

Three Decades Of Sustainable Tourism Research And Future Agenda

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism is a technique designed to alleviate the negative environmental effects of tourism while promoting economic benefits and encouraging responsible travel behaviors. However, the existing research and scholarly knowledge on sustainable tourism are fragmented in nature. Considering “sustainability” as an important theme, the authors aim to conduct a comprehensive analysis on existing sustainable tourism research to point out the intellectual framework and future research agenda. A multistep screening technique is employed for extracting data from Scopus ranging from 1995-2025. The bibliometric analysis is carried out using VOSviewer package which is a reliable for analysing the large volume of data and providing meaningful interpretation. The findings show that publication in this field is growing significantly. Cluster analysis using the co-citation of references method resulted in four broad research themes: Issues and risks in sustainable tourism, Planning, motivation and management of sustainable tourism, Community attitude in sustainable tourism, Community empowerment through sustainable tourism. The study offers a comprehensive understanding about sustainable tourism and acts as a beacon of light for prospective researchers who want to delve deeper into sustainable tourism research.

Keywords- Sustainability, Eco-tourism, Tourism, Bibliometric Analysis.

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as the central point in the formulation of tourism development policies globally (Pham et al., 2025). The tourism sector has initiated efforts to enhance its commitment to sustainability, primarily by creating an eco-friendlier range of products. The tourism industry has a unique role in contributing to sustainability and addressing the associated challenges (Erol et al., 2022). In recent times, there has been a growing emphasis on examining the interconnectedness of innovation, tourism, and climate change on a global scale (Ahmad et al., 2022). Later 1990s, tourism assumed sustainability as a guiding principle

for development for the development of the industry. More recently, there has been significant attention from researchers and policymakers towards the concept of responsibility in the tourism sector (Saarinen, 2021). Despite the increased occurrence of sustainability issues in tourism, the literature on this subject has grown exponentially. However, there is limited knowledge about the extent of research on Tourism Studies in academic literature (Garrigos-Simon et al., 2018). Despite growing worries about the adverse economic effects of tourism on host communities, there has been a lack of sufficient focus on evaluating the economic sustainability of tourism (Brooks et al., 2023).

Presently, tourist destinations are facing unique challenges and problems of over-tourism. To handle these issues and lessen the bad effects of tourism, many people agree that using sustainable development is a good idea (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Numerous nations across the globe depend on tourism for economic prosperity and further development. However, challenges like over-tourism and environmental degradation are significant concerns, highlighting the urgent requirement to implement sustainability (Chica et al., 2022). Effective governance tailored to specific needs is crucial for the successful implementation of sustainable tourism. It not only improves democratic processes but also provides guidance and the necessary tools for making tangible advancements (Sharpley, 2023). Sustainability has a positive effect on competitiveness indicators in tourist destinations. It is very contemporary to preserve the natural resources as over tourism is polluting the environment. Tourism is frequently considered a potential catalyst for economic and social progress. Though, it also functions as a significant influence that has the potential to significantly impact ecosystem structures, processes, and lead to the exhaustion of natural non-renewable resources (Baloch et al., 2023). Sustainability has a greater impact compared to other factors, emphasizing its crucial role in determining competitiveness (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016). Now researchers use a wide variety of tools to study the perception of the tourists and find the real image. Moreover, it will give us a direction for improving the sustainability of the destination. Sentiment analysis can be implemented to enhance the quality and sustainability of a destination (Borrajo-Millán et al., 2021). As worldwide apprehensions regarding climate change, waste management, over-tourism, and increased environmental consciousness escalate, eco-tourism is receiving significant promotional activities. This mandates the formulation of appropriate regulations by governmental bodies and proactive initiatives by local communities to conserve natural resources, protect the environment, and foster sustainable tourism (Shasha et al., 2022). The tourism industry relies on environmental, heritage and natural resources, perceiving them as interrelated (Ramaswamy and Kumar, 2010). The worldwide landscape has experienced a dynamic and highly competitive climate due to LPG. Countries, industries, and businesses are proactively endeavoring to create lasting competitive advantages across several sectors, with tourism being a promising area of focus (Bose and Chattopadhyay, 2019). In India, Kerala has prioritized sustainable tourism development to achieve environmental, economic, and socio-cultural advancement in tourist sites (Venugopalan & Kumar, 2017).

In recent decades, the increasing research focus on sustainable tourism necessitates an assessment of existing knowledge and the future avenues to be explored. Despite several studies on sustainable tourism, there persists a necessity to examine its progress and development owing to its contradictory and dynamic characteristics and ever-changing themes. Nevertheless, the contextual analyses of sustainable tourism were limited and disjointed, hindering a thorough comprehension of the subject. Bibliometric reviews are

highly advantageous for scholars since they provide insights into their area of study. Furthermore, bibliometric assessments offer a quantitative evaluation of documented research interactions within their respective fields (Barik & Nayak, 2024). This bibliometric review is expected to offer quantitative insights for developing researchers in sustainable tourism. As a result, this paper conducts a review on the extant literature on sustainable tourism with the aid of the performance analysis and science mapping. Through performance analysis the study tries to shed light on publication trends, prominent authors, sources, countries and documents citation analysis. This science mapping includes three types of mapping i.e. social structure mapping, conceptual mapping, and intellectual structure mapping.

Methodology

The bibliometric analysis method assesses bibliographic data by examining the study domain and identifying notable trends (Deb et al., 2023). Despite the existence of other known methodologies for evaluating scientific literature, such as systematic literature review (SLR) and meta-analysis possess certain limitations (Furunes, 2019). The SLR analyses the evolution of a domain through a qualitative approach, which is susceptible to researchers' personal preferences (Das et al., 2023; Koseoglu et al., 2016). Meta-analysis necessitates that researchers concentrate on a specific relationship of interest, so limiting their focus to a defined area and thereby narrowing its breadth (Zupic & Cater, 2014). Koseoglu et al. (2016) advocated for the implementation of evaluative and relational approaches to reduce this subjective bias. The evaluative method encompasses performance analysis for assessing the most impactful and prolific institutions, sources, authors, and countries (Leong et al., 2022). The relational technique encompasses the scientific mapping of co-citation of referenced works, co-occurrence of author keywords, and co-authorship among countries (Anderson & Swami, 2021, Das et al., 2023).

Data collection and key words

We selected the Scopus database for retrieving the studies related to sustainable tourism for two reasons. First, the Scopus database, developed by Elsevier extensively coverage the abstracts and citation data, encompassing peer-reviewed articles throughout the fields of social science, science, medicine, arts and humanities (Debey & Bedi, 2024). Second, it catalogues all essential, pertinent databases such as Springer, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, Sage, and Wiley.

We meticulously chose our keywords for searching in the Scopus databases. Preliminary results were acquired and modified, duplicate records were eliminated, and subsequently, analysis was conducted on the gathered data. The Boolean operator (AND) was initially employed to investigate themes pertaining to sustainable tourism. The employed search string was "tourism" AND "sustainable tourism" AND "ecotourism". A Boolean operator was employed to eliminate redundancy, producing the same outcome as the original search phrase. The chosen keywords for this study are "sustainable tourism" AND "ecotourism". Using these two keywords and inclusion criteria we selected the sample documents for our study. The search strategy is depicted in Figure.1.

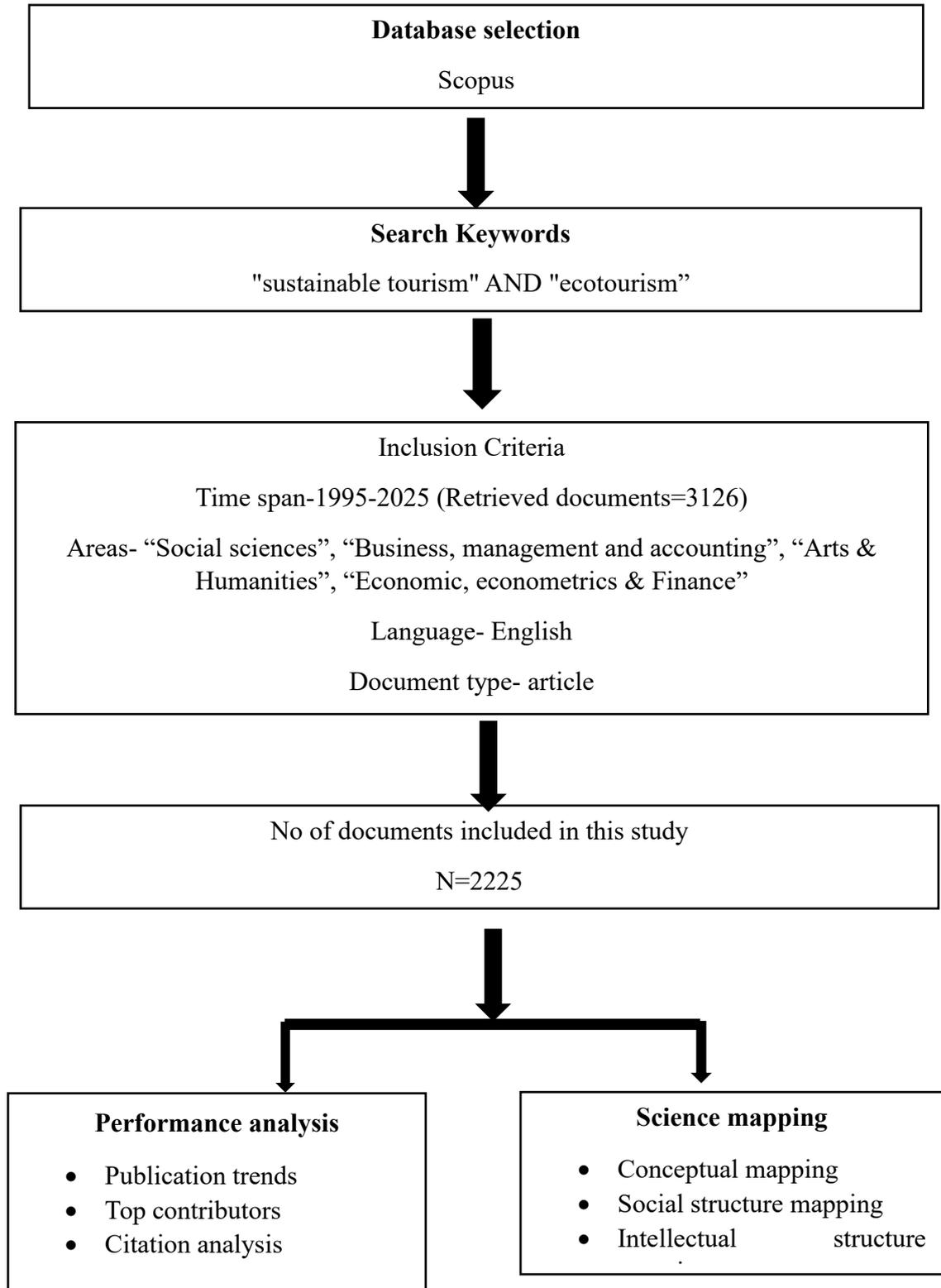


Figure 1: Data extraction
Source: Author(s) own creation

Results

Performance Analysis

Publications trends and prominent contributors

The keyword is queried from Scopus database. Upon employing the inclusion criteria and removing duplicate articles, a total of 2,225 documents were identified, authored by 58,31 individuals affiliated with 4,836 organizations across 126 countries, all contributing to the arena of sustainable tourism. Additionally, 270 sources produced research in the domain of sustainable tourism. Table 1 presents the top 10 contributing sources, authors, organizations, and countries according to number of publications. The year with the most productivity is 2024, comprising 293 papers (13.16%), while the year with the lowest productivity is 1998, with merely 3 documents (0.13%). Figure 2 illustrates the quantity of articles from 1995 to May 2025. There is notable expansion in the volume of articles over the research period.

Documents by year

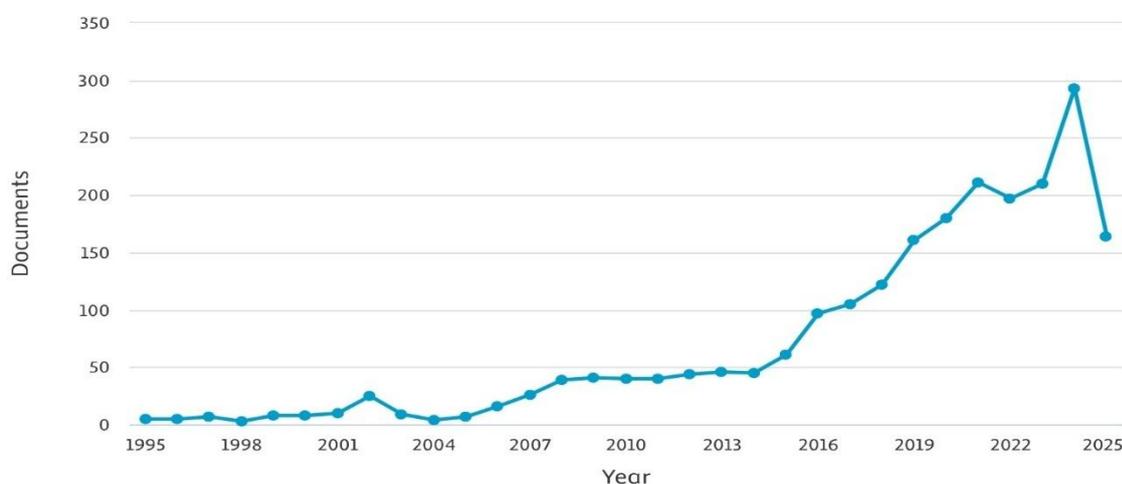


Figure. 2: Publication per year

Source: Author(s) own creation

Table 1: Most prolific contributors in the sustainable tourism research

Author	Articles	Organization	Articles	Country	Articles	Source	Articles
Boley, B. Bynum	17	University Of Surrey, United Kingdom	14	China	248	Sustainability	598
Hall, C. Michael	17	Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden	10	United Kingdom	242	Journal Of Sustainable Tourism	462
Gössling, Stefan	16	Griffith University, Australia	9	Australia	231	Tourism Management	74
Weaver, David B.	16	Western Norway Research Institute	9	United States	227	Geojournal Of Tourism and Geosites	67
Dolnicar,	14	Balkan	8	Spain	181	Current	63

Sara		Network of Tourism Experts, Serbia				Issues in Tourism	
Font, Xavier	14	University Of Canterbury, New Zealand	7	Italy	151	International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning	52
Trišić, Igor	13	University Of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand	7	Indonesia	119	Annals Of Tourism Research	47
Štetić, Snežana	13	University Of Belgrade, Serbia	7	Canada	87	Environment, Development and Sustainability	46
Coghlan, Alexandra	11	Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong	7	Malaysia	80	Journal Of Ecotourism	42
Dodds, Rachel	11	Ho Chi Minh City University, Viet Nam	6	India	77	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	40

Citation analysis

The top most cited documents in sustainable tourism are depicted in Figure 3. Sims (2009) has the most citations (944), followed by Lee (2013) and Hunter (1997), who have 724 and 658, respectively. Stefan Gossling is the most cited author, with 2567 citations, while the United Kingdom is the most cited country, with 17020 citations worldwide. Table 2 represents the Most cited documents, authors and countries in the sustainable tourism research.

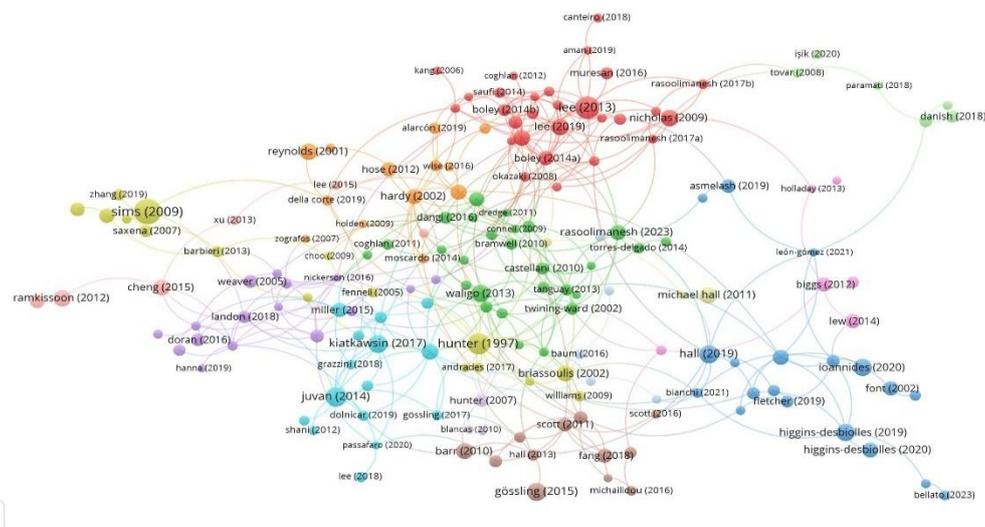


Figure 3: Most cited documents
Source: Author(s) own creation

Table 2: Most cited documents, authors and countries in the sustainable tourism research

Document	Citations	Author	Citations	Country	Citations
Sims (2009)	944	Gössling, Stefan	2567	United Kingdom	17020
Lee (2013)	724	Hall, C. Michael	2028	Australia	16292
Hunter (1997)	658	Boley, B. Bynum	1842	United States	12451
Hassan (2000)	603	Dolnicar, Sara	1841	China	7730
Koens et al. (2018)	562	Peeters, Paul	1151	Spain	6297
Juvan and Dolnicar (2014)	552	Weaver, David B.	1126	Canada	5243
Hall and Williams (2019)	492	Higgins-Desbiolles, Freya	1082	Sweden	4904
Kiatkawsin and Han (2017)	485	Font, Xavier	1058	New Zealand	4871
Gössling (2002)	466	Weiler, Betty	987	Italy	4207
Gössling (2015)	461	Ruhanen, Lisa	978	Norway	4073

Scientific mapping

Intellectual mapping

Co-citation of references

Co-citation analysis elucidates the linkages based on the frequency with which sources are together cited in the literature (Das et al, 2024). The minimum citation threshold for a cited document is fixed at 25. Of the 122,386 referenced citations, 35 satisfy the criteria. Upon examination, the referenced citations were categorized into four distinct clusters. Cluster 1 possesses the greatest mentioned reference count of 15 (Red cluster), while cluster 4 has the lowest at 5 (Yellow cluster). Cluster 2 contains 8 referenced references (Green cluster), while cluster 3 contains 7 (Blue cluster). Buckley (2012) has the largest co-citation count of 67, resides in Cluster 1, possesses 26 linkages, and 103 total link strengths. Figure 4 illustrates the network representation of co-citation analysis of cited references. We categorized the publications according to their study themes. The themes were identified via an "inductive assessment" of the article contents, encompassing an examination of the abstract and principal findings. The themes are categorized according to the author's qualitative analysis of the text. Table 3 illustrates the categorization of prominent co-cited documents according to their corresponding clusters.

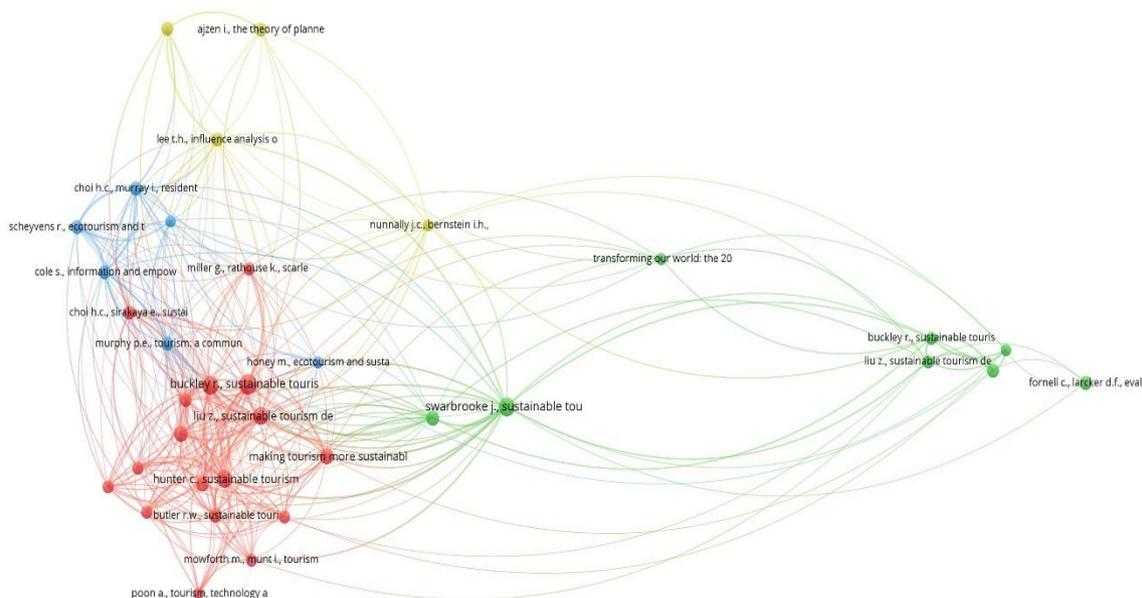


Figure 4: Network visualisation of co-citation analysis

Source: Author(s) own creation

Cluster 1 (red): Cluster 1 is labelled as “Risk and Issues in sustainable tourism.” The major studies on sustainable tourism in this cluster have focused mainly on issuers and risks in sustainable tourism. This is likely due to the possibility of managing the local communities surrounding the areas. Studies also focused on developing theoretical framework for policy formulations, analysing the financial emotional and psychological impact of sustainable tourism and managing the sustainability issues like natural resources, tourist satisfaction and host communities.

Cluster 2 (Green): Cluster 2 is labelled as “Planning, Motivation and Management of sustainable tourism”. The major studies in this cluster focused on sustaining human-environment relationship, increasing the tourist and community motivation, and formulate agendas for worldwide sustainable tourism, which can be popular and acceptable for both developing and developed countries.

Cluster 3 (Blue): Cluster 3 is labelled as “Community attitude for sustainable tourism”. The studies in this cluster focused on economic benefits of local community, creating environmental awareness, long term planning and encouraging community members in decision making and planning for sustainable management.

Cluster 4 (Yellow): Cluster 3 is labelled as “Community empowerment and development”. The research concentrated on empowering local communities. This will promote self-sufficiency, enhance social relationships, and cultivate a sense of collective responsibility for the future of the destination. Sustainable tourism can yield beneficial social, economic, and environmental results by empowering communities. Research also focused on relationship between eco-tourism and sustainable tourism.

Table 3: Co-Citation analysis

Cluster and Colour	Major articles	Links	total link strength	citation	Research theme	Focus areas and gaps
Cluster-1 (Red)	Buckley (2012)	26	103	67	Issues and risks in sustainable tourism	Tourism in protected areas, more diverse research methodologies and theoretical framework, Managing issues like natural environment conservation and cultural issues in sustainable tourism
	Liu (2003)	25	94	53		
	Hunter (1997)	22	106	49		
	WTO (2004)	23	50	35		
	Bramwell and Lane (1993)	22	64	34		
	Buttler (1999)	19	56	31		
	Bramwell and Lane (2011)	22	64	29		
	Bramwell (2017)	16	36	29		
	Miller (2001)	17	45	29		
Cluster-2 (Green)	Swaebrooke (1999)	27	69	55	Planning, motivation and management of sustainable tourism	Planning and formulating new agendas, rethinking human-environmental relationships
	Inskeep (1991)	20	45	38		
	Sayed (2015)	11	13	26		
	Hall (2021)	8	19	26		
Cluster-3	Lee (2013)	19	41	32	Community	Community

(Blue)	Choi and Sirakaya (2006)	20	60	32	attitude in sustainable tourism	attitude, development, increasing community attachment, creating public awareness for sustainable tourism
	Choi and Murray (2010)	18	69	31		
	Miller et al. (2010)	16	32	28		
Cluster-4 (Yellow)	Cole (2006)	22	62	30	Community empowerment through sustainable tourism	Community participation and empowerment, community wellbeing, integrating ecotourism and sustainable tourism
	Murphy (1985)	20	38	30		
	Scheyvens (2002)	14	28	26		
	Honey (1999)	14	18	25		

Social structure mapping

Co- authorship of countries

Figure 5 illustrates the network visualizations of the co-authorship analysis among countries. A co-authorship network seeks to demonstrate the collaboration of authors associated with diverse universities across several countries within a specific research domain. When authors associated with institutions from various countries, these countries are designated as collaborative countries (Deb et al., 2023). The minimum publication criterion for authors is capped at 20 articles. Out of 126 countries, only 41 satisfy the threshold criteria. This network comprises 5 clusters, 391 linkages, and a Total Link Strength (TLS) of 1267. TLS denotes the degree of collaboration among authors. In this regard, authors associated with universities in the UK (TLS = 247), China (TLS = 193), Australia (TLS = 179), and the USA (TLS = 178) have the highest collaboration intensity in the domain of sustainable tourism. The line thickness signifies the strength of the connection between two nations. The strongest connections are between China and the UK, the USA and the UK, and Australia and the USA, with link strengths of 26, 25, and 21, respectively.

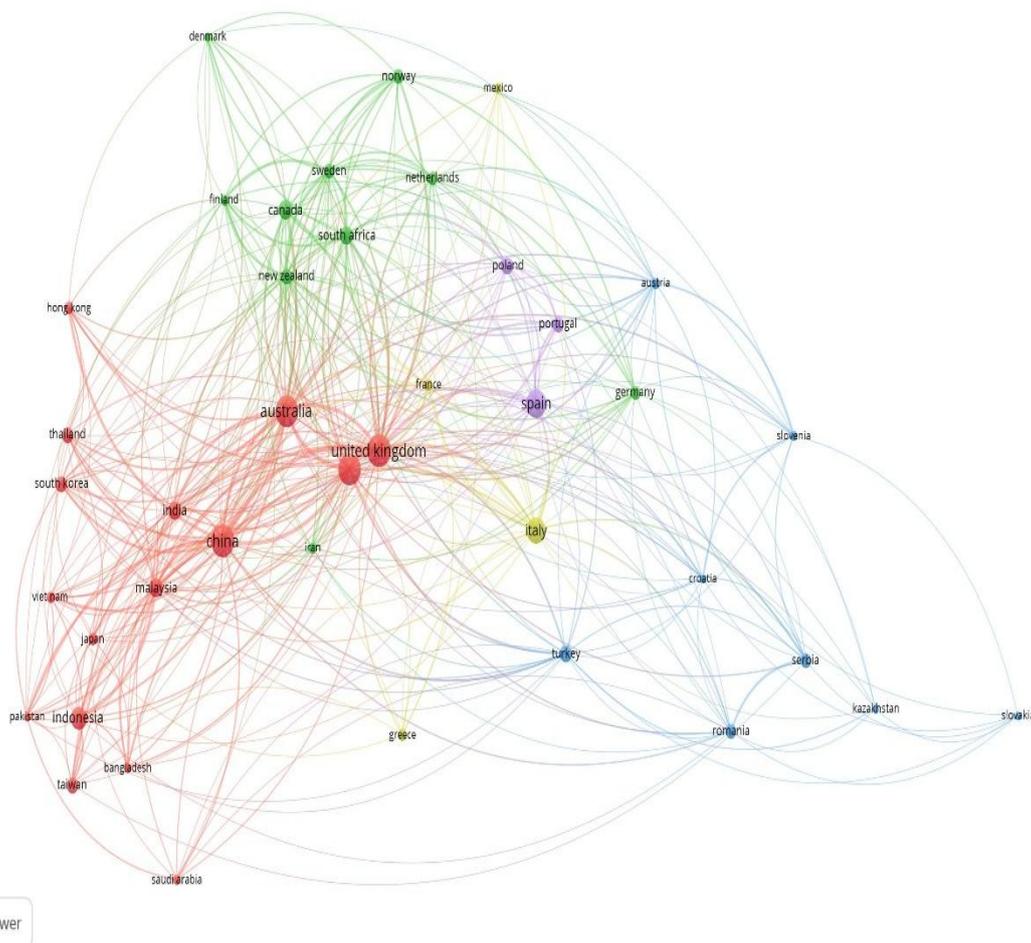


Figure 5: Co- authorship of countries

Source: Author(s) own creation

Conceptual structure mapping

Co-occurrence analysis of author's keywords

The author's keywords were visualized to discern trends in the sustainable tourism sector. The minimum occurrence level for keywords is established at 10. Of the total 5,964 keywords, only 96 satisfied the threshold requirements. Figure 6 illustrates the ten groups derived from our investigation, distinguished by colour. Every node in the visualisation signifies the author's keyword. The larger the node, the greater the frequency of the keyword's occurrence. The primary keywords, determined by co-occurrence frequency, are sustainable tourism (999), ecotourism (192), sustainability (188), tourism (187), sustainable development (143), sustainable tourism development (94), tourism development (65), rural tourism (52), and protected areas (50).

were designated as “issues and risks in sustainable tourism,” “planning, motivation, and management of sustainable tourism,” “community attitudes in sustainable tourism,” and “community empowerment through sustainable tourism”. The social structure mapping of co-authorship analysis was utilized to comprehend the relationships of collaborating nations. The co-authorship study indicates that China, the UK, the USA, and Australia demonstrate the highest collaborative frequency. The present review emphasizes the transition in research preferences, as evidenced by author keyword analysis, from topics concerning sustainable tourism—such as biodiversity, volunteer tourism, and community development (before 2016)—to ecotourism, tourism in protected areas, and natural resource conservation (up to 2022). The primary emphasis of sustainable tourism is on community well-being, economic development, tourist satisfaction, and the sustainability of the tourism business. The keyword analysis reveals that the sustainable tourism phenomena is interconnected with many nature-based tourism segments, including geotourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism.

Future research direction

Sustainable tourism continually remains a significant study topic in relevant disciplines, as demonstrated by the persistently high volume of publications. Given the growing acceptance of sustainable tourism amongst policy-makers and scholars, we can anticipate a rise in studies focused on this subject. Several aspects, such as management and planning for sustainable tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism have exhibited a downward trajectory, indicating research in these areas attained maturity, triggering an alteration in the researchers' focus. Considering the present sustainable tourism research landscape, the potential areas for future investigation are proposed:

- *Research from emerging and underdeveloped nations:* Sustainable tourism research is predominantly prioritized in Western and developed countries such as Australia, the UK, and the USA. Nevertheless, it garnered little interest from developing and underprivileged countries. Recent study from emerging and underdeveloped nations in Asia and Africa will yield new insights into sustainable tourism studies.
- *Impact of infrastructure on environmental protection and sustainable tourism:* At present the stakeholders are mostly prioritize economic advantages at places of interest, while inadequate emphasis is placed on safeguarding essential natural assets. Excessive demand for resources and inadequate supervision are evident problems. Consequently, environmental degradation is occurring in various developing countries, necessitating the implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives and infrastructures. Prospective studies must elucidate the critical function of infrastructure in environmental protection and its impact on the facets of sustainable tourism.
- *Need to develop extensive and feasible technologies:* Regional characteristics and area-specific metrics play a crucial role in developing sustainable tourism. However, there is a scarcity of inclusive techniques for assessing sustainable tourism. Future research should concentrate on developing a through approach and effective techniques for quantifying sustainable tourism.
- *Impact of service quality:* Infrastructure and services significantly impacts the perception of tourist destinations. Deficiency in any of the two elements leads to challenges and undermines the long-term sustainability. Globally, countries with robust infrastructure and superior hospitality amenities are attracting visitors from diverse regions and mitigate the adverse effects of significant tourist migration (Yang et al., 2023). The prevailing literature has slightly encompassed infrastructure and services into the sustainable tourism research.

Hence, future researchers can delve deeper into the nexus between service quality and sustainable tourism.

- *Role of community in developing sustainable tourism:* The participation of all stakeholders is critical for attaining sustainable tourism. Local communities, including inhabitants, small business proprietors, and government representatives, benefit from sustainable tourist growth, which impacts their wellbeing and quality of life. The host community is integral to the attainment of sustainable development objectives. Consequently, it is imperative to develop measures that specifically address small tourism enterprises.

Theoretical and managerial implication

The present bibliometric study has numerous theoretical significances for the progression of sustainable tourism studies. Initially, by delineating the present scope and prospective directions, this research offers scholars an overview of the prior research on sustainable tourism. Researchers can employ the results of the present review to gain a deeper grasp of the historical, contemporary, and prospective aspects of sustainable tourism. This study highlighted prominent scholars, journals, and organizations focused on sustainable tourism by scientific mappings, including citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and network analysis. To promote sustainable tourism, prospective scholars may utilize these results to identify potential partners, including key authors, prominent organizations, and influential countries in this domain. This may promote the generation of novel research concepts and partnerships, so bolstering the academic standing of the discipline and drawing increased funding prospects. Furthermore, the study's recognition of inadequacies in the current literature and the identification of study themes (Table 3) for more investigation may steer subsequent investigations in this domain. Academics and tourism experts may utilize these results as a foundation for subsequent studies in this domain, perhaps resulting in new business prospects and the creation of creative sustainable tourism offerings that cater to the interests of all the stake holders.

Conclusion and limitations

In India and in few nations, there are miles to go in terms of sustainability. The current tourism industry, marked by its substantial contribution to CO₂ emissions, has been labelled as environmentally unsustainable (Payal & Jangid, 2021). There shall be sustainability related conferences, research projects, consultancy activities between academia, government and the tourism sector frequently. This should be eliminated and there shall be goals fixed in terms of sustainability and its achievement. There is growing advocacy on the circular economy stressing the innovative business models in the tourism. Despite arguments about “Sustainable tourism” in the last three decades, the tourism authorities are still focusing on the growth-centric model which is unsustainable (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Tourism is the most potential industry which demonstrates high growth and there is a shift in the consumption due to high development in the infrastructure across the globe. Such a potential industry should be given utmost importance in preserving the natural resources and to protect the interest of the green consumers.

The data presented in this study were constrained by limitations in multiple aspects. The selection comprised works from 1995 to 2025 exclusively offered in the Scopus database. Consequently, the bibliometric study may exclude significant articles from recent periods. Subsequent research may mitigate this disadvantage by incorporating more extensive resources such as the Google Scholar and Web of Science. The study articles consist

exclusively of publications published in journals. Future research may encompass books and conference papers to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable tourism. Moreover, several authors may employ alternative initials, adopt a distinct identity in certain publications, or utilize an entirely different name. These flaws may result in mistakes regarding institutional or contributor productivity and certain disparities. Consequently, sustainable tourism researchers ought to rectify these deficiencies in their forthcoming studies. Nonetheless, the results of this study may provide a framework for scholars interested in investigating sustainable tourism.

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