

Reframing Rural Tourism in Rural Studies: A Bibliometric Analysis and Recent Trends of Two Decades of Research

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Abstract

Rural tourism is an important subject of tourism research in that it not only brings socio-cultural enrichment but also economic benefit to rural communities and brings authentic experience of heritage and nature to urban visitors. Despite the increasing importance of it, the literature is fragmented, and there have been few attempts to draw the different perspectives into an integrated conception. This study attempts to examine and synthesize the existing research on rural tourism to map its intellectual journey, thematic trajectory and future paths. A PRISMA-registered bibliometric review was completed alongside science mapping and qualitative content analysis. Bibliometric methods were used to investigate scientific output, most influential journals, co-citation and co-occurrence of keywords and international co-authorship networks. Theme synthesis was further carried out for the purpose of making a more comprehensive understanding of dominant research clusters and conceptual gaps. Findings reveal six key thematic areas consisting of ethnicity, ecology, communal, growth, strategy and intervention that reflect the multidisciplinary and dynamic character of rural tourism scholarship. The review also highlights a rising interest in sustainability, entrepreneurship and technological innovation, while identifying gaps in longitudinal studies, governance perspectives and integration of smart tourism practices. Overall, this study contributes because it brings together two decades of rural tourism literature into a comprehensive framework from which theory can be informed, policy can be guided, and sustainable development in rural destinations can be supported.

Keywords: Rural tourism, science mapping, sustainable tourism, community development, Tourism Management

1. Introduction:

Tourism has been traditionally considered as an option to get out of routines to rediscover nature and culture (Towner & Wall, 1991; Walton, 2009). The World Tourism Organization has defined a tourist as one who makes a trip, stays outside his/her usual environment for more than twenty-four hours and less than a year continuously, for personal or business purposes, or for leisure, or for other non-remunerative activities (butler, 2015). While there are different types of tourism - leisure, adventure and religious tourism (Maria et al., 2015) - this study concentrates specifically on rural tourism.

According to Sharpley and Sharpley (1997) rural tourism provides the respite of monotonous urban life and relocates people in touch with ancestral links and cultural heritage. Rural destinations offer a chance to rest, relax and soak up a different pace of life and they also support the socio-economic development of host communities (Lane, 1994a). From both a philosophical and economic standpoint, rural tourism is being recognized more and more as a source of community well-being and local economic resilience.

Yet, despite this importance, the field is still fragmented, in that there has been little integration of theoretical and applied views from different disciplinary traditions. To fill this gap, the current study aims to chart existing rural tourism literature, outline common themes and outline emerging research opportunities with the potential to guide future academic and policy directions.

Following this aim of the literature, present study conducts a bibliomatrix analysis of the literature followed by the science mapping and thematic representation of the chosen literature derived from the inclusion and exclusion criteria adding the limitations and future scope the domain demands.

2. Background of the study

2.1 Rural Studies:

Rural tourism is located in the crossroad of rural studies and tourism management. Although studies of rural regions have been done in developed countries, tourism research has paid little attention to the field (Deavers 1992). Rural research develops tools that explain the rural world from the bottom up (Jones, 1995), a perspective that has been largely neglected within the mainstream tourism literature. In order to fill this gap, the present study highlights the relevance of rural studies as a basis for the comprehension of rural tourism. Historically, rural populations are considered marginal categories in policy and research (McManus et al., 2012). Yet, these communities have always proved resourceful in their community-based and participative approaches to marketing (Modi, 2009), tourism (Wijijayanti et al., 2020), and development. More recent scholarship is a cultural shift that places rural populations at the center of the social science discourse rather than on the margins (Cloke 1997).

This movement has given rise to theoretical and territorial appropriation of rural spaces, societies and cultures. Among the three leading approaches to rural studies (modernist, political economy, and postmodernist, see Murdoch & Pratt 1993), rural tourism is most closely associated with the political economy approach. This new methodology looks at the ways agricultural economies are incorporated into capitalist economies (Davies, 2006), emphasizing the complex factors that affect developments in rural areas (Heley and Jones 2012). The commodification of rural landscapes as cultural and experiential commodities has enabled the development of rural tourism (Castle, 1998) which has a direct impact on local economies through employment, infrastructure and multiplier effects. This reflects the need for more genuine and systematic study that can inform the sustainable development of the domain.

2.2 Rural Tourism:

Rural tourism is a vehicle for the formation of identity and a vehicle for cultural innovation. It is not only a source of leisure but also a manifestation of human creativity and adaptation (Hjalager et al. 2018a; Polukhina et al. 2021). For example, there are technological innovations such as the Japanese Shinkansen that was inspired by the kingfisher's natural diving mechanism due to its design in rural environments. In this sense, rural tourism is not only an industry, but an asset that maintains cultural memory and transmits knowledge from one generation to another (Martinez et al., 2019).

Indeed, through its cultural dimensions, rural tourism allows people to interact between the urban and rural areas. Such exchanges result in economic empowerment, knowledge transfer and lifestyle enrichment (Prince, 2017). Rural destinations are thus not only sites of consumption - they are also cultural forums and socio-economic integration forums. The effects of rural tourism are multidimensional and affect the environment, residents and visitors creating a concept that includes the whole. For children, this is a chance to connect with nature; for adults, an experience of cultural rediscovery; and for the older generations, a reconnection with heritage and tradition (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Rural tourism is placed within this layered experience as a holistic form of engagement, which includes recreation, identity and sustainability.

2.2.1 Literature of Rural Tourism:

Literature of rural tourism has evolved through the contributions of management, commerce, and economics. Rural tourism was defined in preliminary studies based on rural management (Hall et al. n.d.), sustainable development (Simkova 2007), stakeholder management (Kayat 2008), and eco-friendly practices. Over time, the research has been extended to cover the study of consumer behaviour (Roberts et al., 2004), business operations (Ryglóva, 2007) and state-owned infrastructure construction (Wilson et al., 2001).

Later, the scope has been extended to include customer satisfaction, resident and tourist loyalty, and interpersonal trust in rural tourism experience (Li et al., 2016). Concepts like place attachment (Huang et al., 2016), culinary tourism and the importance of cuisine for cultural identity have also become prominent. Much of this research was first generated in Western and Eastern Europe (Mura & Klucknick, 2018), and then took hold in Asia and elsewhere.

Some of the recent studies focus on marketing strategy (Pato et al., 2017), technological use (Pencheva, 2016), and financial accessibility for rural enterprises (Badulescu et al., n.d.). Entrepreneurship - in particular social and rural entrepreneurship - has become a key issue (Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2018). This parallel has been complemented by new marketing possibilities such as green marketing (Chin et al., 2018), marketing through social media and community partnerships (Rocca & Zielinski, 2022).

Currently, the research of rural tourism intensifies the interest in the quality of a destination, cognitive factors, and modern promotional strategies (supranational branding, word-of-mouth, and smart tourism) (Sustacha et al., 2024). This change is a response to the industry's attempt to adapt to global challenges while upgrading its contribution to sustainable regional development.

3. Gap of the study:

Even with the continuous proliferation of studies in rural tourism, review studies are dispersed and narrow in scope. The first bibliometric analysis in this area has been published in Turkish by Bozok et al. (2017), which has provided a first insight, but has not been seen internationally. Later on, Ng (2022) undertook a bibliometric review that dealt exclusively with mountain tourism, limiting its generalizability. More recently, Saravanan and Sundara Rajan (2024) presented a review in the *Journal of Multidisciplinary Review* which underlines the need for more detailed analysis of co-authorship networks, thematic associations, and structural connections. Looking at the rural tourism from various standpoints, several review papers were published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on concepts of entrepreneurship (Utami et al., 2023), culture (Tang & Xu, 2023), agriculture (Ferreira & Martin, 2020), circular economy (Rodriguez et al., 2020), technology (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020), and resident's perception (Lulu et al., 2024). However, only eight of these were published in Business, Management and Accounting journals and only one - Thirumalesh Madanaguli et al. (2021) was published in an ABDC A-category outlet. This suggests that research in rural tourism continues to be underrepresented in high impact management journals.

In addition, previous reviews have tended to be hampered by narrow data sets, short periods of time, and a lack of interdisciplinary engagement. However, most have focused on specific contexts or sub-domains, thus providing gaps in longitudinal analysis and cross-disciplinary synthesis. This research aims to remedy these shortcomings by increasing the period of review, expanding the dataset, and placing rural tourism in the intersection of rural studies and tourism management (Malanski et al. 2021). In so doing it adds a more complete mapping of the domain and points the way towards areas of research into the future.

4. Aim of the Study

With the identified gaps in mind, the present study seeks to contribute to available literature on rural tourism in an integral manner by combining bibliometric analysis with the science mapping and thematic analysis. The aim is to widen the scope of existing reviews both with regard to temporal scale and methodological rigour, and to produce insights that can inform future research and practice in the domain.

Specifically, this study sets out the following research objectives:

- **RO1:** To explore the trends in the scientific production of rural tourism scholarship, highlighting its growth trajectory, thematic focus, and regional distribution.
- **RO2:** To determine the intellectual structure of rural tourism research through co-citation, co-occurrence, and co-authorship analyses, thereby identifying the most influential contributions and collaborations in the field.

- **RO3:** To generate thematic clusters from the reviewed literature, critically analyze their contributions, and identify conceptual and practical gaps that require future investigation.

By responding to these aims, the study places rural tourism within a larger academic and managerial context, connecting its relationships and interlinking with rural studies (Malanski et al., 2021), and furthering its profile publication in high impact journals. In addition to bringing together a fragmented body of scholarship, the review provides a way forward for a sustainable and inclusive rural tourism research agenda for the future.

5. Methodology

The methodology in this bibliometric literature review is situated within a mixed-method approach in order to contribute a comprehensive understanding of rural tourism scholarship. The research design has three phases: systematic literature search, bibliometric analysis and qualitative thematic synthesis. At first, the database was developed according to the PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009a). Peer-reviewed journal articles were obtained from the Scopus database, that is considered the most comprehensive database for social sciences and management research (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The search strategy used key words such as tourist, travellers, rural tourism, sustainable travel, community-based tourism, rural destination, rural residents. This ensured wide coverage of literature relevant to rural tourism from the conceptual, managerial and socio-cultural aspects. Second, the bibliometric analysis was performed with Biblioshiny in R (Jia et al., 2018; Srisusilawati et al., 2021). This step gave us an idea of the number of publications, citation trends and most cited journals. Third, the science mapping techniques were implemented using VOSviewer (Ghorbani, 2024), which could be used to visualize the intellectual structure of the field. Specifically, the co-citation, co-occurrence and co-authorship analyses were carried out to show the connections among authors, themes, and institutions. Finally, to add to the quantitative mapping, a qualitative content analysis was performed. This approach enabled to identify six dominant themes and a critical interpretation of how rural tourism literature has evolved, where it stands and where future inquiry should be directed.

6. Search of the literature

The research obtained peer-reviewed journal articles on rural tourism from the Scopus database, which is known globally as the most comprehensive database of management and social sciences literature (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The search was conducted according to PRISMA recommendations (Moher et al., 2009b), which ensures the transparency and replicability of the search procedure. Keywords were chosen so as to reflect the scope of the domain and its development.

Query topic: "Tourist" or "Travellers" and "Rural" or "Rural Travel" or "Sustainable Travel" or "Rural Tourism" or "Community Based Tourism" or "Rural Destination" or "Rural Community" or "Rural Residents"

This search initially identified 6,515 articles. The database was progressively refined by identification, screening and inclusion phases using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) process.

6.1. Paper inclusion and exclusion criteria

In order to achieve rigour and relevance, the study conducted a structured set of inclusion and exclusion criteria guided by the PRISMA framework. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2000 and 2025 were included. Subject areas were limited to Social Sciences, Business, Management & Accounting, Arts & Humanities and Economics because the disciplines offer direct knowledge of socio-economic and cultural aspects of rural tourism. Further, only articles published in A and A+ journals listed in the ABDC were retained in order to ensure quality and credibility. Studies published in non-peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, book chapters or those published in a language other than English were excluded. Duplicate records were deleted during

screening. This resulted in a final dataset of 571 journal articles which formed the basis for bibliometric analysis, science mapping and thematic synthesis.

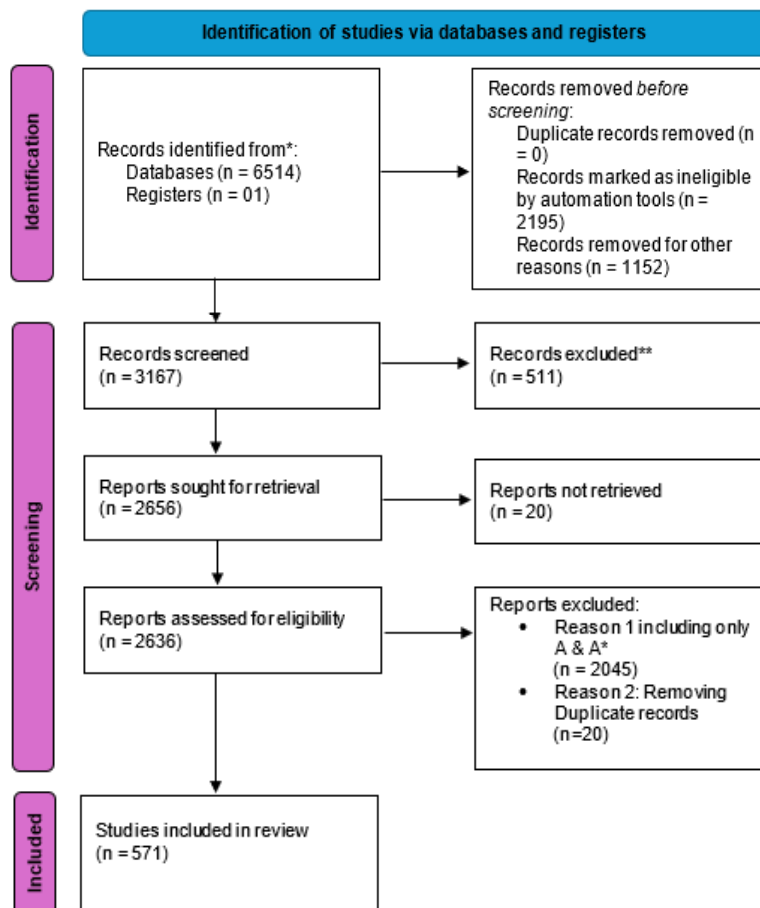


Figure: 01

7. Results of the Study

The result of this study has been arranged in a way through three sections. The section A describes the bibliometric statistics which were as scientific production and most relevant journal sources. The section B present the Science mapping of the included literature and lastly section C showcases the generated themes, limitations, future scope and conclusion of the study.

7.1. Scientific production:

The given figure presents The bibliometric analysis identified four different periods in the scientific production of rural tourism literature in the period 2000-2025.

The first period (2000-2010) resulted in around 135 publications, which form the basis of rural tourism research. Research in this time frame is most commonly concerned with conceptualization of the field; topics include rural cultural economies (Kneafsey, 2001), the role of rural tourism in agriculture (Fleischer et al., 2005), community-based tourism (Kibicho, 2008a), transportation issues (Dickinson et al., 2009), and niche markets such as wine tourism (Alonso et al., 2008).



Figure: 2

The second phase (2011-2015) captured 112 publications, which focused on sustainability (Park et al., 2011), tourist experience (Kastenholz et al., 2012), market orientation (Polo Pena et al., 2013), consumer behaviour (Kim & Park, 2014), and significance of ICT adoption in the rural destination (Gossling et al., 2015).

The third phase (2016-2020) was characterized by constant growth with 140 articles. Some of the research areas in this period are governance frameworks (Cheng et al., 2016), stakeholder management (Alonso & Nyanjom, 2017), innovation (Hjalager et al., 2018b), entrepreneurship (Yachin, 2019a), and value-based approaches to rural tourism (Su et al., 2020).

Phase IV (2021-2025) was the most productive phase with 169 articles published and expanded the field in its theoretical and practical scope. Focus was put on marketing approaches (Kim et al., 2021; Paulino et al., 2021), product advertising (Tsang et al., 2022), green consumption (Chen et al., 2023), authenticity in rural experiences (Zhao et al., 2024), as well as new discussions on virtual and metaverse applications (Paolo et al., 2025).

Overall, the trajectory of research on rural tourism indicates thematic diversification and an increase in academic interest, indicating the field's growing salience in the discourses of tourism management and regional development.

7.2. Most Relevant Journal Sources

The analysis of journal sources showed the ten most prolific sources publishing on rural tourism in the period 2000-2025 (Fig. 2). Taken together, these journals reflect both the disciplinary extent and the growing acceptance of rural tourism as a legitimate field of scholarly study.

Among which six journals were placed in the ABDC A category, four journals were placed in the ABDC A category, which can reflect the slow penetration of rural tourism research to the high-quality channels. The Journal of Sustainable Tourism (Collins & Potoglou, 2019; Kumar & Chandra, 2024; Ma et al., 2024), Tourism Management (Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, & Jaafar, 2017a; Su et al., 2018a) and Tourism Geographies (Sadeghloo et al., 2024; Saxena et al., 2007a) were the most significant contributors. Taken together these three journals represented the largest share of publications in the field.

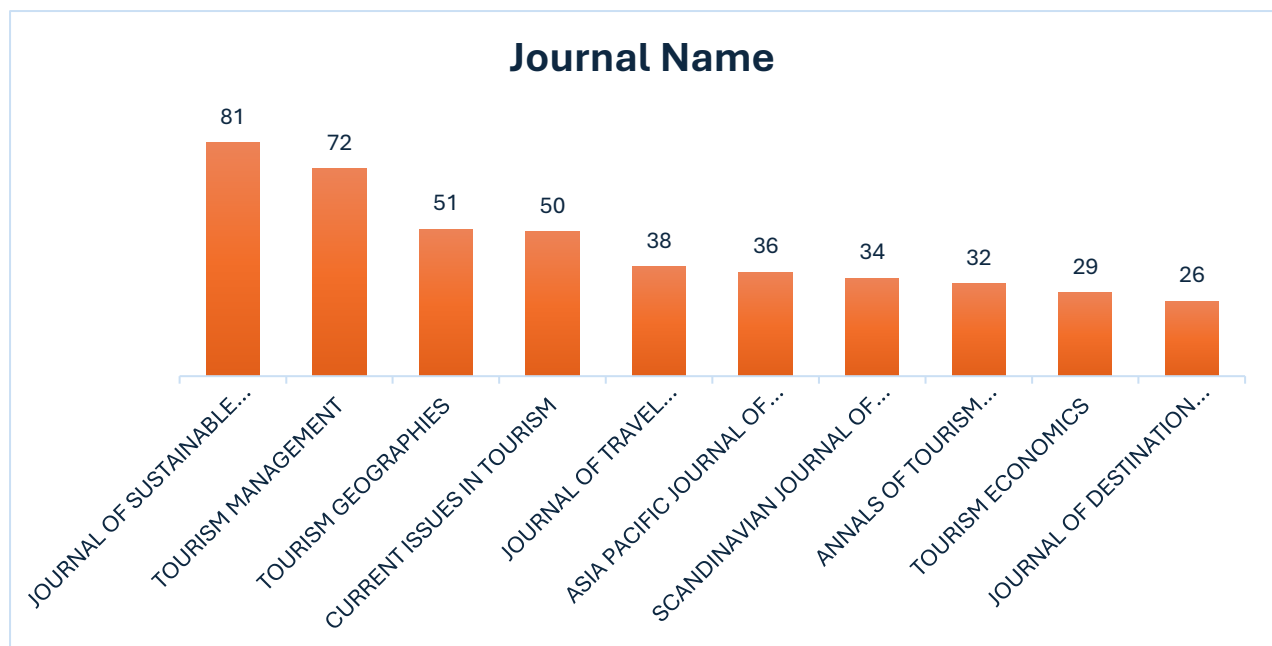


Figure: 3

In addition to environmental journals, other relevant outlets were hospitality focused journals as well as journals dedicated to regional development, remembering the interdisciplinary nature of rural tourism research. The distribution of publications in related fields reflects the fact that rural tourism is not restricted to niche journals but is progressively repositioned in mainstream tourism and management research.

7.3 Co-citation analysis

Based on the received stats and above generated figure from Vosviewer software data, the co-citation analysis gave the link representation of the literatures in 5 clusters. These five clusters were obtained by applying the criteria of, “*minimum 50 citation of the author*”, which results in the acceptance of the 83 authors meeting the threshold out of 31175 authors of the database of 2636 literature.

The co-citation analysis (Fig. 4) gives a detailed picture of the intellectual structure of rural tourism research by visualising the frequency with which authors are cited together in the corpus of literature. Using a minimum of 50 citations as criteria, we have identified 83 influential authors out of 31,175 contributors and formed five different clusters. These clusters will highlight the thematic scope and intellectual traditions of the field.

Cluster 1 represents the historical and conceptual underpins of rural tourism, and includes 26 authors with an average of 117 citations and 76 co-citation links. Getz & Carlsen (2005), Hall (2005), Sharpley (2002), Lane (1994b), Wall (Qin et al., 2012) Mainly concerned with tourism development in peripheral areas, the cluster is also concerned with rural communities, cultural heritage and the dynamics of tourism development. Research here highlights the multiple ways in which rural tourism can be both an instrument for community empowerment and a means of economic diversification. Especially those of Lane (1994b) and Sharpley (2002) are foundational in conceptualising rural tourism as a unique tourism form, which integrates sustainability, culture and local participation.

Cluster 2 includes 16 authors and an average number of 72 citations and 79 connections and is characterized by a focus on social and community perspectives in rural tourism. Notable contributors include Andereck & McGehee (2004), Boley (Strzelecka et al., 2017), and Ramkissoon (Temiz et al., 2024). Research in this cluster is focused on resident perceptions, host-guest relations, and community perceptions of tourism. A dominant theme of this cluster is the focus upon social exchange theory which addresses how residents appraise tourism based upon the

perceived costs and benefits. The award acknowledges the role that community support plays in the long-term viability of rural tourism, and shows how attitudes and place attachment influence both acceptance and resistance.

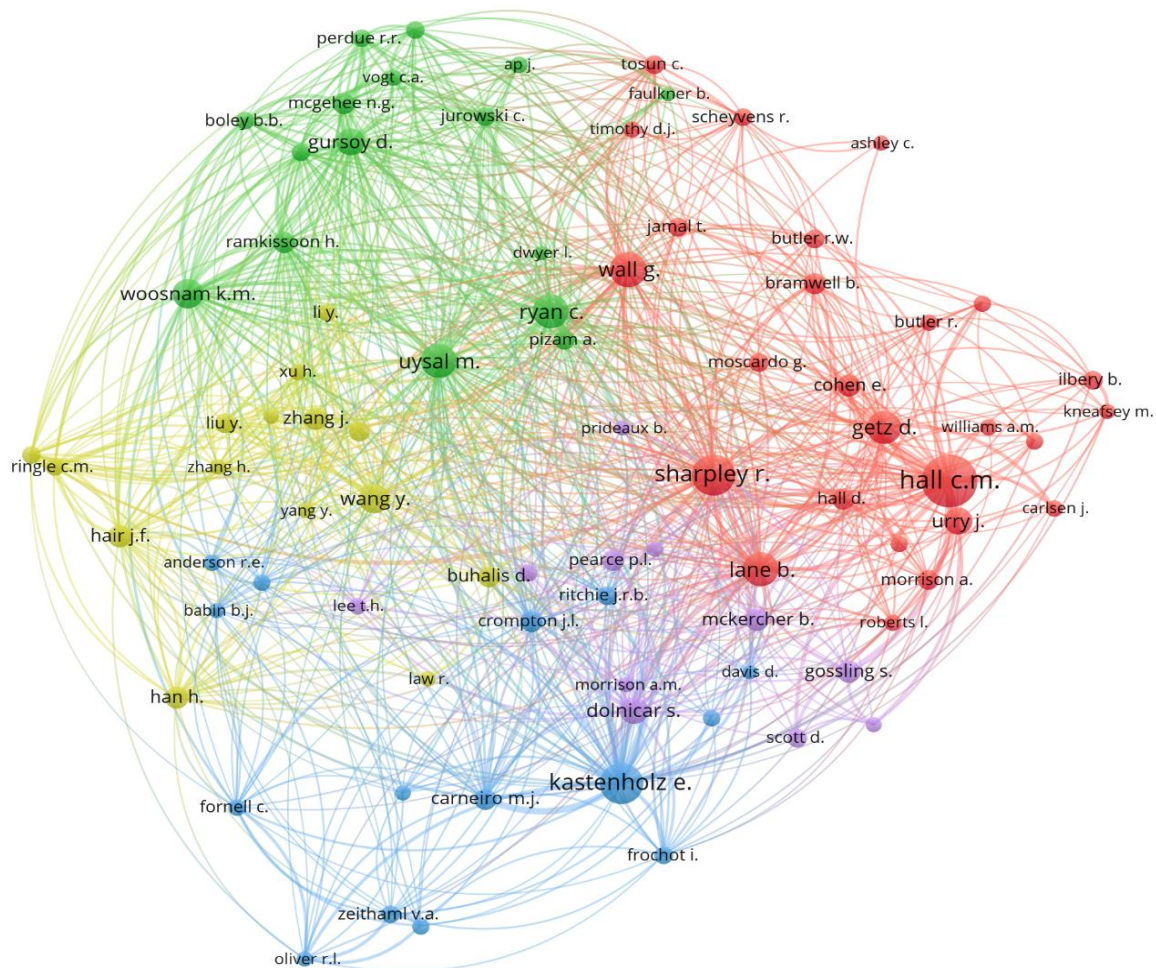


Figure: 04

Cluster 3 is comprised of 15 authors: Kastenholtz (2005), Carneiro et al. (2015), Fleischer & Tchetchik (2005), Frochot (2005), etc. With an average of 80 links this cluster is dedicated to the concept of experience economy and macroeconomic dimensions of rural tourism. Key themes include the economic contribution of tourism to rural regions, the nature of the domestic tourism market and the experiences of rural tourism. For instance, Fleischer and Tchetchik (2005) discussed the role of rural tourism for regional development and Carneiro et al. (2015) highlighted experiential dimensions that affect satisfaction and loyalty. The cluster also penetrates into the policy sphere and offers frameworks for rural tourism governance and strategic planning.

Cluster 4 features the tremendous growth of research from China and other Asian contexts. Such authors as Xu (Huang & Xu, 2022), Zhang (Li et al., 2025), Lee (2022) and Han (Chi & Han, 2021) are at the heart of this cluster. With an average citation score of 72 and 78 links, this cluster highlighted the role of rural tourism in China's economic transformation, sustainability, and community development efforts. The literature exposes how China has emerged as a hotspot of innovation in rural tourism, and provides lessons that could be applied to other places. In addition, the contributions highlight policy creation and residents' behavioural responses, reflecting the incorporation of rural tourism into wider national approaches to rural regeneration.

Cluster 5 covers new and niche issues in rural tourism. The cluster is comprised of 11 authors with an average of 75 citations and 78 links, including authors such as Dickinson & Robbins (2008), Dolnicar (2010), Pearce (Wang et al., 2018) and Lee & Jan (2019). Research topics in this project center on themes of sustainable tourism, farm based tourism, adoption of technology, and opportunities for rural economies. Though in their early stage, these studies provide new insights into the role of new technological developments in rural tourism, the commodification of cultural landscapes and the diversification of rural economies.

Taken together, the five clusters point to the multidimensionality of rural tourism research. They illustrate the development of the field from early conceptualisations and community-based approaches to experiential, economic and policy-oriented approaches, and pull together new themes such as sustainability, technology, and regional development in Asia. Importantly, the co-citation analysis highlights the fact that rural tourism is not a homogeneous field, but rather a multi-disciplinary field with a multiplicity of intellectual traditions. This intellectual mapping helps to signal the balance between continuity, in the form of inspiration by key scholars, and renewal, in the forms of new contributors. It also raises the issue of the growing internationalization of the field with Asian writing taking a more central role in defining present and future research agendas.

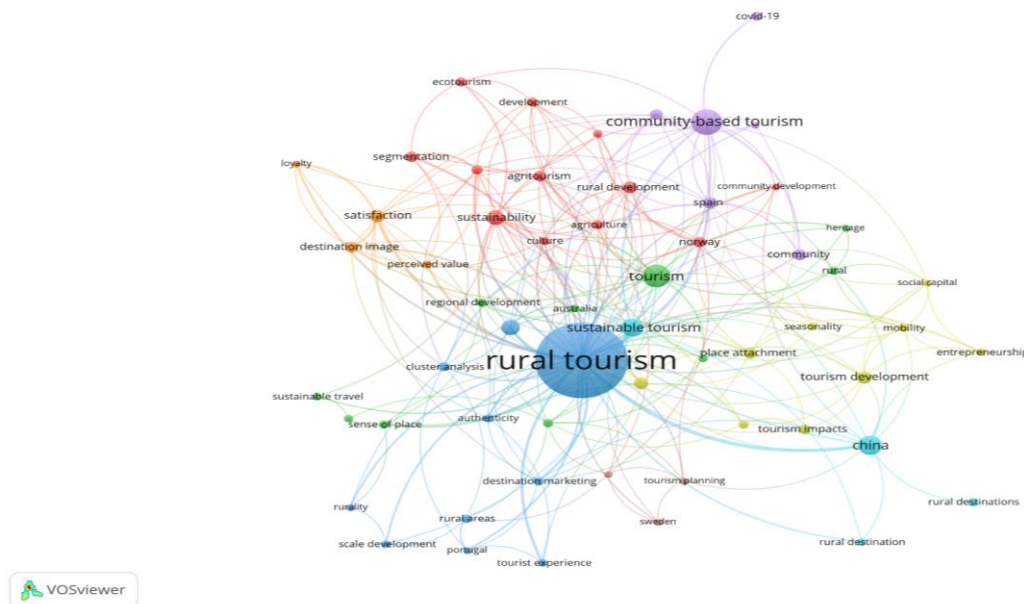


Figure: 5

7.4 Co-occurrence analysis

Following the derivatives of the literature, the coming analysis is of the co-occurrence analysis. The co-occurrence analysis is done on the authors keyword based on the criteria of minimum occurrence of 5 times of authors keyword from the set of 1916 keywords of the chosen data. Applying the mentioned criteria our analysis received 58 keywords of 8 clusters. In these 8 clusters, each cluster describes a meaningful context of the literature which gives the relevance of the themes, ideas and notions in rural tourism throughout this decade.

Co-occurrence analysis (Figure 5) was carried out to analyse the frequency and relationships of authors' keywords, giving information about the conceptual framework of the rural tourism research area. Applying a minimum frequency threshold of five, 58 keywords were detected from a total of 1,916 and were then categorized into eight clusters. These clusters are representative of the prevailing themes and changing directions of the field.

Cluster 1 had 12 keywords, which had an average of nine and 12 link strengths. The most frequent terms were sustainability (Hwang et al., 2012), motivations (Park and Yoon, 2009), agriculture (Su et al., 2019), rural

development (Saxena et al., 2007b), and culture (Sims, 2009). Together, these studies define rural tourism as a tool for sustainable rural development, which frequently overlaps with agritourism (Liang, 2017), food tourism (Everett & Aitchison, 2008) and eco-tourism. The cluster demonstrates the close link between tourism motivations and sustainability agendas more generally.

Cluster 2 focused on communities and governance in rural tourism. Stakeholders (Soulard et al., 2024), regional development (Thulemark et al., 2017), heritage (Xu et al., 2024), sense of place (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014) reflect research on community participation and policy-making. The literature reflects the centrality of stakeholder involvement and heritage conservation to regionalism and tourism development, and also the importance of governance structures.

Cluster 3 (T3) centred on the keyword rural tourism, which appeared 184 times and was the central node for several themes. Related terms were market segmentation (Fernandez-Hernandez et al. 2016), authenticity (Jyotsna & Maurya, 2019), destination marketing (Sykes & Kelly, 2016) and rurality (Meng et al. 2024). This cluster places rural tourism in the context of both research and management. Research has stressed the importance of authenticity as a competitive differentiator, and has explicitly linked marketing strategies to rural identity, reflecting the interrelationship between rural studies and tourism management.

Cluster 4 was devoted to the dynamics of entrepreneurship and development. The popular terms were place attachment (Tuulentie & Heimtun, 2017), mobility (LingXu et al., 2017), tourism development (Ying & Yongguang, 2006), social exchange theory (Huo et al., 2023) and social capital (Zhou et al., 2017). The cluster represents research about the dynamics of linguistic diversity, entrepreneurial opportunities, mobility patterns and local trust as drivers of tourism development. In particular, social exchange theory describes community willingness to support tourism projects as the result of a trade-off between perceived benefits and perceived costs.

Clusters 5 and 6 focused on contextual influences that impact rural tourism. Cluster 5 had keywords including COVID-19 (Li et al., 2022), community-based tourism (Kibicho, 2008b), and wine tourism (Carmichael, 2005) and captured the impact that shocks and niche markets have on rural destinations. Cluster 6 focused in particular on China (Lyu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024) depicting how rural tourism has been integrated within China's rural revitalisation strategies with implications for sustainability, resident behaviour and destination management.

Clusters 7 and 8 were situated along niche and emerging areas. In terms of the micro-level, keywords as tourism planning (Muller, 2006), satisfaction (Loureiro, 2010), loyalty (Murray et al., 2015) and European rural tourism (Camponcerro & Hernandezmoggillan, 2017; Tyrvaainen et al., 2001) express the focus on tourist experiences, and on regional development. These clusters reflect the increasing emphasis on aspects of visitor satisfaction, loyalty building strategies and comparative regional studies in the literature on rural tourism.

In summary, the co-occurrence analysis shows the conceptual richness of rural tourism research. From its initial focus on sustainability to understanding what community development means, the field has broadened to include managerial perspectives, entrepreneurial opportunities, and post-pandemic resilience. The emergence of China as a research center and the increasing interest in niche tourism (wine and agritourism) presage a turn toward global as well as local outlooks. Together, these clusters illustrate the multidimensional development of rural tourism as something which brings together culture, governance, markets and socio-economic development.

B.3 Co-authorship analysis

Co-authorship analysis provides the trends of collaboration among the countries citing their frequency in the context of scientific production. The criteria of the analysis were considered to 25 maximum document collaborated under a country with minimum of 5 scientific production on the chosen topic of discussion. Following this criteria we have received 29 countries into the 5 clusters with 10, 7, 4, 4 & 4 countries in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th cluster respectively.

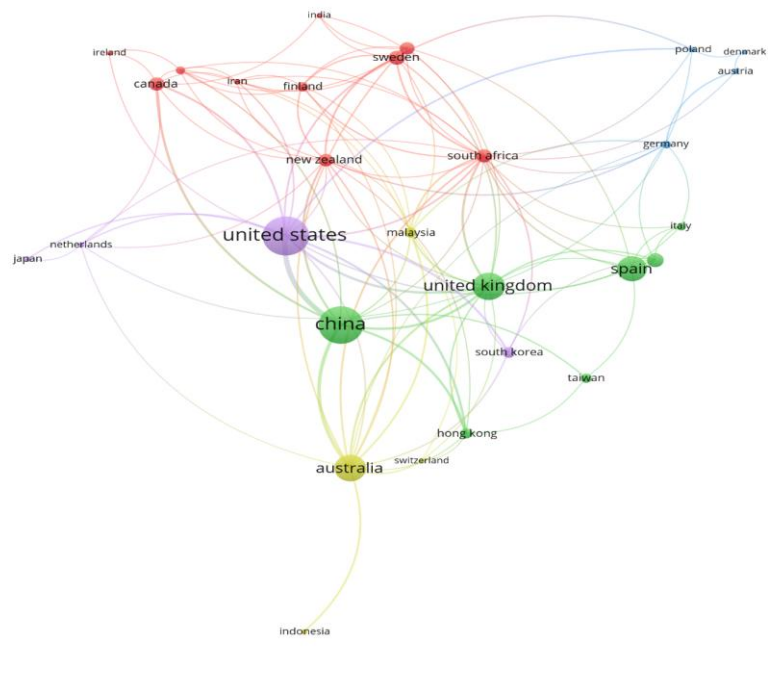


Figure: 06

The co-authorship analysis (Figure 6) outlines the patterns of collaboration in rural tourism research and shows 29 countries that contribute to rural tourism research, grouped into five clusters. These networks represent the global diffusion of knowledges and the scope of internationalised collaboration in the further development of the discipline. Cluster 1, consisting of ten countries, was led by the United States, which became a central hub between several regions (Moayerian & McGehee, 2022; Mottiar et al., 2018). Within this cluster, the intra-cluster ties of South Africa were categorized as strong, with close links between South Africa and France, New Zealand and Sweden (Schilar & Keskitalo, 2018). Cluster 2 consisted of seven countries, with China in the leading position, establishing a large number of collaborations with intra- and inter-cluster partners, especially the USA (Wang et al. 2022). The United Kingdom was also prominent and developed strong ties with Spain and Portugal (Loureiro et al., 2019). Cluster 3 was dominated by Germany, which has served as a mediator between European and international partnerships, especially in the areas of governance and innovation studies (Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, & Jaafar, 2017). Cluster 4 was characterized by Australia, which played an important role in sustainability and destination management research and facilitated cross-border research in Europe and Asia (Ye et al., 2021). Cluster 5 again saw the USA as a broker, connecting with emerging economies to provide the possibilities for the generalisation of rural tourism findings (Dredge & Jamal, 2013).

Overall, there are three trends: the internationalisation of the scholarship on rural tourism, the emergence of China as a centre for research, and the intermediary role of countries such as Germany and Australia within global networks. These partnerships expand areas of knowledge, diversify approaches, and strengthen rural tourism as a uniquely global field of research.

Theoretical Contribution

This bibliometric review further advances the theoretical development of rural tourism by mapping the various frameworks on which the field is based. The analysis shows that rural tourism scholarship has been far from being built on one paradigm but has incorporated sociocultural, economic, and psychological perspectives - highlighting its interdisciplinary character. One of the most influential frameworks used is Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Ap,

1992), which states that the residents assess tourism development based on the loss versus gain balance. Set (2004) will also show that notions of community are central to sustainable rural tourism and that the role of residents in determining destination image and the long-term sustainability of tourism is at the heart of this literature.

These are complemented by psychological insights like Assimilation Theory and Leisure Motivation Theory (Leone et al., 1999 and Perugini & Bagozzi, 2004), which examine the role of travel experiences in shaping individuals' preferences and behaviors. These models have been broadly applied to domestic tourism and second-home ownership, emphasising the importance of understanding the role of motivations and constraints upon participation in rural tourism activities. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Self-Regulation Theory offer an insight into motivation, where attitudes, social norms, and personal incentives motivate tourists' decision-making processes.

More recently, the concept of Mobilities Theory (Cohen et al., 2015; Ren, 2024; Veijola et al., 2019) has been discussed, which explores the changing rural landscapes as a function of flows of people, ideas, and capital. This conceptualisation views rural tourism as developing within global processes which are linking place attachment, identity and community belonging to transnational regimes of mobility. Place Attachment Theory (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001) adds an important layer to this thinking that emphasizes the importance of emotional and symbolic ties to place in influencing both resident's and tourist's interaction with rural destinations.

Theories of economics are also still at the centre. Tourism demand, pricing and consumption behaviors have been analyzed on the basis of conventional demand theory, microeconomic theory and taste theory. These models underline the fact that rural tourism is a cultural and market phenomenon at the same time, driven by both the supply-side innovation and the consumer demand.

Taken as a whole, these theoretical perspectives reflect the intellectual maturity of rural tourism scholarship. They offer a basis for combining the insights of community, individual, and market to identify some directions for the future that combine global mobilities, sustainability, and technological change.

Themes

Ethnicity:

Ethnicity as it applies to rural tourism is a reflection of the inherent cultural relationships and social factors that determine resident and tourist experience. This theme embraces ways in which identity, traditions and collective practices shape the creation and viability of rural destinations.

In the literature, it is shown that rural rituals, beliefs and group solidarity form a cultural ground for tourism participation. These ethnic codes are not only used as symbolic markers of identity, but also structure community-tourist encounters by imposing normative rules. For instance, festivals, rituals and traditional performances often serve as both cultural preservation instruments and tourist attractions, strengthening community cohesion while adding attraction for the destination.

From the tourist's point of view, ethnicity is closely related to motivations for having authentic experiences. Cultural Experiences: Rural destinations are often associated with an opportunity to experience unique cultural traditions, cuisines, and ways of life that differ from urban life. Analysis of tourism human capital, tourism satisfaction and expectations management studies reveal that ethnic rooted authenticity greatly boosts the destination competitiveness.

For residents, ethnicity is a resource and a responsibility. Conservation through tourism presents opportunities in entrepreneurship and cultural commodification as well as economic sustainability. At the same time, it needs to be carefully managed to avoid over-commercialisation that could dilute cultural value. It is also reflected in research that ethnic identity influences trust, loyalty, and emotional attachment which in turn help in the strengthening of the community and its sustenance in the long run.

Overall, the ethnicity theme casts rural tourism not as a leisure pursuit, but as a cultural interface between tradition and modernity. By strengthening cultural capital and communal identity, ethnicity is both a symbolic motivator and a prosaic tool for the resilience of rural communities pursuing tourism.

Ecology:

The ecological dimension of rural tourism explains the intricate nature of the interdependency between human settlement and nature. Ecology in this context includes not only the physical landscapes on which tourism occurs, but also the social, cultural and economic systems which interface with those physical landscapes.

A common theme of this literature is that urban and rural populations are interdependent. In rural areas the natural and cultural resources are available while the urban markets provide demands for authentic environmental sensitive experiences. The discussion illustrates how the ecological systems are the basis for rural change and thus sustainability is both a policy and practice concern.

Research on the impact of tourism development has also been conducted, taking into consideration differential ecological and social consequences. For example, studies from rural coastal communities show how tourism can boil down to economic advantages while concurrently creating environmental pressure and demographic changes. Such conclusions emphasize the importance of spatial planning and equitable distribution of tourism-related benefits in order to avert ecological destruction and social disparities.

Another important aspect is the contribution of tourism to the development of ecotourism and environmentally friendly behaviour. By incorporating ecological principles into destination planning, rural communities can be made more resilient and blossoming tourism development can be in line with conservation objectives. Tools such as ecological footprint analysis, environmental performance metrics and consumer behaviour studies are increasingly being used to measure sustainability outcomes.

The literature also links ecology and marketing strategies, and highlights the role of destination imagery, branding, and consumer perceptions of "green" practices in the competitiveness of destinations. Second-home ownership and demographic change complicate the picture further, putting ecological change into context with social and cultural change.

Overall, rural tourism is presented as a challenge and an opportunity through the ecology theme. It can contribute to sustainable development through conservation and community involvement, but needs equitable governance, planning and long-term monitoring to balance ecological integrity with economic ambitions.

Growth:

The literature on rural tourism has identified growth as a theme that illustrates rural tourism as a catalyst for regional development and socio-economic change. Tourism as an economic activity, not only produces a direct flow of income, but also revitalizes local identities, cultural practices, and spatial aesthetics, thus further increasing community pride and world visibility.

One approach of study is the importance of management of carrying capacity. Excessive development can result in overcrowding, resource depletion, and cultural dilution, while intelligent planning can ensure that tourism development is sustainable and positive for host communities. This trade-off between growth and preservation is a recurrent issue in the literature.

Technology is also intimately connected to the growth story. In particular, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been found to empower rural communities, improve tourism operations and market reach (Ye et al., 2021). ICT integration contributes to livelihood diversification to support long-term resilience and adaptation. Similarly, creative tourism - a fusion of aesthetic, cultural and experiential aspects - has surfaced as a force for sustainable development, allowing communities to innovate without sacrificing authenticity.

New innovations in marketing assist the growth equations. Vlogging, social media and the ability to share word-of-mouth electronically, make rural destinations more accessible to younger people and international

visitors. Agrinature and direct farm-to-tourist experiences are key players in this process, as they diversify farm income and strengthen local economies.

Namibia's public-private partnerships, for example, can also be compared in cross-national comparisons, demonstrating how the models of cooperation contribute to the development of inclusive capabilities and global competitiveness. These results show that rural tourism development is not confined to economic growth but is closely linked to capacity building, innovation and governance.

In conclusion, the growth theme places rural tourism in the context of a change agent that goes beyond financial benefits. It shows how tourism development, when well managed, can improve livelihoods, protect culture, and bring long-term sustainability in a rural setting.

Strategy:

The theme into strategy in the rural tourism research reflects the different strategies applied to enhance the development results and the sustainability. Central to this theme is the realisation that rural tourism needs not just cultural authenticity and community-based activities but also a degree of rational planning, marketing and governance strategies to compete in competitive markets.

A major focus of this research is entrepreneurship and experiential marketing. Authentic rural experiences are provided through tourist activities such as eating at local restaurants, homestays, and cultural performances, all of which are thought of as nodes for tourist engagement in rural areas, helping to distinguish rural destinations. The author concludes by introducing the micro-level entrepreneurial activities as testbeds of larger destination development by producing insights into consumer behavior and service quality.

Another dimension is cultural heritage preservation and resource mobilisation. Barry (1992) highlights the literature on conservation strategies that protect rural landscapes, traditions and heritage assets and at the same time convert them into tourism resources. If commodification is based on social capital and community trust, this can increase value without annihilating authenticity. Education and training of the people are an important part of this as it has the effect of improving service delivery and also ensuring community readiness in meeting tourism markets.

Integration of technology and policy is the third column of strategy. Rural destinations can use digital technologies to better understand market demands, develop targeted products, and connect with global audiences through intelligent tourism initiatives. Policies instilling the participatory governance, branding programs, and digital communication further contribute to the competitiveness. Increasing emphasis is being put on ensuring that tourism development is inclusive, with all sections of the community benefiting from the growth of tourism.

Overall, the strategy theme frames rural tourism as an area that needs to be innovated, collaboratively developed and policymatically aligned. By blending entrepreneurial innovation, heritage conservation, and accommodation to technological changes, rural destinations can ensure sustainable growth, while preserving their cultural and ecological integrity.

Intervention:

Within the study area of rural tourism, the intervention theme refers to the action, initiatives and actors involved in the process of creating development in the countryside. It reflects the development of rural tourism not just by market forces, but by the active intervention of communities, policy and development agencies.

As such, this theme highlights the importance of the tourist actor (explorer, lifestyle traveller, consumer) in developing the destination experience. Studies highlight the impacts of lifestyles-based mobility (e.g. digital nomadism), reviewer evaluation and involvement in cultural performances on the perception and sustainability of rural destinations. "These agents are catalysts, bringing light to rural areas, bringing knowledge and bringing resources from outside."

Also, the literature points out key mediums of intervention (experience, opportunity, participation, awareness, empowerment). Studies have demonstrated that tourism activity cognitive engagement leads to greater

levels of ownership and accountability in residents. Education and capacity development activities are of special importance, because they build local capacity, improve quality of service, and increase agency of the community. Empowerment is a process as well as the outcome that allows rural communities to determine their own developmental path as opposed to being passive observers of tourism.

Further, the theme embraces perspectives including feminist approaches and studies of marginal communities that emphasize the cultural and economic importance of groups that are often overlooked. Such voices add to the discourse by placing diversity, identity and equity at the core of tourism development. Finally, the social notion of residence, viewed as emotional and symbolic ties to place, also implicates the response of communities to exogenous interventions, and addresses the necessity for compatibility with local values.

Overall, intervention is defined as a socially embedded economic, cultural and educational process. It showcases the potential of collaborative and participatory approaches to turn rural tourism into a platform for resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable development.

Limitations and future scope

As with any systematic review, there are some limitations to this study which directly affect the scope of the study and its implications.

First, the dataset was limited to papers published in journals listed in ABDC group A and A+. While this method delivered quality and academic credibility, it left out potentially valuable information from the newer journals, regional publications and the interdisciplinary sources outside of the ABDC affiliation. Future reviews may wish to include more databases, such as Web of Science and Google Scholar, to attain more perspectives and inclusiveness.

Second, only the literature published in English was analysed. As rural tourism is a global phenomenon the exclusion of non-English publications restricts representation of scholarship from regions such as Latin America, Eastern Europe and parts of Asia where contributions are made in local languages not covered by English-language publications. In the context of languages, coverage would be broader, and a more representative picture of international rural tourism scholarship would emerge.

Third, the study was based on bibliometric and co-occurrence methods that, while powerful to map the underlying intellectual structures, are limited when you are interested in capturing nuanced insights, contextual case studies, and qualitative perspectives. Future studies may be enhanced theoretically and/or practically by incorporating bibliometric methods into ethnographic reviews, meta-analyses, and mixed-method syntheses.

Results also indicate a number of promising future research directions. Firstly, the increasing significance of artificial intelligence, digital platforms and smart tourism technologies has to be further explored in regard of their use in rural areas. Second, it is about the governance frameworks, which need to be emphasized more, especially on policy integrating, on how to coordinate stakeholders, on public and private partnerships for rural development. Third, interconnecting rural tourism with emerging areas like fashion, circular economy and sustainable infrastructures may be a fruitful avenue to expand rural tourism beyond the cultural and ecological aspects that have traditionally dominated the discipline.

In conclusion, the review offers a comprehensive mapping of rural tourism literature while also pointing to the need for wider coverage and methodological integration as well as forward-looking questions. Dealing with these challenges will not only bolster the theoretical underpinnings of the field but also improve its relevance in practice to policymakers, practitioners and communities involved in rural tourism.

Conclusion:

This review has traced the intellectual and thematic development of rural tourism over the last two decades, situating it both as an academic discipline and as a driver of rural change. Using bibliometric and science-mapping techniques, the research found six common themes of ethnicity, ecology, communal identity, growth, strategy, and intervention that together reflect the multidisciplinary character of rural tourism scholarship. The findings indicate how the field has moved from conceptual origins to more applied views that highlight sustainability, governance, technology, and community empowerment.

At the same time, the study highlights gaps in the literature, in particular the underdeveloped integration of non-English and non-ABDC scholarship, and the need for longitudinal and interdisciplinary research. By synthesizing fragmented knowledge and defining future directions, this review helps to build the theoretical foundation for rural tourism and provides practical information for policymakers, practitioners and communities exploring inclusive and sustainable rural development.

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