applications, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The online survey facilitates quick and inexpensive acquisition of information while ensuring

anonymity and facilitating data cleaning and analysis (Lefever et al., 2007). As stated by Sills and Song (2002), this method is also effective in reaching connected and technologically savvy populations.

A total of 313 responses were obtained.

### *3.2 Sampling and data processing*

The study focused on younger generations aged 18-35 (i.e., adult Z-ers and Millennials) who currently reside or have previously lived in the ABPA area. As previously underlined, these groups, while being the primary drivers of PAs depopulation, could play a particularly active role in promoting and revitalizing the socio-economic landscape of these territories (Barbera and De Rossi, 2021). Moreover, young people are the demographic most engaged in qualified educational pathways, which foster advanced and innovative skills essential for employment and for stimulating new entrepreneurial ventures. For instance, digital natives from Gen-Z are particularly inclined to developing competencies related to the emerging skills in the field of digital communication, which are increasingly in demand in the current economic landscape (Cantamesse and Ferrero, 2022).

Table 1 shows that the respondents are mainly females (63.3%), while males are 35.1% and 1.6% do not identify with any gender. Most belong to the 24-26 age group (24.6%) and reside in the peripheral area (79.6%). The sample is well-educated, with 49.8% having a high school diploma, 25.2% having a bachelor's degree and 15.0% having a master's degree. As regards occupation, the majority work as employees or manual workers (45.0%). Participants mostly live with their parents and brother(s)/sister(s) (58.8%).

This sample profile highlights the socio-demographic diversity of the respondents, although with an irregular distribution in terms of gender and educational attainment. While this does not ensure statistical representativeness of the broader youth population in the analysed area, the study is conceived as an exploratory analysis. As such, it relies solely on descriptive statistical techniques investigating the young people's perception of services and opportunities in the peripheral area where they live, their attachment to the territory and their involvement in local and tourism-related initiatives.

By means of these data, the objective is not to generalize findings, but rather to offer preliminary insights into the perceptions and involvement of young people in tourism and entrepreneurship in peripheral areas, providing a basis for future, more comprehensive research (Sandelowski, 2000).

Table 1. Sample profile (N=313)

		n	%
Gender			
	Male	110	35.1
	Female	198	63.3
	Prefer not to say	5	1.6
Age (years)			
	18-20	24	7.7
	21-23	58	18.5
	24-26	77	24.6
	27-29	53	16.9
	30-32	40	12.8
	33-35	61	19.5
Primary residence in the Peripheral Area			
	Yes	249	79.6
	No	64	20.4
Education			
	Secondary School graduation	17	5.4
	High School graduation	156	49.8
	Bachelor's degree	79	25.2
	Master's degree	47	15.0
	Postgraduate degree	14	4.5
Occupation			
	Student	91	29.1
	Working student	33	10.5
	Employee, Manual worker	141	45.0
	Entrepreneur, Freelancer	29	9.3
	Manager, Executive	1	0.3
	Unemployed	18	5.8
Family composition			
	Alone	33	10.5
	With parents and brother(s)/sister(s)	184	58.8
	With husband/wife	14	4.5
	With partner	53	16.9
	With friends/roommates	27	8.6
	Other	2	0.6

Source: Authors's elaboration.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Priorities for development in the ABPA Area

Table 2 presents the respondents' opinions on the economic activities deemed as fundamental for the development of the area where they live. Tertiary sector (health, schools, public/private offices, and services, etc.) and tourism constitute priorities for the enhancement of the area, with mean values of 4.29 and 4.21, respectively. Cultural and recreational activities (4.06) are also recognized as important fields of improvement. Cultural events, festivals and recreational spaces, indeed, can foster social interaction among young people while enhancing the artistic heritage and local traditions (Mahon and Hyyryläinen, 2019; Tait et al., 2019). By contrast, the industrial sector appears less relevant, recording a mean of 3.40.

Overall, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving the quality of life and attractiveness of the area are considered crucial by younger. Tourism, along with recreational and cultural activities, assumes a central role in emphasizing the distinctive characteristics and unique potential of peripheral areas (García-Delgado et al., 2020), including ABPA, offering them a new identity and an important development opportunity.

Table 2. Opinions of the sample on key economic activities for the development of the ABPA area- Likert scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Industry	3.40	1.89
Handcrafts	3.73	1.54
Tourism and accommodation activities	4.21	1.78
Cultural and recreational activities	4.06	1.44
Trade	3.74	2.19
Agriculture	3.99	1.46
Tertiary sector (health, schools, public/private offices, and services, etc.)	4.29	1.85

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## 4.2. Leisure activities and mobility patterns

The most common leisure activities among the younger demographic surveyed include dining at restaurants or farmhouses (3.74) and going to pubs, clubs, and discos (3.58) (Table 3). This is followed by city walks (3.36) and outdoor excursions (3.29). The prevalence of these activities highlights the affordance of local culinary traditions and nature experiences in peripheral areas, without necessitating long or demanding journeys. Indeed, these are also among the activities that require minimal travel distances (Table 4). On the other hand, shopping (3.85) and cinema and entertainment (3.62) imply the need to travel to more central areas. Young people in peripheral areas are often forced to move to urban centres or larger areas to participate in these activities, as they are concentrated in contexts with greater availability of dedicated services and facilities (Vendemmia and Lanza, 2022).

Table 3. Frequency of participation in leisure activities- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Shopping	2.65	1.45
Town/city walk	3.36	1.86
Outdoor walk/hike	3.29	2.00
Activities in sports centres	2.81	1.93
Cinema and entertainment	2.62	1.51
Fairs/festivals/concerts	3.03	1.49
Public parks and gardens	2.75	1.14
Restaurant/farmhouse with friends/relatives	3.74	1.50
Pubs/clubs/discos	3.58	1.61

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table 4. Frequency of travelling outside municipality for leisure activities- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Shopping	3.85	1.79
Town/city walk	2.71	1.72
Outdoor walk/hike	2.66	1.28
Activities in sports centres	2.62	1.49
Cinema and entertainment	3.62	1.39
Fairs/festivals/concerts	3.48	1.56
Public parks and gardens	2.28	1.63
Restaurant/farmhouse with friends/relatives	3.47	1.54
Pubs/clubs/discos	3.30	1.72

Source: Authors' elaboration.

As reported in Table 5, the sample primarily relies on personal transportation to access leisure activities and services. While automobile usage prevails (4.52), public transport (1.75) and bicycles (1.65) are marginal options. This is largely due to the insufficient availability of infrastructure and collective transport systems (Table 6). Notably, limited and inflexible schedules (3.99) and the paucity of public transport services nearby (3.80) are significant barriers to accessing more distant services and activities. The absence of adequate connections may influence the daily choices of young people and their involvement in social and cultural interactions by directing them towards easily accessible initiatives (Bernard, 2019). It further increases the risk of social isolation, reducing opportunities for individuals lacking a car to access educational, professional, and recreational experiences (Székely and Novotný, 2022).

Table 5. Means of transport used to access services and leisure activities- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Cars	4.52	1.41
Motorcycle/scooter	1.70	2.64
Bicycle	1.65	1.88
On foot	3.03	1.73
Bus/public transport	1.75	2.66
Sharing travel with friends/relatives	2.91	1.81

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table 6. Barriers to accessing services and leisure activities related to mobility and transportation- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Limited and/or inflexible public transport schedules	3.99	1.59
Absence/shortage of public transport services near my municipality	3.80	1.64
Absence/shortage of parking near services/leisure activities	2.87	1.71
Absence/shortage of bicycle lanes	3.30	1.84
Absence/shortage of shared transport services (car sharing, etc.)	3.23	1.86

Source: Authors' elaboration.

### 4.3. Community engagement and participation in local initiatives

The young respondents feel part of the community in which they live (3.29) (Table 7) and demonstrate a greater interest in participating in environmental (2.46), tourist (2.35) and artistic-cultural (2.33) events in the territory (Table 8). However, the low mean values might reflect a perception of limited provision or lack of local initiatives, which hinder a broader engagement among the young population. The scarcity of events and exhibitions (3.58) and the lack of places of socialization and interest (3.41) emerge, in fact, as central concerns (Table 9). This suggests that current initiatives still fail to fully respond to the needs and expectations of younger generations in the ABPA area.

Table 7. Community engagement and interpersonal ties – Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
I live in a community I feel part of, characterised by strong interpersonal ties among people living in it	3.29	1.65
I live in a community where, apart from family and friends, I have no strong relationships or ties with others	2.49	2.18
I live in a community to which I do not feel I belong, where individuals prioritise their interests over the common good	2.39	2.11

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 8. Participation in activities organised by local associations or groups- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Artistic and cultural	2.33	2.59
Environment and nature	2.46	2.51
Tourism	2.35	2.11
Political, party or trade union-related	1.65	1.43
Humanitarian or social	2.27	2.09
Youth or student-related	2.19	2.11
Youth forum and council	1.65	1.47
Local cultural association	2.16	2.64
Youth center	1.74	1.14

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 9. Perceived issues within the ABPA area- Likert Scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Lack of places for social interaction and points of interest	3.41	2.10
Scarcity of events and exhibitions	3.58	1.62
Lack of personal and collective services	3.45	1.54
Distant to access services	3.31	1.69
Scarcity of green areas	2.11	2.53
Excessive noise	1.69	1.73
Excessive traffic	1.70	1.78
Lack of parking spaces	2.39	2.55
Poor maintenance of roads, public spaces, and buildings	3.35	2.03
Lack of public safety	2.47	2.13

Source: Authors' elaboration.

#### 4.4. Enhancing tourism in the ABPA area

Tourism in peripheral areas offers significant development opportunities, due to their natural and cultural heritage (Ivona et al., 2021). According to the young individuals under investigation, several activities and services are important to promote and foster the attractiveness of the territory (Table 10). These include infrastructure (4.38), accommodation facilities (4.29), and communication and promotion strategies (4.28). Additionally, the accessibility of services to people with disabilities (4.27), trail systems (4.26) and artistic and cultural events (4.25) are other important areas of intervention. For instance, providing well-marked trails could enhance the natural landscape of PAs and enrich the tourist experience, creating a strong relationship between visitors and the local area (Beltramo et al., 2021). Nevertheless, actions aimed at improving the tourist offer need to be strengthened. In particular, Table 11 indicates the need to focus on infrastructural aspects (4.30), communication and promotion activities (4.18), accessibility (4.11) and artistic-cultural initiatives (4.08). This emphasizes the importance of defining an integrated strategy that combines the accessibility of the territory with the effective promotion of local resources, fostering sustainable and inclusive tourism (Di Bella et al., 2019).

Table 10. Importance of the following activities and services for the promotion of tourism in the ABPA area- Likert scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Accommodation facilities (overnight stay / food and beverage outlets, etc.)	4.29	1.36
Handcrafts	3.62	1.85
Cultural and artistic events/initiatives	4.25	1.33
Food and wine events/initiatives	4.22	2.15
Infrastructure (roads, connections, transport, etc.)	4.38	1.28
Accessibility of services for people with disabilities	4.27	1.68
Flexibility in opening hours	3.92	1.41
New territorial networks (associations for the promotion and protection of the area, etc.)	3.92	1.86
Spaces for open-air activities (sports, picnics, etc.)	4.08	1.40
Marked/ maintained trails for trekking, hiking, walking, etc.	4.26	1.37
Bicycle lanes	3.84	1.52
Communication and promotion activities	4.28	1.35

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 11. Enhancement of the following activities and services for the promotion of tourism in the ABPA area- Likert scale 1-5

	Mean	St. dev.
Accommodation facilities (overnight stay / food and beverage outlets, etc.)	4.01	1.81
Handcrafts	3.61	1.84
Cultural and artistic events/initiatives	4.08	1.85
Food and wine events/initiatives	4.00	1.77
Infrastructure (roads, connections, transport, etc.)	4.30	1.34
Accessibility of services for people with disabilities	4.11	1.71
Flexibility in opening hours	3.75	1.52
New territorial networks (associations for the promotion and protection of the area, etc.)	3.88	1.43
Spaces for open-air activities (sports, picnics, etc.)	3.80	1.98
Marked/ maintained trails for trekking, hiking, walking, etc.	3.88	1.87
Bicycle lanes	3.79	2.09
Communication and promotion activities	4.18	1.37

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## 5. Discussions

The research findings highlight the centrality of the tourism and services sector in the development process of the ABPA area. Two basic directions emerge from the analysis of development priorities: (i) the need to strengthen infrastructures and essential services to improve the quality of local life; and (ii) the potential of youth entrepreneurship linked to tourism and cultural activities as a driver of economic and social growth (Korsgaard et al., 2015a; Roundy, 2019). In this specific scenario, tourism is seen as an opportunity to enhance territorial resources and differentiate the local economic offer, but this requires an integrated approach that combines infrastructure investments with promotion and innovation initiatives (García-Delgado et al., 2020). In fact, the strong attachment of young residents to their territories and their interest in tourism-related initiatives reflect a form of “embedded entrepreneurship” (Korsgaard et al., 2015b), where economic activities are deeply intertwined with local identity and social relations. This lends support to the notion that peripheral areas have the capacity to instigate endogenous development processes when local actors – most notably younger generations – are empowered to transform territorial capital into entrepreneurial opportunities. Moreover, these results serve to reinforce the notion of territorial embeddedness as a catalyst for local regeneration, thereby establishing a linkage between the micro-level of individual entrepreneurial intentions and the macro-level of regional development dynamics (Wright et al., 2022; Bacq et al., 2022).

The leisure habits and mobility patterns of young residents highlight the difficulty of accessing leisure and cultural services, which are largely concentrated in urban centers. Dependence on private transport and deficiencies in public services are significant barriers to active participation in the social and cultural life of the community. These findings confirm the need to improve integrated mobility solutions (such as car sharing or on-demand transport) and infrastructure connections to reduce feelings of marginalization and promote social interaction, fostering a sense of belonging and participation in local initiatives (Bernard, 2019; Székely and Novotný, 2022). This is consistent with the literature that associates social capital, collective identity and local collaboration with the resilience of inner areas (Pugh and Dubois, 2021; Vendemmia and Lanza, 2022). The limited participation of youth in community activities, despite their high sense of belonging, reveals a discrepancy between potential and realization, which resonates with the challenges delineated in theories of rural innovation and social entrepreneurship (Huggins and Thompson, 2015; Bacq et al., 2022). It is therefore essential to strengthen horizontal cooperation and institutional support to transform this latent potential into tangible socio-economic outcomes. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing that

youth-driven entrepreneurship can act as a bridge between social cohesion and local development (Teti, 2022; Splendiani et al., 2023).

Results highlight that participation in community activities among young people is limited, despite a relatively high sense of community belonging. The perceived scarcity of events, the lack of dedicated spaces, and the limited supply of cultural and tourism initiatives further emerge as critical elements that hinder greater local inclusion and activism. This perception suggests a lack of coordination between local actors (public and private) and the absence of collaborative networks, which prevent the creation of an attractive and dynamic cultural and tourist offering. However, extant literature highlights the pivotal role of social networks and collaboration between public and private actors as mechanisms to enhance participation and entrepreneurial dynamism in peripheral areas (Korsgaard et al., 2015b; Mahon and Hyyryläinen, 2019; Bacq et al., 2022).

In the context of tourism enhancement, there is an imperative to develop an integrated offer, encompassing adequate accommodation facilities, well-organized tourist routes and effective communication. Consistent with prior research (Beltramo et al., 2021), the interviewees recognize the importance of infrastructure and territorial promotion as key elements to attract visitors and stimulate new entrepreneurial initiatives. However, the lack of adequate services and an effective territorial marketing strategy risk limiting the region's attractive potential (Di Bella et al., 2019), as emerged for the ABPA area. Overall, the results suggest that a coordinated action between local stakeholders, policy makers and entrepreneurs is crucial to enhance tourism as a development driver.

According to the findings, given the potential of the ABPA area in terms of natural, cultural, and landscape resources, as well as the emergence of a strong bond between the local community and entrepreneurial initiatives, the "lifestyle entrepreneurship" model identified by Splendiani et al. (2023) along the Via Francigena could also serve as a useful reference point for this context. Entrepreneurs motivated by personal passions and strong local roots can generate forms of social innovation and contribute to the creation of more resilient and sustainable local business networks. This approach, based on lifestyle choices rather than profit objectives, could stimulate the enhancement of local resources and promote more authentic and participatory tourism, in line with the sustainable development objectives of peripheral areas.

In fact, the development of a collaborative and inclusive tourism model, capable of integrating the diverse needs of young people and promoting local resources, is essential for overcoming barriers to active participation and youth entrepreneurship.

## 6. Conclusions and implications

The present study contributes to the expansion of understanding of how youth engagement and sense of place can serve as key dimensions in models of socio-economic development of inner areas. By empirically illustrating the connection between attachment to place, perceived infrastructural deficiencies, and entrepreneurial motivation, it integrates existing frameworks on rural entrepreneurship and place-based development (Korsgaard et al., 2015a; Barca et al., 2014). In particular, this research sets out to explore the perceptions and perspectives of young residents in the ABPA area with regard to their involvement in the economic and tourism development of the region. The results confirm that tourism and services represent key sectors for the revitalization of the area, but they also highlight structural challenges that must be addressed in order to foster greater involvement of the youth population and sustainable growth.

The results identified infrastructural deficiencies and restricted accessibility to services as the principal critical issues, which have a detrimental effect on the quality of life and economic opportunities available. The scarcity of adequate public transport and the necessity to travel to urban centers to access essential goods and services have the effect of diminishing the attractiveness of peripheral areas for the younger generation. Concurrently, the perceived paucity of cultural events and social interaction spaces curbs the active involvement of young people in the local community, thereby reducing opportunities for interaction and the development of entrepreneurial projects. This aligns with prior research on PAs (Mahon and Hyyryläinen, 2019; Székely and Novotný, 2022), confirming the urgent need for public and private interventions enhancing mobility solutions, local amenities, and cultural and social infrastructure to retain young populations, stimulate community engagement, and create a more dynamic environment for innovation and entrepreneurship. Indeed, the area's growth potential is significant. Young residents show a strong sense of belonging to the area and a growing interest in sustainable development models based on the valorization of local natural, cultural and gastronomic resources. As suggested by Korsgaard et al. (2015b) and Bacq et al. (2022), the promotion of experiential tourism and youth entrepreneurship initiatives can be an important lever to counter depopulation and strengthen the local economic fabric.

The implications for public policy suggest the need for integrated strategies that combine infrastructure improvements, enhanced public services and incentives for youth entrepreneurship. In particular, policymakers should prioritise investment in accessible and reliable transport systems, recognising that mobility is essential to enable young residents to participate in cultural and tourist activities and access job opportunities. Furthermore,

the development of flexible and innovative services, such as on-demand transport or community mobility initiatives, could effectively address the critical issues of access to mobility that have emerged in the ABPA area. To support youth entrepreneurship, targeted financial instruments, mentoring programmes and business incubators specifically designed for the tourism sector should be implemented. These initiatives could help overcome the lack of confidence and entrepreneurial skills that often discourage young people from starting new businesses. Furthermore, greater coordination between institutions, businesses and local communities is essential to foster a more favourable environment for growth, in which tourism is not only an economic factor but also a tool for strengthening the social and cultural capital of peripheral areas. (Di Bella et al., 2019). In this context, it is also important to invest in strategic communication of the area's potential, promoting its natural, cultural and landscape resources through local marketing campaigns, events and participatory initiatives involving young people and local stakeholders. Finally, participatory governance mechanisms that actively involve young people in decision-making processes related to tourism and local development would empower them and ensure that policies are truly aligned with their needs and aspirations.

In conclusion, the future of ABPA depends on the ability to enhance local resources through a participatory and sustainable approach. The engagement of younger generations can play a crucial role in this process, but this requires targeted interventions that facilitate their active involvement and the creation of concrete opportunities for the development of the territory.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study enhances the extant literature on the socio-economic development of peripheral regions by substantiating the assertion that entrepreneurship in such contexts is not merely an economic phenomenon, but rather a socially embedded process. The evidence collected serves to reinforce the theoretical link between place attachment and entrepreneurial embeddedness, demonstrating that the sense of belonging and community participation exhibited by young people can act as catalysts for local regeneration. This contributes to extending the frameworks proposed by Barca et al. (2014) and Korsgaard et al. (2015b), providing empirical support for the idea that territorial capital can be mobilised through youth-driven initiatives and socially oriented entrepreneurship. Furthermore, by situating the findings within the perspective of sustainable and inclusive development, the study advances the debate on the multidimensional nature of rural innovation, suggesting that future research should further investigate the interplay between social, cultural, and economic dimensions of entrepreneurship in rural areas.

Although the paper offers interesting insights into youth entrepreneurship in tourism in peripheral areas, the study presents some limitations. First, the exclusive focus on the peripheral ABPA area precludes the

generalisability of the findings to other peripheral areas characterised by different socio-economic contexts. Future studies could include different peripheral areas in the analysis in order to identify similarities and differences in the entrepreneurial development opportunities of these territories. Furthermore, while the quantitative survey was able to provide a clear overview of the phenomenon under investigation, it would be useful in the future to supplement the analysis with qualitative methodologies (e.g., in-depth interviews or focus groups). This combined approach would allow for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and institutional dynamics that influence youth entrepreneurship, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of development processes in peripheral areas.

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