
CULTURAL TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS: MAPPING RESEARCH TRENDS THROUGH BIBLIOMETRIC AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to perform a detailed analysis of the scientific literature on cultural tourism in rural areas through a bibliometric study of the papers indexed in the Web of Science database. The bibliometric analysis was carried out using performance analysis and science mapping techniques. Authors' keywords and KeyWords Plus were analyzed using RapidMiner software, and VOSviewer software was employed to create category maps and visualize the evolution of keywords. Content analysis of influential publications was used to show the evolution of knowledge and discover the most current issues. The results show the evolution of publications on cultural tourism in rural areas and identify the most influential journals, articles, authors, institutions and countries, as well as the most important research topics in the field. The paper concludes with recommendations for future bibliometric studies and offers guidelines for further research on cultural tourism in rural areas.

Introduction

Culture and tourism share an inseparable relationship, one that has been steadily intensifying as tourists increasingly prioritize authentic and unforgettable cultural experiences. TripAdvisor searches up to October 31, 2022, reveal the importance of cultural tourism, with 25% directly involving cultural activities like museum visits and events. Another 25% indirectly relate to cultural tourism, reflecting tourists' strong interest in cultural experiences (World Tourism Organization, 2023). In 2022, the

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worldwide cultural tourism market was valued at USD 5,321.7 million. It is projected to grow to USD 11,900 million by 2029, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.4% anticipated during the forecast period (Business Research Insights, 2024). The increasing development of cultural destinations, driven by initiatives such as the promotion of rural tourism and the revival of domestic tourism, will lead to significant revenue growth in cultural tourism over the next decade (Future Market Insights, 2023).

The role of cultural tourism and its subgenre heritage tourism in rural development has become increasingly important in the academic literature, as these types of tourism improve the economy and quality of life of rural communities (Ancuța & Jucu, 2023; Anderson, 2014; Aznar & Hoefnagels, 2019). In general, Dimitrijević et al. (2022) emphasize that the promotion of tourism in rural areas not only diversifies the local economy but also stimulates growth in various economic sectors and creates employment opportunities. Cultural tourism, characterized by engaging with local traditions, attending cultural events and visiting museums proves to be an important driver for rural development. While heritage tourism is tied to specific places (e.g., places associated with significant historical events), cultural tourism prioritizes immersive experiences over physical locations (Leask, 2022). Taken together, these dimensions of cultural and heritage tourism offer multiple opportunities for rural areas to capitalize on their unique cultural assets and improve socio-economic conditions. This paper attempts to deepen the scientific discourse on cultural tourism in rural areas through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis, highlighting the main trends, research gaps and new perspectives in this field. Furthermore, the study aims to enrich understanding and contribute to the advancement of scholarship in this important area of research.

Materials and methods

In order to identify and analyse the scientific production on the topic of cultural tourism in rural areas, a bibliometric analysis and a content analysis were carried out. Bibliometric analysis is a widely used method for analysing scientific data (Donthu et al., 2021), which allows researchers to “evaluate the performance of the research and publication of individuals and/or institutions, and/or map the structure and dynamics of science” (Koseoglu et al., 2016, p. 181). This analysis is widely used in the literature to examine the scientific production in different areas of tourism, such as agritourism (e.g., Dimitrovski et al., 2019), sustainable tourism (e.g., Niñerola et al., 2019), food tourism (e.g., Naruetharadhol & Gebombut, 2020), world heritage tourism (e.g., Zhang et al., 2022), etc.

According to Baker et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis “involves applying quantitative tools to bibliographic data” (p. 1028). Based on objective criteria for the analysis and classification of publications (such as the number of publications and citations and the repetition of keywords), it provides a categorized representation of documents (such as scientific papers in journals, books, chapters, and conference proceedings) in the field under consideration. Zupic and Čater (2015) point out that bibliometric analysis complements the literature review method and increases the objectivity of this

method. The methodology employed in this study follows the framework proposed by Meneghello (2021, p. 3) and consists of three main phases: 1. definition of the data set, 2. bibliometric analysis and 3. content analysis.

Definition of the data set

The data available in scientific databases such as Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar are usually used as input data for bibliometric analyses. While the use of the latter database is questionable, as it also contains unreliable publications (Delgado López-Cózar, 2014), the first two databases are the most widely used and recognised in the scientific community (Garrigos-Simon et al., 2018). The data for this study were collected from the Web of Science Core Collection in January 2024. A query, shown in Table 1, yielded a total of 1,677 results distributed across Web of Science categories such as Environmental Studies (16%), Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism (14%), Environmental Sciences (14%) and Green Sustainable Science Technology (11%). Documents from various other fields (e.g. Geography, Architecture, Economics, etc.) account for less than 10%. The results obtained were filtered according to the criteria listed in Table 1 in order to be suitable for achieving the set objectives. After filtering the results, a total of 150 documents were included in the further analyses.

Table 1. Search strategy in the Web of Science database

Query	TS=(“cultural tourism” OR “heritage tourism” OR “cultural heritage”) AND TS=(rural)
Web of Science category	Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism
Document type	Article
Publication year	≤ 2023
Language	English
Search date	January 2024

Source: Authors

Although conference papers are often included in bibliometric analysis (e.g., Khan et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2022), they were not used in this study. A previous analysis of papers published at conferences on cultural tourism in rural areas found that of the 32 papers available in the Web of Science database, 15 conference papers were without citations. Of the remaining 17 papers published at conferences in Macedonia, Malaysia, Iceland, etc., only five papers had more than 10 citations. Considering the years of publication, this distribution of citations according to Niñerola et al. (2019) indicates that the research topic is not of sufficient scientific interest, so these papers are not included in further analysis.

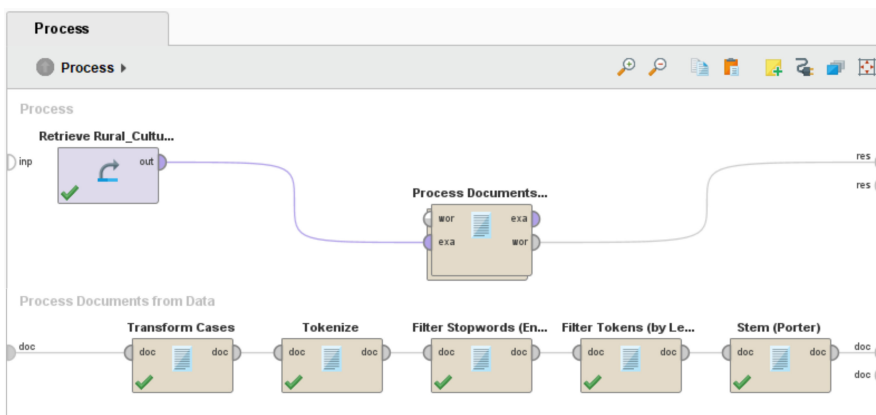
Bibliometric analysis

The two main techniques for conducting bibliometric analysis are performance analysis and science mapping (Donthu et al., 2021). Performance analysis is descriptive in nature, and authors Donthu et al. believe that it can be somewhat identified with the profile of

participants presented in empirical research. According to these authors, performance analysis is used to analytically examine and present the performance of journals, authors, countries, and institutions in the observed field. The authors also point out that when conducting a performance analysis, it is appropriate to use publication-related metrics, citation-related metrics and metrics related to publications and citations. In this study, publication-related metrics (such as the total number of publications, the number of contributing authors, the number of single-author publications, and the number of co-author publications) and citation-related metrics (the total number and the average number of citations) were used.

Science mapping, on the other hand, “analyzes the relationships between research constituents and a field’s intellectual structure” (Baker et al., 2021, p. 1028). As explained by Donthu et al. (2021), various techniques are used in science mapping. First, citation analysis was used. According to Mulet-Forteza (2018), citation analysis is one of the most commonly used methods to identify important papers in a scientific field. In addition to this analysis, as recommended by several authors (e.g., Freire & Veríssimo, 2020; Donthu et al., 2021), a keyword analysis was also used to fully understand the research streams and gain a detailed insight into the most important research topics. To avoid getting a list of keywords in which many terms have the same meaning, the text mining software RapidMiner 9.10 was used to find the steam (root) of the keywords and thus identify the most important ones. Following the methodology presented by Seočanac and Dimitrovski (2022), the standard text processing procedure (Figure 1) was applied to both the keywords identified by the authors and the keywords generated with KeyWords Plus. Zhang et al. (2015) recommend the use of KeyWords Plus in bibliometric analysis due to the large number of terms that provide a summary of the main and secondary topics of the research, i.e., a better insight into the field under consideration. To ensure that the most important keywords, i.e., topics, are visible, a word cloud is created from keywords that occur in at least five documents.

Figure 1. Text processing procedure



Source: Authors

Additionally, the bibliometric software VOSviewer version 1.16.20 (van Eck & Waltman, 2014) was used to create category maps of keywords that provide insight into the focus of research interest in cultural tourism in rural areas during the observed period. The normalization method was used to form the network: the association strength. Each keyword in the network is represented by a node, where the size of the node depends on the weighting factor of the keyword, i.e., the number of repetitions of the concept in the articles (the higher the number of repetitions, the larger the node). The nodes are connected by lines whose thickness indicates how often related words occur together in the articles (the thicker the line, the higher the number of common repetitions). The distance between the nodes indicates how strong the relationship between the terms is (the closer the nodes are to each other, the stronger the relationship between the two terms, i.e., they occur together more frequently in the articles compared to other terms). Each term is color-coded to indicate the group (cluster) to which it belongs. In this case, the clusters are colored according to the average year of the publications in which the term appears.

Content analysis

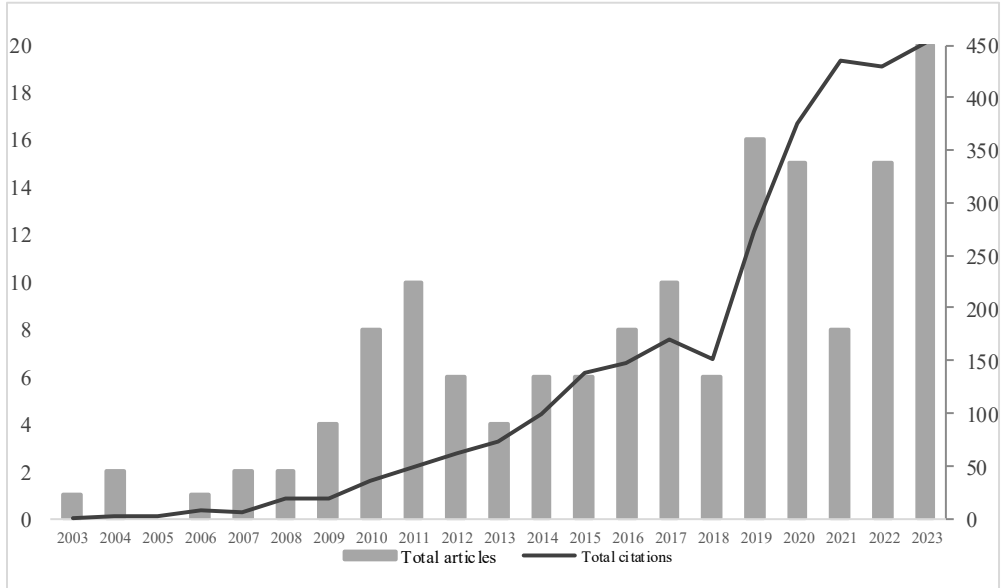
Another qualitative analysis recommended by Freire and Veríssimo (2020) is content analysis. Based on the previously created category maps and the identified clusters, a content analysis of the articles in each cluster was carried out to obtain an overview of the main topics in the field of cultural tourism in rural areas over the years. The main objective is to recognise the evolution of research interest and to identify the most topical issues. The content analysis was conducted by reviewing the abstracts and available articles for each cluster.

Results and discussion

The first scientific paper found in the Web of Science on the subject of cultural tourism in rural areas was published in 2003 in *Annals of Tourism Research* under the title “Cultural rural tourism: Evidence from Canada” by MacDonald and Jolliffe. Since this pioneering work, the number of publications on cultural tourism in rural areas has slowly increased. In the ten years following the first publication, the number of publications increased slightly, reaching a peak in 2011. After that, the number of published papers suddenly declined. A significant increase in the number of publications was recorded in 2019, when 16 scientific papers were published, and this level was maintained in 2020. After a sudden drop in 2021, the number of published papers reached a second peak in 2023 with 20 scientific papers on this topic. This distribution of the number of published papers supports Price’s law that the available information doubles 10-15 years after the start of research on a particular topic (Price, 1956). Looking at the distribution of publications in Figure 2, it is clear that research on cultural tourism in rural areas has left the first phase, which consists of the first publications on the subject, and is now in the second phase of development, i.e., the phase of exponential research growth. According to Durán-Sánchez et al. (2020), this phase is followed by a phase of linear growth, characterized by a slowdown in the growth of the number

of publications and an overview of the knowledge gained in the first two phases. The current distribution of publications shows that the topic of cultural heritage tourism is relatively new and is far from being complete.

Figure 2. Number of publications on rural cultural tourism and citations by observed years



Source: Authors

Performance analysis

Journals

The articles on cultural tourism in rural areas were published in 46 different journals (Table 2). Of the 46 journals, 41.30% published only one article on the observed topic, while 21.74% published more than five articles. These results indicate that articles on cultural tourism in rural areas are mainly published in non-specialised journals.

Table 2. Journal productivity

Number of published papers per journal	Number of journals	Percentage
1	19	41.30%
2	5	10.87%
3	8	17.39%
4	4	8.70%
5 or more	10	21.74%
Total	46	100.00%

Source: Authors

Table 3 shows that the most productive journal and leader in this field is the Journal of Heritage Tourism, which published 15 scientific papers on cultural tourism in rural areas, followed by the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, which published 14 papers. The journal Tourism Management achieved the highest number of citations with 643 citations for 9 published articles.

Table 3. Number of papers and citations by journals

Journal	Number of papers	Number of citations
Journal of Heritage Tourism	15	123
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	14	499
Tourism Management	9	643
Tourism and Hospitality Research	8	102
Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change	7	173
Tourism Geographies	7	151
Current Issues in Tourism	6	255
Almatourism – Journal of Tourism Culture and Territorial Development	5	22
Pasos Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural	5	2
Tourism Management Perspectives	5	78

Source: Authors

A total of 362 authors were identified in the observed articles. Based on the author's contribution to the observed topic, Crane (1969) proposes the following classification: high producers (more than 10 papers), moderate producers (5-9 papers), aspirants (2-4 papers) and transients (only 1 paper). The results show that the highest percentage of authors belong to the last category – transients (87% of authors), while the remaining 13% belong to aspirants. Based on the results obtained, there are no high or moderate producers on the topic of cultural tourism in rural areas. Table 4 shows the five most prolific authors of articles on cultural tourism in rural areas. Professor Geoff Wall from the University of Waterloo in Canada is the author with the most citations and articles on cultural tourism in rural areas.

Table 4. The most productive authors

Author	Country	Number of papers	Number of citations
Wall, G.	Canada	4	150
Lenao, M.	Botswana; Finland	3	46
Okolo-Obasi, E. N.	Nigeria	3	89
Su, M. M.	China	3	134
Uduji, J. I.	Nigeria	3	89

Source: Authors

Of the total number of articles, 20%, i.e., 30 articles, were written by a single author, while the remaining 80% are the result of the collaboration of several authors (Table 5). Most articles have three authors, while the fewest have eight authors.

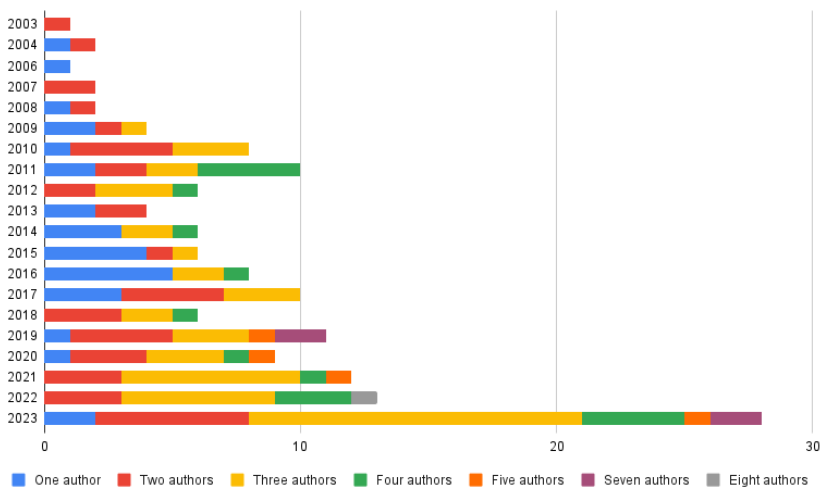
Table 5. Co-author analysis

Number of authors per paper	Number of papers	Percentage
1	30	20%
2	43	28.67%
3	51	34%
4	17	11.33%
5	4	2.67%
6	4	2.67%
8	1	0.67%

Source: Authors

Figure 3 shows that the number of authors increases in the course of the development cycle of the observed thematic area. In the first five years, papers are mainly authored by one or two authors, after which papers are published that are the result of collaboration between more than two authors.

Figure 3. Number of authors by years



Source: Authors

Institutions and countries

The most productive institutions are the universities. The most productive universities are the University of Waterloo in Canada (five published papers), followed by the University of Botswana (four papers). The articles on cultural tourism in rural areas were published by authors from 49 different countries, which shows that it is a popular topic worldwide. As shown in Table 6, China is the country with the most publications in this thematic area.

Table 6. Author's countries of affiliation

Country	Number of papers	Number of citations
China	28	716
USA	25	531
Spain	15	218
Australia	13	306
Italy	12	164
England	11	334
Canada	10	501
Portugal	6	100
Mexico	5	51
South Africa	5	30

Source: Authors

Citation analysis

Table 7 shows that only six papers have more than 100 citations, while 25 have no citations. Niñerola et al. (2019) give two possible explanations for the lack of citations: either the research topic is not of sufficient scientific interest or the article has only recently been published. A review of the articles without citations revealed that 19 of 25 papers were published in 2022 and 2023, which corresponds to the second explanation given by Niñerola et al.

Table 7. Citation of papers (all databases)

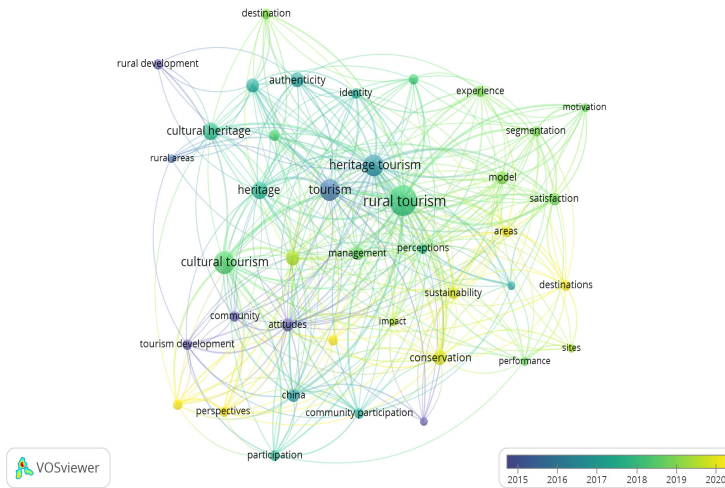
Number of citations	Number of papers	Percentage of papers
≥ 100	6	4%
50–99	8	5.33%
25–49	20	13.33%
5–24	60	40%
1–4	31	20.67%
No citations	25	16.67%
Total	150	100%

Source: Authors

Table 8 shows the articles with the highest number of citations and their characteristics. The paper with the highest number of citations (212) is the paper entitled “Cultural rural tourism – Evidence from Canada”, authored by MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003). The paper with the highest number of citations per year (14.54) is the paper written by Jimura (2011) “The impact of world heritage site designation on local communities – A case study of Ogimachi, Shirakawa-mura, Japan”.

With the VOSviewer software, it is possible to see the trend of keywords by observed years, i.e., the evolution of the observed area. Figure 5 and Table 9 show that in the first publications, the authors focused on tourism and rural development before the interest in authenticity and sustainable development increased. In the more recent publications, the focus shifts to experience and empowerment. The detailed literature review on the identified topics is presented in the following part of the article.

Figure 5. Keyword trend



Source: Authors

Table 9. Keyword clusters by average year of publication

Clusters	Items	Colour	Avg. pub. year
Cluster 1	Attitudes, community, culture, development, rural, tourism development	Purple	2015
Cluster 2	Heritage tourism, rural areas, tourism	Blue	2016
Cluster 3	Authenticity, China, community participation, destination image, identity, participation, sustainable tourism	Turquoise	2017
Cluster 4	Cultural heritage, cultural tourism, heritage, perceptions, rural tourism, sustainable development	Green	2018
Cluster 5	Destination, ecotourism, experience, impact, management, model, motivation, performance, satisfaction, segmentation, sites	Lime green	2019
Cluster 6	Areas, community-based tourism, conservation, destinations, empowerment, perspectives, sustainability	Yellow	2020

Source: Authors

Content analysis

Cluster 1: Cultural tourism as a catalyst for rural development

Tourism is seen as an important tool for rural development, especially in regions with declining traditional industries. MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) present a framework for the development of a region in Canada that focuses on cultural rural tourism and emphasizes the value of preserving local culture. Community-based partnerships, particularly through cooperatives, are seen as effective in this context. Ankomah and Larson (2008) proposed a tripartite alliance for the development of cultural tourism products to alleviate rural poverty. Anderson (2014) examined the impact of cultural tourism on well-being in rural Kilimanjaro and found that cultural tourism significantly enhances community well-being by providing a reliable source of income, promoting social progress and improving access to education and health facilities. However, it highlights the need for targeted training programs at the community level to address limited skills and negative attitudes towards the tourism industry. Overall, Cluster 1 advocates for a holistic and collaborative approach to rural development that combines cultural preservation, community engagement and tourism development.

Cluster 2: Impacts and challenges of heritage tourism in rural areas

The studies in Cluster 2 highlight the most important aspects of the impacts and challenges of heritage tourism and tourism in general in rural areas. McMorran (2008) argues that cultural heritage is primarily used for economic benefit rather than for ideological reasons. Kausar and Nishikawa (2010) focused on the challenges faced by developing countries and emphasized the need for linkages between tourism and local economies. Fonseca and Ramos (2012) examine the potential of heritage tourism in peripheral areas, identify barriers and emphasize the importance of effective collaboration and strategic planning. Ming et al. (2015) emphasize the transformative impact of tourism on livelihoods in rural areas and warn that overdependence can increase long-term risks to communities and jeopardize their long-term sustainability. Huang et al. (2016) identified the motivations of visitors to heritage sites, focusing on learning and recreation. Taken together, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of heritage tourism and the need for a balanced and sustainable approach to tourism development.

Cluster 3: Factors influencing destination image of rural tourism destinations

The studies in Cluster 3 shed light on the various aspects that shape destination image of rural tourism destinations. The study by Frost (2006) examines the impact of historical films on heritage tourism and deals with questions of authenticity and destination image using the example of “Ned Kelly”. Royo-Vela’s (2009) study conceptualizes excursions to rural cultural destinations in Spain as a popular form of tourism and identifies key variables that shape the image of the destination. Fountain and Mackay (2017) observe the evolving form and identity of a festival over time, reflecting the dynamic interplay of local initiatives and global influences. Implicit power relations in tourism development are revealed in the study conducted in China by Xue and Kerstetter

(2017), who call for a reassessment of power structures to improve community-business relations. Guizzardi et al. (2021) explore how sustainability drives tourism demand in small areas by identifying key indicators and demonstrating their impact on destination image and satisfaction. Cheng et al. (2023) emphasize the complicated relationship between perceived authenticity, destination image, satisfaction and loyalty, with visitors expectations playing a moderating role. In summary, these studies highlight the importance of perceived authenticity, sustainability, power dynamics and evolving place identities in shaping the tourist experience and image of rural destinations.

Cluster 4: Cultural tourism for sustainable rural development

The studies that form cluster 4 emphasize the central role of sustainable development in rural areas and underline the need for strategic management. Sasidharan and Hall (2007) highlight the potential of cultural tourism initiatives to revitalize rural economies, but emphasize the need for sustainable development practices based on the engagement and empowerment of local communities. Kastenholz et al. (2018) identify clusters of tourists with different impacts on environmental, cultural and economic aspects of rural areas. Xu and Sun (2019) emphasize the direct contribution of local farmers to sustainable rural tourism, with coping behavior influencing the sustainable development of rural tourism. Qu and Cheer (2020) explore the transformative potential of bottom-up events in revitalization and sustainable development in rural communities. The study emphasizes the critical role of community engagement for sustainable success. Muangasame and Tan (2022) present a unique phygital strategy for rural cultural heritage tourism based on local engagement, digitalization and innovative partnerships. Taken together, these studies provide valuable insights into the various dimensions of cultural tourism for sustainable rural development and emphasize the importance of community engagement and innovative approaches for long-term success.

Cluster 5: Improving tourism experiences in cultural rural destinations

Li et al. (2019) develop a conceptual model to understand the relationships between quality-related factors and travel intentions or attitudes to sustain rural tourism. The results show the crucial mediating role of perceived value and point to management implications for improving tourism in rural cultural destinations. Fraiz et al. (2020) focus on active tourism and identify three distinct groups in the Spanish market. Each group has unique motivations and preferences in terms of pull factors. In particular, the authors emphasize that the segment of people interested in culture could be a good target group for rural destinations. Kim et al. (2021) explore the economic potential of experiential offerings in rural heritage destinations and emphasize the importance of emotional and cognitive aspects in experiential consumption. Chirieleison et al. (2021) investigate the influence of destination certifications and labels on the perception and satisfaction of tourists in Italian villages. The study suggests that knowledge of labels can represent a significant competitive advantage, affecting authenticity, personal engagement and overall satisfaction in the tourism development of historic villages. Katelieva and Muhar (2022) have shown that the inclusion of intangible

cultural heritage in the tourism offer in rural Austria contributes to sustainable tourism development by providing shared benefits and protecting cultural heritage. Overall, these studies contribute to the understanding of factors influencing tourism experiences in cultural rural destinations and provide valuable insights for effective rural destination management and sustainable development.

Cluster 6: Empowerment in rural areas through cultural tourism

Overall, the studies shed light on various dimensions of empowerment in rural areas through tourism. In Nigeria, the impact of social responsibility initiatives of multinational oil companies on the empowerment of women in rural areas through agrotourism is examined (Uduji et al., 2020). In China, the engagement of Hui ethnic women in cultural tourism (embroidery) is examined, highlighting economic and multidimensional empowerment at different levels (Ming et al., 2020). The case of Egypt highlights the tensions in tourism development policies, where local communities seek to protect their identity, leading to potential disempowerment (Asham et al., 2022). Guo et al. (2023) highlight the widespread gender inequality in rural China by drawing on theories of empowerment and sustainable development to assess women's perceptions, and they demonstrate the significant role of tourism cooperatives in empowering women, improving participation in tourism, and promoting sustainable tourism development. These findings emphasize the need for inclusive and community-oriented approaches to rural tourism planning and development that take into account cultural and gender dynamics to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Conclusions

The bibliometric and content analysis carried out on cultural tourism in rural areas leads to the conclusion that this is a relatively young research topic for which there is a need and sufficient scope for new studies. Based on the subject matter of the observed papers, three important areas can be identified: Sustainability, Experience and Empowerment. Through empirical research and the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as a combination of both, the authors have attempted to identify and propose solutions for the conservation and sustainable management of cultural heritage in rural areas, as well as improving the experience of tourists and empowering local people, especially women. Considering that the current issues related to cultural tourism in rural areas have been identified, researchers in this field can use the results of this study to make a decision about their research topic. The identification of the most current issues in cultural tourism in rural areas through a bibliometric and content analysis, which to the author's knowledge has not been done before, can be considered as a theoretical contribution of this paper. In addition, this study can be useful for researchers in other fields who can apply the same methodology to other areas. The results of this study also have practical benefits for rural areas wishing to develop cultural tourism. Firstly, they can be encouraged to take the initiative and involve local communities and other stakeholders in heritage protection activities. Secondly, they can use the lessons learned by the authors of the sixth cluster to strengthen local community participation. Thirdly,

they can be encouraged to improve the tourism offer (e.g., by offering authentic activities such as storytelling about authentic local lifestyles, etc.) to enhance tourists' experiences and satisfaction.

Suggestions for future studies can be made in two directions. First, future studies wishing to conduct a bibliometric analysis of cultural tourism in rural areas are advised to use studies indexed in other databases (such as Scopus) in order to increase the sample of observed papers and the reliability of the results, which could be considered a limitation of the present study. It is also interesting to perform a bibliographic coupling analysis in future studies to discover possible connections between documents, journals, authors, organisations or countries. The second suggestion is addressed to the authors of future studies on cultural tourism in rural areas. When reviewing the identified papers, it became clear that most studies are based on case studies or research in specific locations, which prevents generalisation and broader application of the findings. Future studies should aim to develop research models that are at least applicable to the same type of heritage resource (e.g., historic houses). From the identification of keywords, it can also be concluded that the most important theories on the observed topic are not included. Therefore, future studies should consider theories such as Stakeholder theory (to identify key stakeholders), Social exchange theory (to understand locals' attitudes), Consumer culture theory (to understand tourists' behaviour), and Transformative learning theory (to understand the significant cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal changes that tourists undergo as a result of their cultural rural tourism experiences).

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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