

An Assessment of the Epistemological Progress in Rural Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review aims to assess the epistemological progress and the current state of knowledge in the academic literature on rural tourism and local communities. The study utilized the PRISMA statement framework to describe the process of article selection and rejection for the literature review. The review focused on articles published in high-ranking journals indexed in the Scopus database over a ten-year period from 2013 to 2022. Findings revealed a growing number of publications on rural tourism since 2015, with a steady increase in 2019. Most articles were published in 12 journals. Studies tend to use a qualitative approach, with a preference for case studies. The systematic review examines rural tourism research by context, topic, methods, location, and theoretical framework. The review highlights the current state of rural tourism research and suggests future research directions. This study provides a comprehensive overview of rural tourism research published worldwide over the past decade and determines its epistemological progress.

Keywords: Rural tourism; systematic literature review; local communities; PRISMA; community-based tourism

Introduction

Rural tourism is an established concept in tourism literature; it had existed since the late nineteenth century (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). In the Scopus database, there is an article on rural tourism titled ‘Working session 3; Changing functions of the community’ presents key evidence published in 1964 in the Journal of European Society for rural sociology, *Sociologia Ruralis*. Rural tourism is seen to have gone through two major phases since 1970, in many regions, currently on the verge of the third phase (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). The first phase had begun in several regions of Europe by the early 1970s. Second phase, first arose in the mid-1980s and is still visible in some nations today. The third stage is a uniquely twenty-first-century phenomenon, propelled by competitors, technological advancements, and a growing need for leadership and governance. Rural tourism is viewed as a means of encouraging local development as a type of economic activity that entails transformation in rural areas. Tourism development in rural areas is perceived by local communities as a chance to develop rural economies and revitalize places that would otherwise be out of business due to market dynamics (Ivona, 2021). Rural tourism can enhance and promote traditional culture, which can

evolve into a straightforward idea frequently supplied through knowledge and experience for the tourists (Triyanto et al., 2018).

Rural tourism programmes in the remote areas offers a variety of possible advantages, such as increased employment, a broader economic base, population expansion, social development, and resurgence in regional crafts (Nicolaidis, 2020). The perspectives of the host community on tourism development are essential for every government or industry-led development programme. The need for a coordinated effort to empower, educate, and include local communities and stakeholder groups in attempts to rebuild the tourism sector for long-term sustainability using an innovative community-based tourism approach (Moyo & Tichaawa, 2017). A collaboration between rural tourism initiative and a local community must address both conservation and local economic development (Boer & Dijk, 2016). Sustainable tourism development, especially in rural areas, is an effective tool for regional development in a developing country, aiding in the reduction of regional imbalances, particularly between urban and remote areas (Litheko & Potgieter, 2019).

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) had observed 2020 as a year of “Tourism and rural development” as most countries around the world turn to tourism to spur economic recovery, notably in rural areas where tourism is a major employer and economic pillar. The importance of rural tourism in the tourism sector has become crucial in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as tourists seek less congested sites and open-air experiences and activities, tourism in rural areas offers considerable prospects for recovery. COVID-19 has a huge influence on rural tourism research, which cannot be overlooked (Rosalina et al., 2021). The world is facing one of the most difficult crises of all times, it creates a need to renew our efforts to establish innovative techniques that will encourage tourism's potential for rural development and community upliftment (UNWTO, 2020).

Over the years tourism research has grown rapidly in comparison to many other mature industries, fewer attempts have been made to conduct a systematic evaluation of the available literature to provide researchers and practitioners an insight on its evolution and direction for the future (Chang & Katrichis, 2016). The goal of this investigation is to fill the void of systematic literature review of the epistemological progress and the current state of knowledge in the academic literature on rural tourism and local communities in the last 10 years. Content analysis of the exported data from the Scopus database has been done and the full text of the articles has been rigorously reviewed before the inclusion of the articles in this study. The study also identifies different contexts studied under rural tourism research. By mapping what is known, this evaluation also provides important information about how to identify contributions to rural tourism research for future research. Most importantly, the study also provides a road map for new rural tourism researchers in identifying key research issues and the directions for rural tourism research in future. The purpose of this study is to conduct a systematic review of literature on:

1. To determine research methods utilized in studies of rural tourism over the years
2. To account major issues addressed in the published studies
3. To summarize rural tourism studies from 1st January 2013 to 31st December 2022
4. To assess the current state of research in rural tourism

The methodology is presented in the next section, the outcomes of the empirical material are then discussed and the results are presented. The conclusion is based on the literature evaluation, and the final section outlines potential study directions for rural tourism research.

Systematic literature review

Systematic literature reviews are becoming increasingly significant techniques in social science research (Davis et al., 2014). Systematic reviews were first initiated in medical science as a

method of synthesizing study outcomes in an organized, transparent and reproducible manner, and have long been regarded as the gold standard among various techniques of literature reviews (Snyder, 2019).

The practice of meticulously collecting and compiling the related information on a subject is referred to as a systematic review (Grant & Andrew Booth, 2009), the statistical tools utilized to aggregate the information to create an estimate and determine overall trends on the subject are known as “meta-analysis” (Davis et al., 2014) In contrast to the typical narrative literature reviews, a systematic literature review stresses on an organized procedure for collecting the available literature, for its synthesis, all of which are recorded and justified (Janjua et al., 2021). The foundation of all academic research efforts is expanding on existing knowledge and connecting existing information regardless of discipline. The methodical approaches used in synthesizing the outcomes, that allows more efficient and high-quality search results are the basic feature that distinguishes systematic literature reviews from other methods of literature reviews (Liberati et al., 2009; Mulrow, 1994).

To the best of authors knowledge, the research was undertaken by (Rosalina et al., 2021), It looked at rural tourism definitions and problems in established and emerging contexts, (Janjua et al., 2021), this review examines the current state of knowledge in academic literature on sustainable rural homestays, (An & Alarcón, 2020), this study examined articles related to “sustainable rural tourism” that was retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) database, furthermore, this investigation aimed to comprehend sustainable rural tourism from the customer's point of view (Ammirato et al., 2020), the purpose of this article is to give a comprehensive view of the linkages between agri-tourism and sustainability, (Madanaguli et al., 2021), the goal of this study was to track the rise of rural hospitality and tourism entrepreneurship by examining various thematic research areas (Kumar & Shekhar, 2020), this study intended to perform a complete assessment on the impact of technology in the tourist sector and its utilization in rural tourism research to serve the purpose of socio-economic development.

However, despite the fact that their work greatly contributes to our understanding of rural tourism definitions and connections among sustainability and agri-tourism, entrepreneurship in village hospitality and tourism industry but it does not contribute to the comprehensive systematic review on rural tourism which can ascertain the current state and developments in rural tourism research in the last decade.

The present study was designed to fulfill the need to know the current state of rural tourism in an extensive manner, keeping sincere focus on the criteria of the PRISMA framework in the study. The “PRISMA Statement” and its expansions are a set of standard guidelines aimed largely at encouraging transparent and comprehensive reporting of Systematic reviews (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). Hence, the comprehensive study of “systematic literature reviews” in tourism using the “PRISMA protocol” would aid in gaining deeper insights of systematic review execution, quality, and rigor (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). The current investigation intends to present an insight on the progress of rural tourism and local communities over the last 10 years by using a systematic review of rural tourism.

Methods

In the present study, authors have conducted a “systematic literature review” to provide an overview on the current status of rural tourism and how it has been examined earlier regarding the research subject, research setting, sampling, geographic region, method, and conceptual framework. “The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)” protocol was utilized to scrutinize the obtained literature on a specific context that served as the foundation of the study (Sharif et al., 2019). The PRISMA checklist outlines the

steps that should be taken in order to conduct a review that other researchers can replicate and generate reliable data (Kraus et al., 2020). The choice of PRISMA over other existing protocols is based on its thoroughness and its application in various fields of study around the world and it can maintain consistency among reviews (Sharif et al., 2019; Liberati et al., 2009).

The systematic review process has three phases. The first stage is to identify keywords, which are relevant to the research questions and the research theme. The finalized terms are thoroughly screened in the title abstracts and keywords of scholarly database. The second stage involves developing the framework of the gathered database that comprises the inclusion criteria, analytical classifications, and adjustment after testing on a small number of samples. The final phase is putting the data into the research repository and creating a summary for the data analysis.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted for the purpose of this study in order to identify papers relating to rural tourism and local communities. Specifically, all the research papers published in the journals of tourism, hospitality, and rural development between 2013 and 2022 that are indexed in the SCOPUS database.

A research protocol was created in advance to locate the literature based on the review objectives. The research protocol included databases, search terms, and the selection criteria for literature inclusion. In order to provide the most up-to-date and relevant information, the search for the study was limited to a ten-year period between 2013 and 2022.

The research articles found in Scopus database using the keyword of Rural Tourism was 7285. When the research was limited to the years 2013 to 2022, the new number was 2626 studies on August 11, 2022. The word schemes listed below were used to capture studies that looked at rural tourism and local communities, (Rural tourism OR Village tourism OR Nature tourism OR Eco tourism OR Agri tourism OR Entrepreneurial) AND (Host communities OR communities OR Women participation OR Preservation). 1774 studies were excluded from the retrieved studies as it did not lie within the scope of the study and were unrelated to rural tourism and local communities. The remaining 852 studies were reviewed for eligibility based on the literature selection criteria. Community-based rural tourism was the only factor considered, though studies on agri-tourism, ecotourism, and sustainable rural tourism were also considered. Following these thorough stages, 176 research papers were found suitable and shortlisted for the comprehensive visualization and evaluation and excluding 676 studies that were not related to the objective of the study.

Results

In this section, we present the description and its analysis of the 176 articles reviewed for the current study. The study widely explains the progress of rural tourism research; its development and growth over the past decade in tourism literature, Journals that have encouraged rural tourism research and publications during 2013 to 2022 have been discussed. Content analysis is performed by reviewing the articles of the leading journals to ascertain the research context (issues addressed, methodology, and geographical regions) and authors of various studies, which are then discussed alongside tourism development and local communities.

The first analytical phase consisted of attempting to systematize the available literature on 'Rural Tourism and Local Communities' based on the past research in the context. Author's analyzed the included studies and determined the present status of knowledge in rural tourism and its ties to other types of tourism such as: Agri-tourism, Eco tourism, Nature tourism and Sustainable tourism etc. Over the last 10 years from 2013 to 2022, author's determined that the research on the theme of rural tourism has increased since 2015, with a steady increase in 2019. Figure 1 and 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the studies that were reviewed.

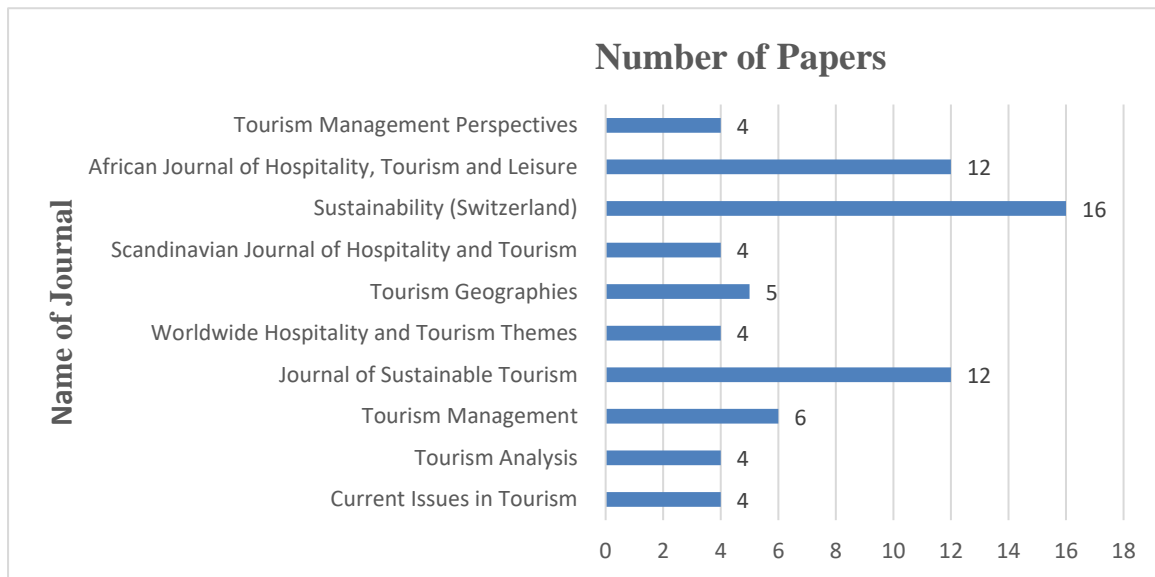


Figure 1. Number of publications in leading academic journals from 2013 to 2022

Source: Authors' own

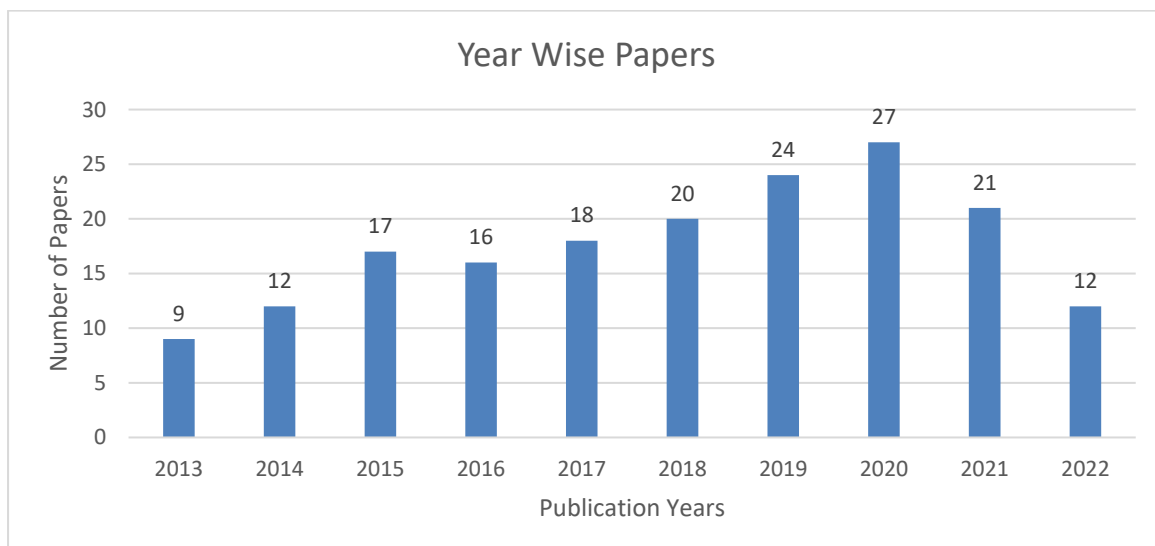


Figure 2: Total number of publications year wise between 2013 and 2022

Source: Authors' own

Figure one illustrates the leading top 10 academic journals that published works on the theme of rural tourism and local communities including agri-tourism, ecotourism, and sustainable rural tourism. This investigation reviewed 176(n= 176) articles scattered across 84 journals for its research methods, tourism settings and issues addressed in these studies. Most articles published in 12 journals. Sixteen papers were published in Sustainability (Switzerland), which has the maximum publications related to rural tourism and local communities, followed by “Journal of Sustainable Tourism” (JST) and “African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure” with twelve publications each and Tourism Management is at third place with six publications like wise Tourism Geographies with five publications, and Tourism Analysis, “Current Issues in Tourism”, Tourism Management Perspectives, “Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism” and Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes with four publications each. These are the top ranked journals with maximum number of publications in

rural tourism research. Aside from the total number of research papers published in a journal, it is crucial to determine the publication year; Figure 3 has presented the publication year of the research articles.

Figure two depicts the publications distributed each year, beginning in 2013. The total number of publications has progressively increased with nine, twelve, and seventeen publications in 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively. The number of publications climbed from twelve in 2014 to seventeen in 2015 and sixteen in 2016. And, due to the constant rise in rural tourism research over the previous years, the number of publications in 2019 and 2020 grew to twenty-four and twenty-seven, respectively. Sustainability (Switzerland) has 9% papers, “Journal of Sustainable Tourism” and “African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure” has close to 7% papers, Tourism Management and Tourism Geographies has 3% publications and Tourism Analysis, “Current Issues in Tourism”, Tourism Management Perspectives, “Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism”, and “Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes” has 02% publications each in the setting of rural tourism research within the 84 journals which are included in the study. It was reported that the research articles on rural tourism and local communities have steadily increased over the years during the investigated period of systematic review on rural tourism and local communities.

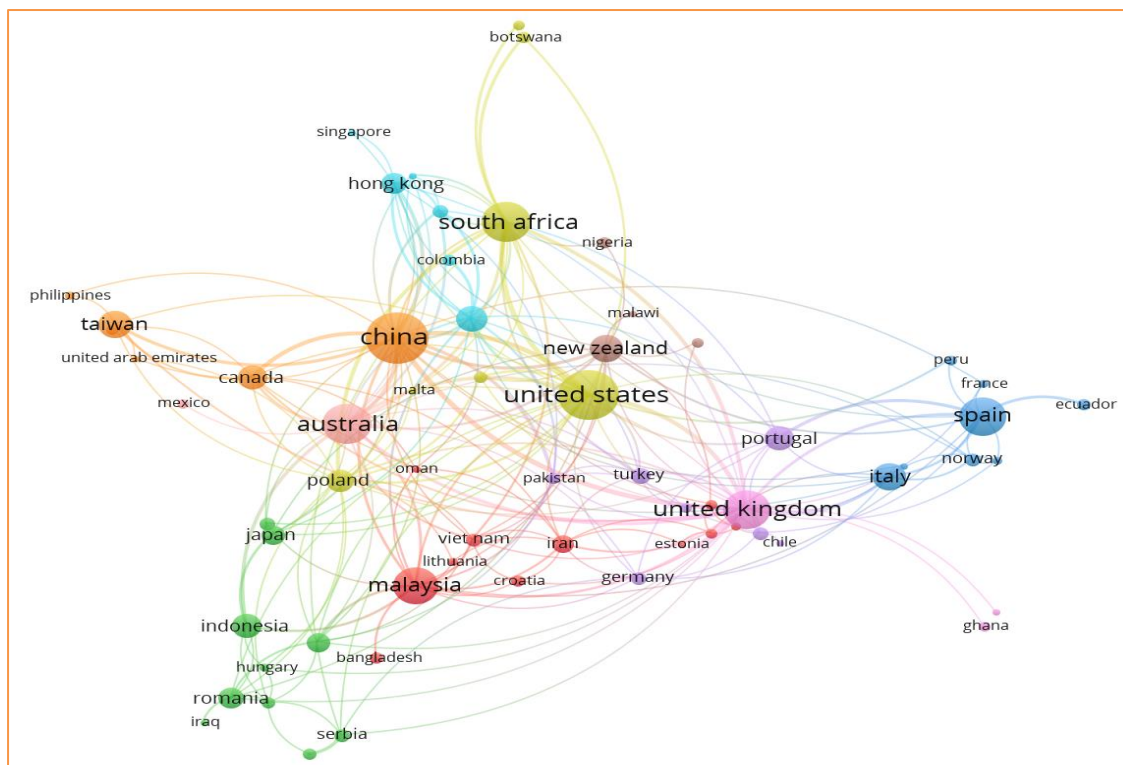


Figure 3: Countries and their association in terms of rural tourism research
 Source: Bibliometric analysis by Vos viewer (Authors’ own)

There were primarily three approaches to research methods employed in all the 176 papers included in this study; quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approach. Quantitative method was used in 54 studies, qualitative approach used in 98 studies, while the case study approach was used extensively in 29 studies, and mixed method approach by combining quantitative and qualitative techniques were used in 24 studies. Most of the papers that used a quantitative approach adopted questionnaire surveys as their technique to generate statistical data. The majority of the studies that used qualitative techniques, mostly utilized the case study method to conduct the research by organizing semi structured interviews, focus group

discussions and participant observation to gather the data, apart from the above techniques there were studies that utilized content analysis (12 papers), Delphi method in (04 papers), participant observation in (04 papers), “qualitative analysis on textual data” in (05 papers), and “focus group interviews” in (01 paper). Apart from the aforementioned methods and tools, the use of various other techniques has been reported in rural tourism literature such as; Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) technique, Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) technique, Fuzzy DEMATEL analytical methodology, Location Quotient (LQ) method, Quantitative approach: bootstrapping analysis, Paper-based itinerary mapping methodology, Qualitative approach: in-depth exploratory analysis, Hermeneutic phenomenology, Text Mining, and mixed methods: generative design tools etc.

Content analysis

The findings reveal that research on rural tourism has increased over time, with a consistent increase in 2019. The 176 papers were selected for the inclusion in the systematic review on rural tourism is listed in an extensive table below, disclosing the study titles, research themes, methodologies adopted, and source of the study data. The systematic review investigates how rural tourism has been investigated in terms of nature-based tourism, agri-tourism, and community-based tourism in various countries. According to this review, an increasing number of scholars from developing nations are researching on rural tourism and local communities, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

The location of the study is referred to as a geo- graphical area. In the Asia-Pacific region, 91 studies of rural tourism research were conducted, including 19 studies in Malaysia, 16 in China, 15 in the United States, 14 in Indonesia, 06 in Australia, 05 in India, 04 in Canada, 02 in Japan and South Korea each, 01 study in Pakistan, Thailand, Philippines and Peru each. The Asia Pacific region accounts for 52 percent of the overall number of research on rural tourism in the last decade.

Similarly, 51 research studies on rural tourism have been conducted in Europe over the last ten years, including Serbia (7 studies), Portugal (6 studies), Romania (5 studies), the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Poland, and Ireland with (3 studies) each, Brazil (2 studies) and Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Austria, Netherland, Latvia and Finland with 01 study each. In the recent decade, Europe has accounted for 29% of all the studies on rural tourism. In addition to the aforementioned regions, Africa contributes for 11% of all rural tourism research, with 12 studies in South Africa, 03 studies in Botswana, and one study each in Nigeria, Namibia, Gambia, and Kenya.

The review sheds light on rural tourism and local communities, highlighting the important topics covered by the authors and suggesting future research directions. The study presents an interpretation and content analysis table of the top fifty studies with highest citations, providing a synthesis of various research streams of rural tourism and its socio-economic potential on local communities, in order to establish a reliable interpretation of rural tourism research during the last decade. Furthermore, the study presents an in-depth evaluation of the findings of the systematic review, revealing the areas of strengths and shortcomings of present research streams to understand the overall situation of rural tourism and local communities. Table 1 summarizes the findings of “content analysis” of all the selected research articles (n=30). The following characteristics are summarized from each selected paper: (a) Authors and year of publication (b) Research theme (c) Journals (d) Data sources/methods (e) Issues addressed in the study in context of rural tourism, (f) Citation score. The outcome of the systematic study is based on the characteristics listed above in order to aid in the investigation of how the epistemology of rural tourism research is comprehended and developed over the

period of time. The study adds to the literature on rural tourism by providing a thorough picture of this domain of tourism research.

Table I. Content analysis of top 30 studies with highest citation (n=30)

No.	Author (Year)	Subject Theme	Source	Method/Sources of data	Issues addressed	Citation
1	("Wolfgang et al., 2014")	"Segmentation by motivation for rural tourism activities in The Gambia"	"Tourism Management"	Quantitative approach	Benefits to rural communities by reducing economic leakage rates.	295
2	("Lew Alan A. et al., 2016")	"Community sustainability and resilience: similarities, differences and indicators"	Tourism Geographies	Qualitative approach	Resilience, a framework for understanding and approaching community development	244
3	("Ming et al., 2019")	"Livelihood sustainability in a rural tourism destination - Hetu Town, Anhui Province, China"	Tourism Management	Mixed methods design	The sustainable livelihood framework to analyze tourism and rural sustenance	188
4	("Park Duk-Byeong et al., 2015")	"Rural residents' attitudes to tourism and the moderating effects of social capital"	"Tourism Geographies"	Quantitative approach	A theoretical model that incorporates studies on inhabitants' attitudes and community development	160
5	("Jaafar Mastura et al., 2015")	"Tourism growth and entrepreneurship: Empirical analysis of development of rural highlands"	"Tourism Management Perspectives"	Quantitative approach	To identify the features and restrictions of small tourism-related enterprises in Kinabalu National Park, Sabah.	151
6	(Idziak Waclaw et al., 2015)	"Community participation in sustainable rural tourism experience creation: a long-term appraisal and lessons from a thematic villages project in Poland"	"Journal of Sustainable Tourism"	Qualitative approach, perspective of applied anthropology	The concept of theme villages as a way to create unique rural tourism experiences	120
7	("Elisabeth Kastenholz et al., 2013")	"Host-guest relationships in rural tourism: Evidence from two Portuguese villages"	"Anatolia"	Qualitative approach	Investigates the tourism phenomenon at the local scale	118
8	("Petrovic et al., 2018")	"Tourism as an Approach to Sustainable Rural Development in Post-Socialist Countries: A Comparative Study of Serbia and Slovenia"	Sustainability (Switzerland)	Quantitative approach, comparative analysis	Rural tourism as one of the essential factors of rural development competitiveness in Serbia and Slovenia	117
9	("Trukhachev Alexander, 2015")	"Methodology for Evaluating the Rural Tourism Potentials: A Tool to Ensure Sustainable Development of Rural Settlements"	"Sustainability" (Switzerland)	Delphi approach	Potential of tourism in providing additional revenue opportunities	112
10	(Gaetano et al., 2021)	"Prospective tourist preferences for sustainable tourism development in Small Island Developing States"	"Tourism Management"	Quantitative approach	Investigation of the sustainable management of tourism and coastal ecosystem services	110
11	("Hwang et al., 2017")	"Social Capital and Collective Action in Rural Tourism"	"Journal of Travel Research"	Mixed method design	Social capital refers to unique sorts of personal interactions that encourage residents to work together to promote rural tourism	108
12	(Ohe Yasuo et al., 2013)	"Evaluating the complementary relationship between local brand farm products and rural tourism: Evidence from Japan"	"Tourism Management"	Qualitative approach	The link between the direct effects of a local brand farm product and its indirect effects on tourism	103
13	("Putu Devi Rosalina et al., 2021")	"Rural tourism: A systematic literature review on definitions and challenges"	"Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management"	Systematic quantitative literature review	Analysis of definitions of rural tourism	101
14	("Mottiar et al., 2018")	"The roles of social entrepreneurs in rural destination development"	"Annals of Tourism Research"	Qualitative approach, cross-case analysis	What role do social entrepreneurs play in the development of rural tourism destinations?	93
15	(Chan et al., 2016)	"The role of self-gentrification in sustainable tourism: Indigenous entrepreneurship at Honghe Hani Rice Terraces World Heritage Site, China"	"Journal of Sustainable Tourism"	Qualitative approach	Within Yunnan's UNESCO-listed Honghe Hani Rice Terraces, three forms of tourism gentrification are investigated	92
16	("Dana Leo-Paul et al., 2014")	"Entrepreneurship, tourism and regional development: a tale of two villages"	"Entrepreneurship and Regional Development"	Qualitative approach, discourse analysis	Comparative analysis of two rural communities in the south of France	90
17	(Ming et al., 2019)	"Ecotourism development in Thailand: Community participation leads to the value of attractions using linguistic preferences"	"Journal of Cleaner Production"	Fuzzy DEMATEL analytical methodology	Fuzzy set theory and DEMATEL to determine the potential of ecotourism	87
18	("Huang et al., 2016")	"Bundling attractions for rural tourism development"	"Journal of Sustainable Tourism"	Quantitative approach	In rural places, the interrelationships between heritage tourism and non-heritage activities	85
19	(Zhiyong Li et al., 2021)	"Urban and rural tourism under COVID-19 in China: research on the recovery measures and tourism development "	"Tourism Review"	Content Mining	Impact of COVID-19 on urban and rural tourism	82

20	("Saarinen Jarkko et al., 2014")	"Integrating tourism to rural development and planning in the developing world"	"Development Southern Africa"	Qualitative approach	The integration of the tourism industry with rural communities poses a number of challenges for rural tourism growth	79
21	("McGehee Nancy et al., 2014")	"Social movements and tourism-related local action"	"Annals of Tourism Research"	Qualitative approach, critical-interpretivist	Handmade's significance in nurturing the change-agent components of social movements in the United States	78
22	("McGehee Nancy Gard et al., 2015")	"The central role of leadership in rural tourism development: a theoretical framework and case studies"	"Journal of Sustainable Tourism"	Case Study	Three rural tourism leaders with a track record of success in their communities are profiled	76
23	(Carson Doris Anna et al., 2014)	Understanding local innovation systems in peripheral tourism destinations	Tourism Geographies	Case Study	The networking, collaboration and knowledge exchange behaviour of tourism stakeholders	76
24	(Jaafar Mastura et al., 2013)	"Nature-based rural tourism and its economic benefits: a case study of Kinabalu National Park"	Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes	Qualitative approach	The economic benefits emanating from tourism development for a local community in Sabah.	75
25	(Hjalager et al., 2018)	Entrepreneurial implications, prospects and dilemmas in rural festivals	Journal of Rural Studies	Case Study	The business entrepreneurship aspect of festivals in Danish rural areas	73
26	(Ringkar Situmorang et al., 2019)	"Friend or Foe? The complex relationship between indigenous people and policymakers regarding rural tourism in Indonesia"	"Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management"	Qualitative approach	Explored the interrelationship between indigenous people and policymakers in rural tourism	71
27	(Lun et al. 2016)	Rural Tourism Development in Mountain Regions: Identifying Success Factors, Challenges and Potentials	Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism	Qualitative approach	Highlights key success factors, risks and potentials for the development of attractive rural tourism products	69
28	("Haider Ulrike et al., 2014")	"Rural tourism opportunities: strategies and requirements for destination leadership in peripheral areas"	Tourism Review	Case Study	Lack of destination leadership and the need to present a new approach	65
29	("KhamravayPasanchay et al., 2021")	"Community-based tourism homestays' capacity to advance the Sustainable Development Goals: A holistic sustainable livelihood perspective"	Tourism Management Perspectives	Case Study	Critically examined both livelihood benefits and costs of operating a homestay	62
30	("Popp et al., 2016")	"Understanding tourists' itineraries in emerging rural tourism regions: the application of paper-based itinerary mapping methodology to a wine tourism region in Michigan"	"Current Issues in Tourism"	"Paper-based itinerary mapping methodology"	Itinerary planning on paper for a developing wine tourism sector in a rural Michigan county.	57

Source: Authors' own

Discussion

This paper consists of the application of a systematic review by adopting the PRISMA statement framework and searching the context with specified keywords, which leads to the available results, as well as examining and analyzing the content and interpreting the results. The above Table 1 contains only those articles published in English language by various Journals indexed in Scopus database and excluding the book chapters and conference proceedings. The study's aim was to gain a better understanding of the current state of rural tourism literature and how it has been researched in the past decade. The studies were chosen based on the presence of the term "rural tourism" in the title of the study, abstract, main text, and its keywords. Thus, the systematic review process was very crucial to ascertain the epistemological progress of the subject. The findings of the study demonstrate the progress of all the research approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method investigations. Most of the studies dwelled on Government's role in tourism development and the mediating role in the development strategy of the government, Government's innovation to strengthen community-based tourism interventions in rural areas, Policy makers involved indigenous people in rural tourism development at some places. Researchers emphasized on the historical and constructive role of tourism in developing rural leisure, culture, and identity in the early twentieth century, as well as the significance of cultural heritage in society and its preservation for future generations. Researchers from various countries have identified issues of sustainability at "rural tourism" destinations, with a special emphasis on indigenous

settlements, importance of sustainable tourism for achieving social sustainability in tourism development in various regions has been recognized by researchers from various countries.

Rural tourism research has revealed the potential for maximizing the advantages of ecotourism to local communities, paving the way for the adoption of community-based tourism and other community empowerment initiatives. The findings of various empirical researches have found that tourism development in rural areas strengthens and maximizes the scope of cultural, heritage and wildlife conservation by diversifying into Eco-tourism activities, it also enhances socio-economic development and creates entrepreneurial opportunities for the host communities. Some studies focused on the importance of entrepreneurship in the development of rural communities. According to one of the studies conducted in Norway in 2017 suggests that the sense of belongingness in local communities in the villages can adopt entrepreneurial mobile practices to promote rural tourism at their locations. The rural entrepreneurs concentrated on mobile innovations to make it easier for local communities to add some valuable features in the experience economy (Bertella & Cavicchi, 2017). Although the experience economy is growing globally, studies have revealed the lack of skills in offering service and ‘wow’ experience to the tourists. According to one of the studies conducted in Malaysia revealed that there are 14 skill deficits for employability at rural tourism destinations and suggested a framework of employability skills mostly valued by the employers of the tourism and hospitality industry (Ojo, 2018). Researchers from various regions of the world have revealed that planned tourism growth in rural areas with a long-term vision can alleviate poverty and improve people's living conditions. A case study of Bergville Kwa-Zulu-Natal Province in South Africa reveals an effective method for reducing poverty through rural tourism in the villages (Mutambara & Mthembu, 2018). The region has its own tourism management practices that contribute to better living conditions by alleviating poverty of the people who reside there. Tourism development in the villages extends the benefits to the local communities in various regions; it reaches a larger population and it also reduces the likelihood of tourism activities being concentrated at any location in the periphery (UNWTO, 2020).

The theories used in the included articles for the systematic review includes the “theory of tourist behavior” in the perspective of a historic village in the study to see if there are any links between various factors and their effects on village tourism (Li et al., 2019). A study on the expansion of ecotourism in Thailand was conducted using "fuzzy set theory" and the "decision making trial and evaluation laboratory (DEMATEL)" method in order to estimate the potential for ecotourism in Thailand (Tseng et al., 2019). Cluster theory was applied by the researchers in a case study of La Brea, Trinidad, to investigate clusters as a technique of tourism development for the village communities. In the La Brea region, “cluster theory” allows for a new way of thinking about destination development (Christa Laing, 2016). In the study of (Manyane, 2016) the stakeholder’s theory was utilized to study the applicability of the stakeholder theory for generating sustainable eco-cultural products in Botswana's North West Province. Another study was undertaken using the stakeholder’s theory as the study's foundation to analyze the difficulties and opportunities that exist in the “Appalachian Forest Heritage Area” from the standpoint of local leaders of the community (Deng et al., 2017).

The study revealed that most researchers working on rural tourism and local communities are from developing countries in the Asia Pacific region, including Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Peru, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, and China, while researchers from developed countries, including the United States of America, Canada, Japan, Australia, Japan, and South Korea have also contributed. Europe is next, with Serbia, Portugal, Romania, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Poland, and Ireland, as well as Brazil, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Austria, Netherlands, Latvia, and Finland. In addition to the aforementioned regions of the world, Africa also

contributes to rural tourism research, particularly South Africa, Botswana, Nigeria, Namibia, Gambia, and Kenya.

Conclusion

This study investigates prior research on rural tourism in terms of context, issues, methodology, geographic regions, and theoretical framework. The systematic literature review sheds light on rural tourism research and local communities, highlighting the authors' contributions from various regions of the world. The study concluded that the majority of the studies utilized a qualitative approach, with the case study method being used extensively. Based on 176 included articles in the study, we found that the frequency of rural tourism publications has risen steadily since 2015, with a further rise in 2019. This demonstrates that rural tourism research has grown steadily and the interest of the researchers has increased significantly over time. The study provides an in-depth analysis of the included articles, highlighting the strengths and developments of rural tourism over the years to understand the current scenario of tourism in rural areas and local communities. This systematic review and content analysis of the selected studies have identified a considerable number of key issues; Contribution of rural tourism in achieving sustainability and “United Nations Sustainable Development Goals” (SDG’s), participation of women’s in rural tourism, Marketing of a rural tourism initiatives, Gastronomy in rural tourism, food tourism at rural tourism destinations, Development of adventure activities at rural locations are rarely addressed in the existing literature.

This systematic review significantly contributes to the current body of knowledge on rural tourism by presenting the comprehensive scenario of rural tourism research. The study concludes that rural tourism can be utilized as a tool of panacea for rural economic growth and boosting local populations living conditions. Tourism development in villages brings up opportunities to promote local arts, crafts, and culture to visitors from all over the world who can appreciate the communities’ efforts and help to improve the host communities living standards. The most popular tourism journals for publishing rural tourism studies were Sustainability (Switzerland), “Journal of Sustainable Tourism”, “African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure”, “Tourism Management”, “Tourism Geographies”, “Tourism Analysis”, “Current Issues in Tourism”, Tourism Management Perspectives, “Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism”, Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes. In this review, it is noted that a growing number of scholars from developing nations, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, are working on rural tourism.

To summarize, it is essential to point out that the findings of this study shows that the concept of rural tourism has gained consolidation in the academic community, as evidenced by the large number of researchers from around the world, demonstrating the importance of the subject for countries seeking to develop rural areas through tourism activities by involving local communities in the tourism value chain at the destinations. Although there is a wealth of literature is available on rural tourism, it particularly emphasizes the concept, its importance, and challenges in the development phase. A significant conclusion that can be derived from the study is that rural tourism provides maximum advantages to local people and has the capacity to solve economic challenges in villages while also strengthening the tourism sector.

Limitations

Despite the fact that the systematic reviews and meta-analyses are considered the best techniques for obtaining a precise conclusion to a research problem, but the systematic reviews has inherent weaknesses such as study location and study selection, heterogeneity, loss of crucial outcome information, improper subgroup analyses and publishing duplication

(Gopalakrishnan & Parasuraman, 2016). The language of the sought results was limited to English and “conference proceedings”, monographs and book chapters were not included in the review. It is well accepted that this method's reliance on online search results is a major limitation. However, because most journals now publish electronic issues, any potential bias will have a minor impact on the investigation.

Future recommendations

The relevance of rural tourism and community participation in achieving long-term sustainability in terms of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental advantages is highlighted in this paper. The study also addresses the growing relevance of tourism activities in rural areas. Researchers can use this review for the research gaps and research directions in rural tourism in future, such as the researchers can address the issues of sustainability and finding ways to meet the “UN's Sustainable Development Goals” through rural tourism to maximize gender equality, women's empowerment; researchers can also inter-relate with Goal Number 1 No poverty, “Goal number 4 Quality Education”, “Goal number 5 Gender Equality”, and “Goal number 8 Decent work” and economic growth of rural areas can be addressed in the context of rural tourism research in future (UNWTO, 2019). Researchers can investigate the function of social media in marketing and developing new rural tourism destinations, the applicability of artificial intelligence in the development of rural tourism, and the tourism and hospitality education and training required for rural residents to maximize their interest and participation. Future research should focus on stakeholder’s cooperation and its benefits for rural tourism destinations, as well as rural tourism management from the community perspective. There is a dearth of studies on the ways to entice tourists to visit rural tourism destinations. Future research should empirically investigate the challenges posed by the novel coronavirus COVID 19 on the lives of rural communities. Researchers can conduct studies in rural settings to propose a framework for farmers and residents diversifying into tourism activities, which could help in reducing village migration to cities. This study revealed that the qualitative approach dominates rural tourism research; therefore, future studies should use a mixed method approach and triangulate the study findings for better results; triangulation can be accomplished by the use of several research techniques and it can increase the validity of evaluation and research findings (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). So, the above-mentioned subjects can be addressed in future research.

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